

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE WRITTEN WORKS OF

NAWAL AL-SA'DAWI

by

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For my mother

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## ABSTRACT

Nawal al-Sa'dawi is an Egyptian doctor and feminist writer whose sociological works have had a great impact on her society and the Arab world. This thesis sets out to trace how Sa'dawi's work as a doctor during the 1960s brought her into such close contact with the sufferings of women and girls in her society, that she set out to try and discover the reasons for such widespread oppression of her own sex.

Each of Sa'dawi's factual works is treated separately here in chronological order. These works show Sa'dawi protesting against sexual and social abuses of women, against female circumcision and double standards of morality in her society. When she tries to expose the root causes of Arab women's oppression, she points the finger of blame at patriarchal society, economic pressures and misguided interpretations of psychology and religion. Sa'dawi is prevented from speaking out frankly against political or religious institutions because of the threat of censorship which carries with it the danger of imprisonment and persecution.

Apart from a critical examination of her factual books, this thesis also contains a survey of her fictional works, for Sa'dawi has also achieved success in the field of literature with her short stories and novels. Her fiction frequently brings to the reader typical dilemmas facing women in Egyptian society. Again each work is discussed individually here.

Since Sa'dawi is still very active as a writer, I have had to confine my thesis to covering her output up to 1986, which means that nineteen works are discussed in detail.

The tremendous popularity of Sa'dawi and her written works rests largely on her commitment to helping her compatriots achieve balanced healthy lives from the psychological, physical and sexual dimensions, through frank discussions of highly controversial subjects. During the 1980s, Sa'dawi's fame has spread to the West where she is rightly regarded as the leading spokeswoman for Arab feminism.

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I am grateful to Nawal al-Sa'dawi for answering my personal queries. I wish also to thank Farida Abu-Haidar for her interest in my observations, and finally to mention my mother for always encouraging my effort.



## CHAPTER 1

### 1. General introduction

Nawal al-Sa'dawi is probably the most interesting and widely-known personality writing in Arabic today. Her works are of immediate importance because they contain the blueprint for social progress for her own country, Egypt, at a time of intense struggle between reactionary forces, in the form of religious fundamentalism, and progressive, forward-looking socialism. Her works are also relevant to other Arab, Islamic and Third World states.

No other female Arab writer can match her productivity or her popularity, at home or abroad. Sa'dawi has capitalized on Western interest, from publishers, the media and feminist organizations, in the oppression of women worldwide. There is a demand for her works in translation: several of her novels, her memoirs from prison and The Hidden Face of Eve have been available to English readers for some time. With the exception of Fatima Mernissi in Morocco, no other writer has rivalled Sa'dawi's insight into the social realities of the Arab family and the position of women in modern Muslim society, and shown such commitment to publishing the facts not only to the Arab societies themselves but also to the West.

I should like to discuss the special place which I believe Sa'dawi occupies in the field of social reform, as an educator and moralist, and also her prominent position in Arabic literature, as one who voices the female experience of life and one whose criticism of her society, in a fictional form, has the capacity to shape future sensibilities.

Salwa Khamash, in her socio-literary study of the Egyptian novel,<sup>1</sup> concluded that social problems were not taken as a central theme by Egyptian novelists, that "The acute and chronic suffering of the masses has rarely been exposed", that whole areas of life were missing from the picture portrayed in the Egyptian novels; children, students, workers, servants, soldiers, were all surprisingly absent, and that novelists had not studied society to any degree that would enable them to express the very depths of the human suffering that resulted from social ills, nor man's aspirations for a better future.

This ability of the writer, as one of the "elite of awareness", to react to the problems around him and even anticipate those of the future, is a prerequisite for a literature that raises public consciousness of society's shortcomings and paves the way for social change. Most Egyptian novels, Khamash found, suffered from the "crippling influence" which tradition had on the novelist's mind. The chief restricting factors on the writer were found to be: the inferior position of women, the atomistic view of life derived from a culture steeped in religion, narrowness of ideas stemming from the writer's limited experience, and the general impossibility of any deep relationship between men and women within that society. Nothing in his education or environment predisposed

the Egyptian novelist to develop a wider vision to enable him to place his society's problems in perspective. Khammash found too, that:

"The absence of any concrete system in the novelist's social thought, or any specific philosophy of life renders the characters full of contradictory and conflicting attitudes, which in the final analysis is no attitude at all." <sup>2</sup>

With Nawal al-Sa'dawi, all this has been swept aside. Here is an author who speaks for those who have had no real voice before: the beaten wife, the sexually-abused girl, the downtrodden peasant, the conscript, the servant girl, the student and the prostitute. Sa'dawi's commitment to socialist and feminist thought allows her to place the sufferings of the individual, in the context of a Third World society which is trapped by restrictive patriarchal tradition, overpopulation, poverty and subservience to international capitalist forces. This orientation of her thought holds true for both her sociological and fictional works. Sa'dawi's work as a doctor and for the United Nations, has brought her into contact with a great variety of people and experiences; her travels have given her the opportunity to compare different societies and take a more objective view of her own. Wide reading has enlarged the scope of her ideas, whilst an admirable fortitude has sustained her in the struggle to get accepted, those values and attitudes she believes to be healthy and true. Not only does she criticize her country's past and present for its hypocrisy, but she also sets down examples of a sounder system of values to replace those which she rejects.

I have decided to deal with Sa'dawi's works up until 1986. As a writer she is as productive today as ever; still ahead of her time, still coming up with original ideas and showing even greater concern for the health of Egyptian society during the current revival of interest in Islamic ideals. A brief introduction to Sa'dawi's early life, education and career, her non-fictional works and contribution to Egyptian literature will follow.

\* \* \*

## 2. Sa'dawi's early life, education and career

One can glean many facts about Sa'dawi's life from reading her factual books. For an Arab woman, she is refreshingly frank and uninhibited about describing some of her personal experiences in print. It is this very quality of intimacy which has attracted so many of her female readers in particular, to confide in her. Not only are her sociological works sprinkled with encounters and observations derived from her career, but her novels and short stories also draw heavily upon her personal experience, and several have a strongly autobiographical flavour, as a result. Such is the individual character of her writing, that the reader has the impression, after reading any one of her works, that he has met its author. Her supreme commitment to helping people improve the quality of their lives, dispelling ignorance and exposing hypocrisy, is evident in all her works, ranging from her long treatise on women and sex, to her shortest stories.

Sa'dawi was born on 27th October 1931 in Kafr Tahla, an Egyptian village in the Nile Delta, the eldest girl of nine children, she had one elder brother. Her parents were relatively liberated and open-minded for their times. They encouraged her to question beliefs and opinions, even religion, to a certain degree. Sa'dawi considers herself to have been a "lucky child" in that she escaped much of the traditional oppression to which girls of her class, that is educated middle class, were usually subject.

Sa'dawi traces her strength of personality back to her mother and paternal grandmother, both of whom she mentions in her writings.<sup>3</sup> Sa'dawi's mother had been removed by her father from the French school which she had been attending, to marry and afterwards be confined to the role of wife and mother.<sup>4</sup> Sa'dawi was clearly influenced by her mother's sense of resentment and frustration at having been denied an education. Girls' right to education and right to choose a career were to become central issues in Sa'dawi's factual works. In her memoirs from prison, Mudhakkirātī fī Sijn al-Nisā', Sa'dawi pays tribute to her mother for teaching her to write.<sup>5</sup>

Sa'dawi's father had been a university graduate and had held the important post of General Controller of Education for the Province of Menoufia.<sup>6</sup> She gives an example of the type of discussion which she held with her father on the delicate question of God's gender and its relevance to Arabic grammar, illustrating his broadmindedness and her precocity.<sup>7</sup>

Whilst Sa'dawi has not been active within the Egyptian political system, she has consistently held a prominent place in public life as a noted opposition figure. She traces with pride her concern with national affairs, to her parents' participation, in their youth, in the demonstrations against the British presence in Egypt<sup>8</sup> and how she had received their encouragement to take an active role in student demonstrations.<sup>9</sup>

The harrowing account of Sa'dawi's circumcision at the age of six,<sup>10</sup> must leave an indelible impression on the minds of Western readers, while creating an immediate bond of sisterhood between her and any of her Arab female readers who have shared her trauma. Despite her obvious loving

concern for her mother, their early relationship must have suffered from considerable strain due to Sa'dawi's deep sense of having been betrayed by her mother during the circumcision. She recalls how in that moment of pain and terror, her mother had not responded to comfort her. Sa'dawi also admits the extent of the psychological scars left upon her by such an experience.<sup>11</sup>

The onset of menstruation, for which Sa'dawi was quite unprepared, caused a disproportionate amount of terror to her young mind. Looking back, she can relate with a humorous touch how she had imagined herself to have become the victim of a night attack, or that she had contracted belharsia.<sup>12</sup> By describing her own intimate experiences in this way, she is forcefully pleading for Egyptian girls to be educated about the physical changes which puberty brings. We gather that during her own childhood she rebelled successfully against her family by refusing to pay more attention to her appearance than to developing her mind.<sup>13</sup> As a girl, Sa'dawi recalls being insatiably curious, reading widely from her father's library, devouring any printed matter, which included the newspaper wrappings of the roasted seeds which she used to buy to eat in the street, and absorbing all information at hand, like a sponge. Sa'dawi attended an English primary school at Menoufia, secondary school in Cairo and a boarding school at Helwan. She appears to have loved school and to have been equally interested in Arts and Sciences.

Even though her parents were fairly progressive for their times and kept discrimination between their sons and daughters to a minimum, Sa'dawi was nevertheless conscious of certain differences between the behaviour expected of her and her elder brother. She wanted to know for example,

why he enjoyed various privileges which she did not, despite the fact that her school work was superior to his, and also why girls were physically and socially more restricted than boys.<sup>14</sup> It was not until she began her own research in her thirties, however, that Sa'dawi understood the reasons behind sexual discrimination in the Egyptian family and saw how girls' ambitions were limited as part of their grooming for marriage and a life of domesticity and ultimate subordination to the male sex. She describes the irrational fears instilled within her by such an upbringing, which made her family's honour dependent upon her not jumping down from the high steps and rupturing her hymen and hence losing her virginity.

Sa'dawi entered the Medical Faculty of Qasr al-Aini, at Cairo University, aged eighteen, and graduated in 1955. She then worked as a doctor in hospitals, in the countryside and in her own private clinic. Her first marriage, which took place when she was in her mid-twenties, lasted just over a year: her second, only six months. Both marriages ended in divorce, initiated by Sa'dawi herself, because it became clear that both husbands expected her to subordinate herself to them and their work.<sup>15</sup> In 1964, she married Sherif Hetata, who is also a doctor and novelist; a partnership which she has found to be much more congenial. Sa'dawi has a daughter Mona Hilmi, from her first marriage and a son, Atef, from her third: both children have already shown talent as writers.

In 1965, Sa'dawi spent one year at Columbia University in America, studying for a Masters degree in Public Health and Mental Health. After her return to Egypt the following year, and until 1972, Sa'dawi held the very important post of Director of Health Education, in the Egyptian Ministry of Health. During this period, she founded the Health Education



Association, in 1968 in Cairo, with her husband Sherif Hetata, and edited the journal Al-Sihha which discussed health matters and readers' problems from 1968-71 until it was closed down by the Ministry of Health.<sup>16</sup> Sa'dawi was dismissed from her work in the Ministry in 1972 on account of her writings, in particular her book Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins, on the socio-political problems of Egypt, first published in Cairo in the same year, and for a lecture at Ein Shams Faculty of Medicine, Cairo, in which she made clear her views on women and society.<sup>17</sup>

Had Sa'dawi not provoked the antagonism of a few highly influential political and religious figures, and had she not been dismissed as Director of Health Education, but been allowed to continue her progressive work, it is arguable that Egyptian society would have followed a different course over the past two decades. Sa'dawi's first friction with the authorities, she dates to 1962, when in the National Conference for the Popular Forces, before President Nasser,<sup>18</sup> she caused a stir by answering the question, "Who is the peasant?", by saying, "The one whose urine is red".<sup>19</sup> She referred, of course, to the perennial problem of belharsia, thus indicting the authorities for not taking sufficient steps to eradicate it.

Another clash Sa'dawi recorded in 1970, also in the presence of Nasser, when she was representing the Physicians Union at an important meeting. After an address given by Anwar Sadat,<sup>20</sup> then Deputy President, calling for economies, hard work and increased production, Sa'dawi dared to point out the loss of productivity occasioned by some three hundred delegates having to wait two hours for the dignitaries, besides making other criticisms of the absence of democracy in Egypt. An Interior

Ministry official later warned her against criticizing the government.<sup>21</sup>

The next six years following her dismissal, was a highly productive period, in which Sa'dawi averaged one to two books a year, concentrating on the medical sociological field. Apart from the private research necessary for her books, she undertook a separate study at Ein Shams University from 1973-4, on the problem of women and neuroses in Egypt.

In 1978, Sa'dawi began work for the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, in the African Training and Research Centre for Women, based at Addis Ababa. This was a prestigious position entailing high responsibilities in which she was in charge of the Centre's training programmes. Her efforts to oppose the use of consultants and experts who were all white and all male, in reinterpreting the projects submitted by women, ended in frustration and she resigned the following year.<sup>22</sup> Sa'dawi then joined the United Nations Economic Committee for West Asia, and was based in Beirut. Again, she found a lack of support for her ideas, and left in 1980, after addressing the International Women's Conference in Copenhagen, on the problems faced by Palestinian women in the occupied territories.<sup>23</sup> Since 1980, Sa'dawi has devoted herself to writing, her international public speaking and the various organizations in which she is involved, such as the Association for African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD), of which she was a co-founder in 1978, and the Arab Women's Solidarity Association which she founded in 1982. Sa'dawi is also involved with the Egyptian Human Rights Organization of which her husband is Secretary General.

In 1981, Sa'dawi was arrested under Sadat's state of emergency, along with over a thousand others, for apparently posing a threat to public order. Her three month stay in jail is recorded in her memoirs from the women's prison, Mudhakkirātī fī Sijn al-Nisā'.

More recently, Sa'dawi has gone to live in her husband's native village, along with her family, where she considers their home to be a writers' retreat. In addition to her writing and maintaining her modest home, she sees some private patients who cannot afford to pay for medical treatment. She also works with the village women on various projects related to improving health care and changing outdated concepts, that inhibit women's development, by raising their political and social consciousness alongside teaching them practical skills.

Sa'dawi spoke of the significance of her move to the village, in Oslo in 1980, when she said:

"I have come to realise that my literary or scientific creativity can only flourish if fed through the multiple network of relations and links which I have established over the years with the people of my city, Cairo, and my village Kafr Tahla. These links are also the support and the protection which have spared me the sorrow of loneliness and the alienation of excessive individualism. My desire to nurture my art, and to preserve my individual identity, my pressing need to be alone, away from people, so that I can meditate and contemplate, are accompanied by an equally pressing need to be in contact with people, not because I want to write about them, but because I must live with them, and touch with my hands the fibre of their support." 24

Now nearing her sixties, and enjoying a worldwide following, Sa'dawi continues to write and work as actively as ever; a living testimony to

Arab women that sinn al-ya's<sup>25</sup> need not exist.

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### 3. An introduction to Sa'dawi's non-fictional works

Nawal al-Sa'dawi is best known in the West as a militant feminist, for bringing to our attention the often appalling situation of many Arab women, and for systematically documenting the entire range of mental, physical and emotional abuse to which they have frequently been subject. To label her a feminist is, I believe, to understate her social commitment and give the impression that she is anti-men, due to the unfortunate negative connotations of the word 'feminist' as it is popularly conceived. She is, of course, particularly concerned about members of her own sex, because they tend to be the victims of male-dominated society, but she is very well aware of the sufferings of men and children which are directly linked to, or result from, those of women in her culture.

I should like to consider the following under the heading of sociological works: Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins (Women and sex, 1972), Al-Unthā hiya al-Asl (The female is the origin, 1974), Al-Rajul wa'l-Jins (Men and sex, 1975), Al-Mar'a wa'l-Sirā' al-Nafsi (Women and psychological stress, 1976) and Al-Wajh al-'Āri li'l-Mar'a al-'Arabiyya (The naked face of the Arab woman, 1977). The Hidden Face of Eve published in England in 1977, is also included in this group. It contains a medley of material drawn from the first four books mentioned above, but translated into English and edited by Sherif Hetata, to make it more appropriate for Western readers. The uproar caused by the publication of Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins in Cairo, made Sa'dawi obliged to switch to Beirut as a publishing centre for her other works on factual topics. This move meant that, while still

being liable to some censorship by the publishers in Lebanon, Sa'dawi was able to write more freely and was at least assured a circulation of her works in the Arab world, even if it were a limited one. The scarcity value and controversial nature of her works has of course only increased their popularity.

Sa'dawi writes chiefly for the educated youth of Egypt, to whom her works are touchingly dedicated. These young people are the new literate generation who will form the future society. Given the correct education and freed from outdated attitudes rooted in ignorance and fear, their pressure of numbers alone, Sa'dawi hopes, will be able to create extensive beneficial changes to Egyptian society. Sa'dawi has proved to be a relentless critic of the double standards and deficiencies that so characterize Middle Eastern society, even if it involves tackling the trio of taboo subjects: sex, religion and politics.<sup>26</sup> She desperately tries to point out the injustices that have arisen and still arise in her society, because of its unquestioning acceptance of traditional outdated values and its perpetuating absurdly inaccurate stereotypes of men's and women's nature. Sa'dawi's attitude has not just been to attack the hypocritical, but to suggest healthier, alternative values, and redefine such concepts as love, truth, femininity, masculinity, beauty etc., in the light of modern Western knowledge.

As a doctor, Sa'dawi has been acutely aware of the physical and emotional suffering of women and girls, who bear the full force of Egypt's patriarchal ethos. Her quest for the information she needed to help improve the lives of Arab women, led her to research the historical origins and development of the paternalistic values which have so shaped

social life in Egypt. Sa'dawi is the first writer in her society to have drawn public attention to the harmfulness and widespread practice of female circumcision. She has brought the essence of Western feminist thought, as formulated by such scholars as Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet, Mary Jane Sherfey, Germaine Greer, Betty Friedan and Juliette Mitchell, to her Arab readers in the form of a potted history of patriarchal and capitalist social development, an exposé of Freud's errors, a critique of the timeworn myth of Adam and Eve and a new perspective on female sexuality. By giving this historical exposition of the development of patriarchal society, Sa'dawi shows how the subordination of women worldwide, has been a man-made phenomenon, how it has been reinforced by the vested interests of political and religious authorities over the ages, and how women have internalized this inferiority.

It was Professor H.A.R. Gibb who said of Jurji Zaydan that he was the Egyptians' "chief educator out of school",<sup>27</sup> a description perhaps even better suited to Sa'dawi. Her factual works contain a fascinating collection of information drawn from her wide reading of history, feminism, religion, Arab literature, anthropology and sociology, together with scientific facts from modern medicine, anatomy and psychology. She adopts a direct didactic tone and addresses her readers with the authority of a knowledgeable teacher. She knows full well the crucial role of correct education in forming the mature, integrated human being. Sa'dawi gives her audience the information that is unobtainable from any institution in Egyptian society. This is even more true today with the tightening up on sexual morals encouraged by the popular stress on Egypt's Islamic heritage, than in the 1970s when Sa'dawi began to write about sexuality within her society. The beginning of the Sadat era was for many middle-class

Egyptians a time when they were conscious of greater personal freedom and a certain relaxation of society's strictures against the expression of sexuality.

Sa'dawi has evolved a certain highly individual style. If we look at her technique, we will see that it basically involves appealing to her readers' reason above their emotions. She leads them through a series of logical arguments, posing the questions and answering them step by step, thus drawing her readers away from their misconceptions and prejudice. She forces them to think about their values, perhaps for the first time, and so persuasive is her style, that she gives them little option but to agree with her views. Many of Sa'dawi's readers have had no one knowledgeable with whom to discuss the subjects of sexuality, a wife's relationship to her husband, masturbation, circumcision, homosexuality and motherhood etc., and probably had to read her works in secret. For such as these, Sa'dawi performs the role of another partner in discussion, an older, wiser figure who has their best interests at heart.

If Sa'dawi is uncompromising in her demands for more honesty, equality and justice, she is also full of understanding, which comes across as successive waves of compassion for those who are oppressed. Sa'dawi is not a prisoner of any political or religious dogma, hence her writings have a universal validity for her Arab readers. Though she has never been involved in political parties, nor subscribed to a specific ideology, her works have an undeniable socialist bias. An abhorrence of capitalism is equally obvious, as is a prejudice against the West in general. If Sa'dawi's underlying philosophy is socialism, her ethics are feminist-humanitarian: she is opposed to racism, class oppression, exploitation



of one human being by another and discrimination of any kind. She stands for liberation, of all human beings and of every facet of their lives: liberation of the mind from erroneous concepts; liberation of the personality through any positive and creative activity, and the liberation of the body from false theories of human sexuality. Her defence of children's rights forms a significant contribution to general awareness of their sufferings.

By sketching a picture of the ideal socialist society where men and women could cooperate and realize their full potential as human beings, Sa'dawi offers readers a fascinating alternative to their own. Hers is no easy option, however. Sa'dawi's standards are extremely high; formidably so. Women's active participation in society and government, which she constantly urges, is not purely for their own benefit, as a means towards greater independence and control of their lives, but is seen as a prerequisite for Egypt's future progress. Whether the Egyptians' apparent eagerness to remodel their society, in the late 1980s on what they interpret as being Islamic principles, is merely a passing flirtation with those traditional concepts that seem to fulfil a much needed sense of security, or whether it will prove possible to create a political ideology out of Egyptian Islam that will have the capacity to adapt to twentieth-century problems, which will also satisfy the majority of society, remains to be seen. If the current Islamic revival should ever disappoint the Egyptian public, then a socialist backlash would be highly probable, in which case Sa'dawi will no longer be suspect, and her works will probably become the textbooks of the new social order.

In common with feminists elsewhere, Sa'dawi is trying to resurrect pride in women's active past from within her own culture. This has led her to delve into history from pre-Islamic times to the twentieth century, in search of suitable role models. The issue of cultural loyalty precludes her from holding up Western women, or those from secular, socialist states as examples; but then so does the censor. The irony is that Arab women, who cling so tenaciously to the stereotype of the Western woman as morally depraved, will probably have to pass through similar struggles and teething troubles on their road to liberating themselves and their society. Any suggestion that women in the more progressive societies, who undoubtedly enjoy greater freedoms and opportunities, might be a pattern to observe and emulate, is strenuously avoided. Amal Rassam, a social scientist from Iraq, has this to say on the above point:

"While the Arab experience need not mirror that of Europe in its details, there is little reason to doubt the similarity in overall trends. For example, everywhere in the Middle East, we see the erosion of the extended patriarchal family and the emergence of the individual, both male and female, as an independent actor on the social scene. The domination of the young by the old and of women by men is no longer taken for granted. Whether publicly debated or simply reflected in the practical arrangements and relationships within the household, sex roles are changing rapidly, much as they did in Europe."<sup>28</sup>

Sa'dawi's individual approach to her subjects and the very material with which she deals, have not endeared her to certain ultra-conservative sections amongst the authorities. It is clear, though, when she says, "My audience chose me",<sup>29</sup> and when she narrates the familiar type of case that necessitated her writing Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins,<sup>30</sup> that she felt impelled to write her sociological works. It has not been for any self-aggrandizement

that she has tackled these subjects, but to serve others. That the path has been rocky, over unchartered terrain, that at times it has felt like treading a minefield, Sa'dawi admits in the preface to Al-Rajul wa'l-Jins.<sup>31</sup> Her aim is to give a comprehensive view of the human being as he or she interacts with society. No part of human life should ever be studied in isolation, she feels, but should be seen in the context of political and social reality. Thus she justifies including literary, political, sociological and religious material in a book ostensibly about sex.

The tremendous positive response to her writings has been an encouragement to her to continue along the lines she has chosen, and confirmation that her message is getting through. The first edition of Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins sold out rapidly and she received messages of support and gratitude for her work; people began to come to her in person with their problems, even from abroad. In the preface to the second edition, she says:

"Many letters came to me from male and female readers asking for more of this information that is so essential for life and I was very heartened by this support, believing deeply that the majority of people in our society are eager for knowledge."<sup>32</sup>

Responding to her readers' needs has made massive demands on her energy, intellectual ability and thought. It has involved her surveying Western knowledge on a variety of subjects, besides researching on her own society. She has then attempted to compare the two, so that she can use the former to shed light on the latter.

If Sa'dawi were to live in exile abroad she could write as freely as she pleased and reap substantial profits from the publishing and film industries, yet she chooses not to for personal reasons, and also because she believes that one must attack the deficiencies of the Egyptian social system from within, for any successful changes to be made. Sa'dawi was heavily censored under Sadat. Many of her works were banned in Egypt and various other Arab countries.<sup>33</sup> Under President Mubarak<sup>34</sup> most of her works have been republished, but with a restricted circulation. This, she feels, is not because of any new tolerance towards her views, but just to give a semblance of democracy, so that the government can say, "Of course we permit the opposition to write and publish." Sa'dawi is still censored from appearing on the television and speaking on the radio. Her latest novel The Fall of the Imam (1987) has had to be published first in English in the West, because of its highly controversial nature.<sup>35</sup>

The knowledge that one's works will be scrutinized by the censor, poses a delicate problem. One must not underestimate the restrictive influence of censorship in the Arab world, which fetters the creativity of its most original writers. Their fears are substantiated whenever an 'intellectual' is imprisoned or taken to court on account of expressing opinions which the authorities find disagreeable. Sa'dawi likens the presence of censorship to "a sword" hanging over the minds and thoughts of writers.<sup>36</sup> Like all writers in restricted societies, Sa'dawi is eager to see her works published and read widely. She is therefore obliged to couch her ideas tactfully, so as not to lay herself open to criticism, or overtly offend the sensibilities of the religious and political authorities. Her solution to this problem involves trying to disarm any potential opponents before she even begins her book, which she does by justifying

her approach and anticipating their criticism, in the preface. One can only admire her ability in providing what amounts to a skilful self-acquittal, and look with indulgence upon the inconsistencies which arise as a result, from time to time. To write at all in such a society as Egypt, on such issues as women, sex and society, demands, in addition to intellectual ability, great courage. For this reason the very act of writing can become imbued with added significance; it can become a mission for truth.

"I had no other weapon left in life except the pen, by which I could defend myself, my freedom and that of human beings everywhere. I had only the pen left with which to express the tragedy of the poor, of women and slaves, to tell people that I abhor oppression and love justice, that I respect the individual and will not bow down before the authorities, whoever they might be."<sup>37</sup>

Despite great efforts by the Establishment to silence her, even to the point of having her imprisoned, Sa'dawi has maintained her independence.

"I shall continue to write then. I shall write even though they bury me in a grave. I shall write, even though they take away the pen and paper. I shall write on the wall, on the ground, on the sun and the face of the moon."<sup>38</sup>

The Establishment's attempts to curb her influence have utterly failed; they have simply fanned interest in her works.

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#### 4. An outline of Sa'dawi's contribution to Egyptian literature

Had Sa'dawi's efforts been confined to sociological writings, that would have been achievement enough. Had she made a name for herself only in the field of fiction, her contribution to literature thus far, would already have guaranteed her a prominent position in the literary history of Egypt. As it is, she has succeeded in both spheres, a double achievement, and enjoys a well-deserved reputation for both her factual and fictional works. The important issues of life, death, justice, God, religion, love, hate, the nature of existence, anger and frustration, are at once themes in her works and motives for her writing. Sa'dawi feels that her fiction is very much bound up with her subconscious mental processes, in that she can be haunted by an idea for a work for months or even years: characters may appear in her dreams and work out their dialogue long before she commits it all to paper. That she also writes for psychological relief will become evident during the following discussion of her novels and memoirs.

There are certain outstanding features which mark her prose regardless of the particular subject matter and style, which are in themselves varied. There is, for instance, the way in which she voices women's intimate experiences, which the male reader may pass unnoticed. By touching on such subjects as menstruation, masturbation, women's sexual response, orgasm and circumcision, Sa'dawi gives validity to these experiences previously neglected by male and female writers alike. She has marked an advance on the pioneering Arab women writers of the 1950s who tentatively

dealt with the pre- or extra-marital affair, like Layla al-Ba'labakki and Colette al-Khuri, by virtue of the very depths of emotion with which she communicates these subjects. There is no denying that Sa'dawi uses veiled language, but the meaning is unambiguous for the mature female reader. Indeed, her first novel Mudhakkirāt Tabība (1960), can justly be regarded as the first modern feminist book to be written in Arabic. This unmistakable feminist message in her fiction is furthermore delivered to the Egyptian woman first, then to other Arab women. With the exception of one short story,<sup>39</sup> all of Sa'dawi's works are firmly based in Egypt, hence her fellow countrywomen can identify far more readily with her heroines and characters than they can with those of Lebanese, Syrian or Iraqi women writers, for example. Cultural and dialectal variations in the Arab world usually predispose the reader to find his or her own indigenous fiction the most rewarding.

Sa'dawi's female characters are drawn far more convincingly than her male, which means that her male readers are drawn into the minds of Sa'dawi's heroines. They have to submit to seeing life, as she depicts it, through the eyes of a schoolgirl, a prostitute, a battered wife etc., in order to appreciate her work at all. Sa'dawi's characters do not conform to any stereotyped images of women found before in Arab fiction, not even the stereotype of the supposedly liberated, rebellious young woman. She shows her heroines challenging prevailing standards with keen, intelligent minds, whilst observing and experiencing the contradictions inherent in society's expectations of them and their own impulse to self-determination. They are strong enough mentally to follow their own natures, to develop as normally as they can without repressing any part of their mind, merely to try and ensure the goodwill of another, or to

protect themselves. At the end of the novels, they are rewarded with a certain fulfilment, not punished for challenging society or made to renounce their ambitions in favour of a man's. When Sa'dawi shows that young women can criticize society, their families and men, and yet survive; in fact, can find happiness and purpose in life, she is taking literature in a new direction. This is a trend which not only reflects the present reality of social life in Egypt, but also has the potential to mould young minds for the future. At a time when role models for intelligent young women growing up normally are scarce, whether in Egyptian literature, or in the media, the appearance of strong and respectable heroines in Sa'dawi's novels, must be a welcome sight. It therefore begins to become clearer how her fiction complements her factual works, by completing the picture of the Arab girl's interaction with her society. It is interesting to contrast the energy and dynamism of Sa'dawi's heroines, with the resignation and acceptance of those drawn by her fellow Egyptians, Alifa Rifaat and Sufi 'Abd Allah.

The quality of realism in Sa'dawi's writings is attributable mainly to the strong autobiographical current running through them. Sa'dawi has capitalized on her varied experience of life. The fact that she has been able to move so easily between different classes and sections of society, has probably helped to give her a much broader outlook on life than any other novelist writing in the Arab world today. Her mobility is due partly to her profession, partly to her social skills and the fact that her family combined peasant and middle-class backgrounds. As a sympathetic doctor, she has been able to win the confidence of women from every sector of society, something which other gifted doctor-novelists, such as her husband, Sherif Hetata, and Yusuf Idris, have not been able to do



quite as effectively. Sa'dawi breaks away from the pattern of the educated upper middle-class female novelist preoccupied with the frustrations of her privileged peers. Sa'dawi shows genuine involvement with her characters' problems. She can and does speak for the poor and the oppressed.

Arab literature has had a tradition of committed writers since the early 1950s: commitment (in Arabic iltizām) being the familiar label for a writer with a compelling socialist message to deliver, whose works perhaps exhibit technical inadequacies, and where the ideas expressed are more important than the plot. Sa'dawi has inherited this tradition, but has enlarged its scope by incorporating the authentic female dimension. Her depiction of the horrors of the Egyptian social system, convey the meaning of its poverty and oppression in the human terms which are ignored by official statistics. It is this aspect of her fiction, its quality of social realism, its capacity to shock, embarrass and anger, which needs to be observed in trying to account for the diversification of her written works. Fiction acts as a safety-valve, allowing her to vent the emotion welling up inside. Her outrage, frustration, optimism and compassion, when presented under the guise of a story, fictional personae and imaginary situations, can find a legitimate outlet in a society which would find such subject matter, wholly unacceptable, if written as fact.

One interesting quality of her fictional writing which can easily be overlooked, is its spiritual dimension. Wherever possible, readers are given a full impression of her characters; their spiritual state is not neglected, in favour of the psychological. She achieves this extra dimension by describing the feelings of the individual, that sense of

being a tiny part in the macrocosm and that inner exaltation above the mundane, when the soul seems to blend with the eternal spirit of existence. So personal and individual is this type of experience, that what Sa'dawi captures in the written word can only be a reflection of that which she herself has known. A certain degree of spiritual evolvment is therefore demanded of the reader, if he is to appreciate such passages. The following chapter will explore these points in more detail as they arise in her novels.

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References to Chapter 1

- 1) Salwa Khamash, A study of social problems in Egypt as depicted by Egyptian novelists from 1919-1960, thesis presented for the degree of Ph.D., University of London, 1977, p. 2.
- 2) Ibid., p. 471.
- 3) See the interview in Spare Rib, London, August 1986.
- 4) The Hidden Face of Eve, Zed Books, London, 1980, pp. 8, 146, 153.  
(Henceforth HFE)
- 5) Mudhakkirātī fī Sijn al-Nisā', Dar al-Mustaqbal al-Arabi, Cairo, 1984, pp. 160-3. (Henceforth Mudhakkirātī)
- 6) HFE, p. 8.
- 7) Ibid., pp. 103-4.
- 8) Mudhakkirātī, p. 205.
- 9) Sa'dawi tells the story of her participation in the demonstration of 1946 and how her father supported her right to demonstrate when the head teacher threatened her with expulsion for so doing: Mudhakkirātī, p. 203. The widespread demonstrations of 1946, in which students and workers featured prominently, were in protest at the British

government's refusal to consider the Egyptian government's demand for a renegotiation of the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936 and the withdrawal of British troops from Egypt.

- 10) HFE, pp. 7-8.
- 11) Ibid., p. 9.
- 12) Belharsia, a disease common in Africa and the Far East, is spread by a parasite and produces internal wasting. It is contracted by washing or bathing in contaminated water. The distinguishing symptom is blood in the urine.
- 13) HFE, p. 46.
- 14) Ibid., p. 10.
- 15) Mudhakkirātī, pp. 7-8.
- 16) Ibid., pp. 16-7. See also Ref. 2 p.401 below.
- 17) Ibid., p. 17.
- 18) Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918-70) was president of Egypt from 1954 until his death. He came to power following the 1952 Egyptian Revolution during which a group of army officers overthrew the monarchy. Nasser laid the foundations of a socialist government in Egypt.

- 19) Mudhakkirātī, p. 151.
  
- 20) Anwar Sadat (1918-1981) succeeded Nasser as president of Egypt in 1970. Whilst he continued along the socialist lines laid down by his predecessor, Sadat widened the scope for foreign, particularly American, investment in Egypt as a way of stimulating the economy. Although Egypt in the early 1970s saw a slightly greater degree of freedom of expression, towards the end of his era, Sadat was forced to clamp down harshly on those whose opposition he feared. In September 1981, 1536 people were arrested under a presidential decree, one of whom was Sa'dawi. Sadat was assassinated on 6th October 1981, by Muslim fundamentalists, while attending a military parade.
  
- 21) Mudhakkirātī, p. 107.
  
- 22) Interview Spare Rib, August 1986.
  
- 23) Mudhakkirātī, p. 212.
  
- 24) Third World Women's News, Vol. 1:1, 1986.
  
- 25) sinn al-ya's is the popular expression for menopause in Arabic. It literally means "age of despair". It reflects the widespread belief in the Arab world that with the ending of her fertility, a woman has no hope left in life.
  
- 26) Whilst 'politics' might seem to be the main topic of conversation amongst Arab men, especially those who frequent the popular Egyptian

cafes, it is necessary to distinguish discussion of the subject on this superficial level, from serious criticism of political institutions. It is this latter which Sa'dawi means when she refers to politics as being a taboo subject.

- 27) H.A.R. Gibb, "Studies in contemporary Arabic literature", Bulletin of the School of Oriental & African Studies, Vol. 4, 1926-8, p. 760.
- 28) Amal Rassam, "Towards a theoretical framework for women's studies", in Women in the Arab world, UNESCO, 1984, p. 136.
- 29) This remark was made during an interview, 11th June 1986, London.
- 30) Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins, pp. 12-13.
- 31) Al-Rajul wa'l-Jins, pp. 6-7.
- 32) Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins, p. 5.
- 33) All her works are at present banned in Saudi Arabia.
- 34) Hosni Mubarak, designated by Sadat to be his successor, took office following Sadat's assassination. So far his tenure of office has given a slight increase in personal and political freedoms to Egyptians, though this has manifested itself mainly in the promotion of Islamic groups and ideas. Mubarak has lifted the censorship imposed by Sadat on most of Sa'dawi's books, and has freed many of those imprisoned by his predecessor as potential opponents of the Egyptian state.

35) Since I shall not have space to cover this work in detail (which at the time of writing is not yet available in English or Arabic) it seems apposite to make a few references to its controversial substance here. The "Imam" referred to in the title could be seen as the symbol of the typical Middle Eastern leader, whether religious or political, who rises to power on a wave of charismatic glory, upon whom the people's entire hopes are centred and who is elevated by them to the level of a god or saviour. Such a leader inevitably falls under the pressure of the corruption which underpins his regime. Sa'dawi uses a fantasy here to put across theological and political issues. Nevertheless, it is possible to draw parallels between the dramatic fate of Sa'dawi's Imam and recent Middle Eastern leaders, the Shah of Iran, Numeiri of Sudan, and most especially, Egypt's former president, Sadat.

36) Mudhakkirātī, p. 8.

37) Ibid., p. 8.

39) Ibid., p. 9.

40) The story "Ayn al-Ḥayāh" in the collection Al-Khayt wa'l-Jidār is set in Jordan, see p. 569.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE NOVELS OF NAWAL AL-SA'DAWI

Before discussing Sa'dawi's novels, it is important to pause and reflect on the state of literature in the Arab world during the late 1950s-60s, when Sa'dawi began to write. The novel form itself was still a recent introduction to the Arab cultural scene and the period of frantic experimentation during the 1930s-50s had already provided it with models of the historical, romantic and social realist trends. One particularly popular orientation common to many creative intellectuals during the late '50s was that of 'commitment' in literature or iltizām, which the Arabs adopted as roughly equivalent in meaning to Sartre's concept of engagement. M.M. Badawi defines iltizām as, "the need for a writer to have a message, instead of just delighting in creating a work of the imagination".<sup>1</sup> Sa'dawi is undoubtedly a writer whose fiction contains a message.

Throughout its short history, the Arab novel has been through rapid developments in form and style. More recently it has seen attempts to integrate into fiction mystical, symbolical, existentialist, surrealist and socialist political dimensions of human experience. Even in the late '80s however, it is arguable whether literature is yet regarded in the Arab world as a free independent activity of the individual's imagination. The directions in which the novel has developed may be due essentially to the social and political problems which the Arab nations face. Halim



Barakat sees Arabic novels as being an important element in social transformation, he regards them as a:

".. critical exploration into Arab society and not just a faithful reflection of the status quo. The prevailing climate of social and political crises has promoted a critical stance vis-a-vis society and its institutions,"<sup>2</sup>

he goes on to describe the general tendency that permeated Arabic literature during the '50s and '60s, as being:

".. one of desperate search for a new order, and in the direction of restructuring and rearrangement of society, rather than reflection and maintaining or promoting the established order."<sup>3</sup>

If we wish to summarize the prevailing mood of those writing in the 1960s, we can usefully refer to Sabry Hafez: ".. the tongue of a whole generation has been prohibited from any genuine political activity and surrounded by deformed values and fallacies".<sup>4</sup> It was essentially a mood of dissatisfaction with current values and a rejection of the dominant conditions.

If we return to Barakat's thesis, we can see how Sa'dawi's novels fit into the broader scheme of creative writing in the Arab world during the '60s-'70s, apart from the fact that she would be described as a 'committed' writer. Barakat loosely classifies the important works of this period into novels of non-confrontation, novels of compliance, novels of regression, novels of individual rebellion and novels of revolutionary change.<sup>5</sup> Sa'dawi's are unquestionably 'novels of individual rebellion', and easily measure up to Barakat's definition:

"The point of departure of these novelists is the individual ego and the posing of self-centred attempts at resolving the problem of human alienation. Their characters are pre-occupied with problems of social and cultural limitations on individual freedom. They resolve their alienation by social criticism and defiant rejection of prevailing value orientations. Thus, these characters are constantly in a state of tense clashes with society and its institutions."<sup>6</sup>

Another of Barakat's observations is particularly pertinent to a study of Sa'dawi's work. He notices one distinct trait of a writer who composes novels of individual rebellion which is that, "though he diversifies his characters, they tend to speak his own language and debate his own ideas".<sup>7</sup>

In addition to using the novel as a vehicle for a specific message related to the individual's rebellion against society, Sa'dawi also incorporates the feminist stance, and it is this extra dimension which forms her substantial contribution to Arabic literature as a whole. Her style differs significantly from that of her predecessors, both male and female, and her contemporaries, in the type of leading character she depicts. Her 'heroines' undergo development of character by resisting the traditional values and injustice around them, by refusing to accept compromise, or renounce their own individuality. Sa'dawi draws heroines who have true strength, who are intelligent, whether educated or not, who are not dominated by men and who do not define themselves in relation to a man. By providing the reader with this type of fictional image of women, Sa'dawi is helping to promote a new, popular consciousness, hence her work confirms Barakat's thesis of novels playing a role in transforming Arab society. Sa'dawi is redressing the stereotype of women as unstable,

dependent on men, weak, unintelligent and negative, as portrayed in Arab literature thus far. She is also describing the experience of the new generation of university educated young women striving for liberation.

If we glance at a few examples of attempts to portray the modern woman in Arabic literature, during the '50s and '60s, we will begin to appreciate the extent of Sa'dawi's original attitude towards women in her fiction. Ihsan 'Abd al-Quddus, a male Egyptian writer, tried to create a realistic liberated young woman in his novel Anā Hurrah.<sup>8</sup> His protagonist Amina achieves a certain superficial Western kind of liberation after attending university and finding a career. She is not shown, however, as being happy with the affluent and unrestricted life-style which she has created for herself. Her life, we are told, is empty without love. The author can only allow her to find fulfilment at the end of his novel by making her subordinate her personality and talents to a young man who appears to be a promising writer. She has given up her freedom in order to live in the shadow of a man.

Suhayl Idris, a Lebanese writer, was also concerned with the position of women in contemporary society. His novel Asābi'unā Allatī Tahtariq<sup>9</sup> shows that even if a young woman is educated (as is the character Ilham in this work), the traditionally desirable feminine trait of self-effacement in a relationship with a man is still prized. He suggests that in cultivating this quality in herself lies a young woman's best hope of happiness. The two other female characters in this book who are more liberated than Ilham, though their liberation is seen only in sexual terms by the author, are shown as aggressive and domineering and

receive no respect from men.

If we now take examples of two Arab women authors we can see that their female characters do not automatically receive a happier fate from the pen of a member of their own sex. In Anā Ahyā by Layla Ba'labakki,<sup>10</sup> the main character Lina rebels against her family and society in a negative and self-destructive way. She finds no fulfilment though she tries to find it in work, in study and in a relationship with a young Communist. After being rejected by him, Lina attempts to commit suicide.

Colette al-Khuri's character Rasha in Laylā Wāhida<sup>11</sup> is an unfulfilled married woman who has no outlet for her potential talents. After an encounter with an attractive man on a train to Paris, Rasha enjoys a romantic night far away from her home country and husband, but she is unable to reconcile her new experience of sexual love and freedom, with her own restricted life. Al-Khuri thought that the only appropriate end for Rasha would be to lose her life by involving her in an untimely accident. In al-Khuri's first novel Ayyām Ma'ah<sup>12</sup> the character Rim has a stronger personality; she wants to establish her independence after university, through a productive career. She has a relationship with a middle-aged musician through which she hopes to find a sense of meaning in life, but ends up by being rejected. Instead of being devastated like Lina, by rejection, she develops an inner strength. Since it is clear that she can no longer fit into her society, al-Khuri sends Rim away to Europe to enable her to work towards her goal of independence. To escape is the only solution she can envisage.

Sa'dawi's protagonists, however, can actively reject men: in this is embodied the essential difference between Sa'dawi's outlook and those of the above authors. Furthermore, Sa'dawi's fictional works are vibrant, full of energy; each one a testimony to some aspect of human strength. Sa'dawi's young women have a vitality all of their own. In The modern Egyptian novel, H. Kilpatrick noticing the lack of "interesting and lively" female characters, rightly considered it a sign of immaturity in the Egyptian novel as it had thus far developed. Some readers may consider that Sa'dawi's spirited young women would partially redress this balance.

"Although the situation has improved since the days of the pioneer novelists who had to appropriate heroines from the foreign communities, the Egyptian novel does not yet have to its credit a gallery of interesting and lively women characters; when it does so, this will be an important sign of maturity."<sup>13</sup>

A discussion of Sa'dawi's novels in their chronological order will now follow, paying close attention to the author's achievements in the light of the above remarks.

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## References to Chapter 2

- 1) M.M. Badawi, Modern Arabic literature and the West, Ithaca Press, London, 1985, p. 3.
- 2) Halim Barakat, "Arabic novels and social transformation", in Studies in modern Arabic literature, ed. R.C. Ostle, London, 1975, p. 126.
- 3) Ibid., p. 126.
- 4) Sabry Hafez, "Innovation in the Egyptian short story", in Studies in modern Arabic literature, p. 111.
- 5) Barakat, op. cit., p. 128.
- 6) Ibid., p. 134.
- 7) Ibid., p. 135.
- 8) Ihsan 'Abd al-Quddus, Anā Hurra, Cairo, 1954.
- 9) Suhayl Idris, Asābi'unā Allati Tahtariq, Beirut, 1962.
- 10) Layla Ba'labakki, Anā Ahyā, Beirut, 1958. Ba'labakki is a Lebanese writer.

- 11) Colette al-Khuri, Laylā Wāhida, Beirut, 1961. Al-Khuri is Syrian.
- 12) Colette al-Khuri, Ayyām Ma'ah, Beirut, 1959.
- 13) H. Kilpatrick, The modern Egyptian novel, Oxford, 1974, p. 178.

1.

MUDHAKKIRĀT TABĪBA

Sa'dawi's first novel Mudhakkirāt Tabība (Memoirs of a lady doctor), published in Cairo in 1960, can rightly be considered the first feminist work of fiction in Arabic. Since it is a key work in understanding Sa'dawi's place in Arabic literature, and because of its autobiographical nature, I shall provide a summary of its contents.

The book begins with a nine year-old girl becoming conscious of her social restrictions, as she grows aware of her developing body. She is shown in various situations typical of the Egyptian family. As a gesture of protest against the feminine role her mother expects her to follow, the girl has her long hair cut short like a boy's. She decides to become a doctor when she leaves school, this being not only a way of using her mind, but also of gaining some measure of vengeance on her family for trying to curb her, for she had already noted their respect and fear in regard to the medical profession. As a student she soon loses any illusions about the human body. At first she believes that science holds the key to life and makes it her god, but when she sees modern medicine incapable of saving the life of a young woman in childbirth, she renounces her faith in science. When she later leaves the city to go and work in the countryside, the contact with Nature restores her mind to balance and she feels in tune with her self and her sexuality, her heart is awakened to love and she regains faith in humanity.



By this time she is twenty-five, and becomes conscious that she has spent her childhood and youth engrossed in studying and in rebelling against her family and her femininity. After returning to the city and opening a clinic, she begins to feel a need for a partner. She meets a young engineer, whose dying mother she has attended. He professes liberated views at first, and appears to respect her need for a career. She agrees to marry him, but the kind of love she feels for him is a maternal affection mixed with pity for his vulnerability, rather than a mature emotion. During the marriage ceremony she feels disgusted with the procedures, the fact that she is being handed over through a contract like a piece of property, and the insulting comments of the religious registrar. No sooner is she married, than she feels entirely restricted by her husband, who turns out to have the insecurities typical of the Arab Egyptian husband,<sup>1</sup> which result in an overweening desire to dominate her and subdue her into the role of housewife. She realizes that she has made a mistake in getting married to that particular man, and decides to end the marriage to regain her independence, regardless of other people's criticisms of her. Since she feels the need for a man even more strongly now, she resolves to choose one for herself, believing that she can only learn who is suitable by a process of experimenting, by getting to know the other person before marriage. She meets a surgeon who is attracted to her and makes advances, but she is repulsed by his arrogance. By now she begins to feel that she is engaged in a long struggle with her society.

Over the course of time, she becomes famous, without, we are to suppose, having to compromise on her values. By becoming something of a celebrity, she has been able to rise above her society and no longer

feels locked in conflict with it. One unhappy result of the fame and fortune which she has achieved, is a personal loneliness. At a party, she meets a composer of popular music and both are attracted to each other. Another evening she plucks up courage to invite him to her home, thus taking the initiative in their relationship. As he is on his way, she excitedly arranges her flat, makes a cake and a jelly. He flatters her for her spontaneity, naturalness and strength. She is pleased to note that he looks her in the eye rather than stares at her body. He plays the violin for her and she is entranced. They fall in love. He declares his love for her first and they embrace. The phone rings, and she is called out to an emergency. He asks to accompany her and it turns out that his help in fetching blood for a transfusion, is invaluable. The patient happens to be a young man living in squalid conditions. After a dramatic scene, the young doctor saves the patient's life, but when he tries to pay for her services, it suddenly seems unethical to her that a doctor should charge for his skills in medicine. The doctor, who is by now aged around thirty, finds herself after this incident overwhelmed by a need to give in life to others, instead of taking. She feels a need for the support of others, and finds comfort and peace in the arms of her new love.

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On a superficial reading, it would appear that Sa'dawi's novel Mudhakkirāt Tabība is a thinly-veiled attack on men in her society and

their hypocritical attitudes towards women. However, the author probes further to question the whole conception of femininity and masculinity, the validity of marriage as an institution, and the position of the young professional female. No one could deny that much resentment against men is revealed within the novel's pages and sustained throughout the work: in fact, all but the most liberal and broad-minded of male readers would probably find themselves wincing at certain passages, if not outraged. The value and interest of this book lies in the exciting challenge Sa'dawi presents to the traditional modes of thought and preconceptions of a male-dominated society which restrict women's functioning as mature and responsible members of their society.

Mudhakkirāt Tabība is so full of vividly realistic scenes and so obviously autobiographical, that the reader often has the impression that he is reading Sa'dawi's lifestory.<sup>2</sup> This is reinforced by the use of the first person narration, the fact that we do not learn the doctor's name, and the medical subject matter. The doctor-narrator dates her revolt against femininity back to childhood, to the age of nine, when she first became aware of the different treatment accorded to girls and boys. Sa'dawi shows how preferential treatment given to Egyptian boys and the physical and mental restrictions imposed on girls even before puberty, largely determine accepted adult values, namely that men believe themselves to be intrinsically the superior and dominant sex, while women regard marriage as their only vocation, their physical attractiveness their only passport to success. We can see how, right from the beginning, Sa'dawi is unafraid to introduce explicit references to taboo subjects such as menstruation,<sup>3</sup> child abuse, when the young girl is fingered by

the porter,<sup>4</sup> and the first stirrings of sexual desire in puberty.<sup>5</sup>

It is significant that Sa'dawi criticizes mothers in general for their methods of rearing their daughters. The girl is encouraged to view her body as her greatest asset in attracting a husband as a way of securing her future respectability, yet all the while society delivers to her its clear message that her body is something essentially shameful. For the sensitive girl of Sa'dawi's story, these irreconcilable demands which expect her to accept that she is at once inherently attractive and offensive, cause her to revolt against her own femininity. The embarrassment occasioned by the physical developments of adolescence alone are enough to make the girl want to recoil from any social activity.<sup>6</sup>

However, she begins to rebel openly, defying her mother by having her hair cut short: this act symbolizes her first triumph over her own sex and over her mother whom she blames for controlling her life, her future and body.<sup>7</sup> As a fictional image this gesture is not original to Sa'dawi: Ba'labakki's Lina also defies her parents by wearing her hair short.

Sa'dawi shows how the girl becomes suspicious of her mother's love because of the latter's domination, which in turn prevents the development of a close, trusting relationship which one might have imagined would develop between two members of the more restricted sex. The same idea can also be seen in the work of another Egyptian woman writer, 'Inayat al-Zayyat in her novel Al-Hubb wa'l-Samt<sup>8</sup> where the young girl Najla is painfully aware of her mother's indifference to her. It is evidence of Sa'dawi's skill that she can epitomize the whole problem of women's physical attractiveness, the arbitrariness of society's standards, and the mother-daughter relationship in the young girl's comment, after

her haircut. Her mother had always tried to instill in her the belief that long hair is a woman's crowning glory:

"I looked at the curls of my hair as they wound between the blades of the sharp scissors before falling to the ground. Was it these curls which my mother referred to as being the woman's crowning glory? And could this 'crown' topple so quickly in a single moment of resolution? I felt a strong feeling of contempt towards women. I realized that they believed in trivial things that were worth nothing. This feeling of contempt for them gave me a new sense of power which enabled me to return home with my feet firmly striding, and to stand tall before my mother with my short hair."<sup>9</sup>

When she leaves secondary school, she is determined to pursue academic success. She has already begun to work out her own values and decidedly places the intellect above the body in importance. She aims to excel in medicine because she recognizes that the position of doctor will give her the prestige she requires to command the respect of her parents, her brother and, she hopes, society,<sup>10</sup> whilst for herself it will signify a triumph over Nature which had given her a female body. Any mystique which the male body might have held for her is completely shattered when, as a medical student, she is confronted with her first corpse to dissect. In an extremely effective scene, Sa'dawi reduces men and women to the same level, reminding us of our mortality, our basically animal origins and the ultimate irrelevance of earthly distinctions. The young student comes to realize that it is society which has tried to convince her that masculinity is a mark of distinction and honour, and femininity a sign of disgrace and weakness, but does not follow up this interesting proposition to reach any understanding as to why this might be the case. She is scornful of mothers who put fear into their daughters on account

of the male body, which young girls are then supposed to live in awe of, to slave in the kitchen to satisfy, and to dream about night and day. This is a good example of literature being used for the purpose of social criticism.

The student boldly proceeds to dissect the male corpse, feeling as she does so, that she is getting some measure of revenge against men for regarding her as merely a body to look at lustfully or touch. The writing in this passage is forceful. The girl's own individual self is emphasized:

"The body of a man! That awful thing about which mothers frighten their young daughters, to the point that they are ready to slave in the hot kitchen to satisfy the man's hunger, and to dream of his form day and night! That is man, the same one that is lying before me naked, ugly, dismembered... I hadn't imagined life would prove my mother wrong so quickly, or that I would get revenge on men in such a way as this. Man, that depressing creature that looked at my breasts and saw nothing else in my existence but them.

Here am I returning his arrows to his heart.

Here am I looking at his naked body and feeling disgust.

Here am I descending upon it with my scalpel to tear its limbs apart.

Is this then the body of a man?" 11

When she comes to dissect the female corpse she looks at the skinny breasts and thinks: "Those two bits of flesh that tortured me in my childhood, which define the future of young girls and occupy men's minds and eyes..." 12

In what amounts to a biology lesson from Sa'dawi to the reader, the author stresses the physical nature of the human body, pleading the case in fiction, for equality between the sexes and an honest reassessment of traditional values. The medical student elevates science to the position of God because it appears at first, to reveal life's secrets to her. However, it soon falls in her esteem, just as man had before, when she witnesses the failure of all scientific methods to revive a young woman who dies during childbirth.<sup>13</sup>

The young doctor goes to work in the countryside and realizes how out-of-touch with Nature and humanity she has become through sacrificing her own body to her mind. There follows a description of the gradual awakening of her sexuality which could only have been written by a sensual woman.<sup>14</sup> Sa'dawi pictures it as a healthy experience, when she describes the young doctor laughing heartily, gulping down her food with relish, inhaling the smell of the earth while lying on the ground alone, truly indulging and enjoying her sensuality.

The formal nature of her medical training together with her having to come into constant contact with pain and death, has caused the doctor unawares to repress her emotions. Only when she breaks down before a patient whose pitiful appearance touches her innermost core, does she realize in retrospect, that she has lost her faith in humanity. As she reflects on her life, it seems as if she has missed out on her youth, that the constant struggles against her brother, mother and herself had demanded all her youthful energies. She makes a sudden discovery of the meaning of life and regains contact with human emotions. On her return

to the city, she at last feels able to embrace her family. Sa'dawi is giving us an authentic female version of experience. There is a real personality and intelligent mind detectable in her heroine here, even if they appear to bear a strong resemblance to that of Sa'dawi herself. Here is a character capable of positive action, not one simply reacting against life, tossed here and there by the vicissitudes of fate. It is very interesting that Sa'dawi treats these tensions felt by the young doctor as part of the woman's growth in character, her awareness of life and coming to grips with a profession. Sa'dawi's character grows through experience throughout the book. The reader is constantly aware of the central personality of the doctor which remains stable despite her different situations.

In time, the young doctor begins to feel the pressure of her single state. Nature has caused her temporarily to put behind her the revulsion she had felt against men, dating from the time when she was molested as a girl, by the doorman. She dreams vaguely of an indistinct but male face. Due to this subconscious predisposition to find a partner, she is completely duped by the young engineer, who seems at first, to be the man of her dreams. She is deceived by his flattery that she combines beauty and brains, and believes him when he says that he prefers to see a woman as man's partner and equal, not his servant and subordinate. He even protests that it would be an injustice against herself and humanity, if a woman of her calibre were imprisoned in the kitchen, relegated to the role of cooking and feeding her children.<sup>15</sup> Although he professes liberated opinions, he does not seem to have given much thought to the reasons for women's occupying an inferior position in society, nor



for man's holding the keys to power. The young man's look of helplessness stirs her maternal instinct, it is on this basis that she agrees to marry him. Sa'dawi shows how angry the bride becomes during the marriage ceremony, at the wording of the certificate and the issue of the dowry, which make her feel depersonalized, like a piece of land or building under contract. The ma'dhun<sup>16</sup> is horrified when she insists on reading the small print before she signs and when she dares to speak on behalf of her husband-to-be, concerning the dowry.<sup>17</sup>

It is because of the liberated attitudes which he has earlier professed, which have seduced the doctor, and because the reader is so conscious of the young woman's sincerity, that the man's hypocrisy is all the more shocking when he inexplicably turns into a domineering husband. The doctor diagnoses an inferiority complex and jealousy as being the root of his personality problem. Having a talented wife poses a problem for an insecure husband, which is what lies behind his attempt to stop her working. What really galls him is that she is not emotionally dependent upon him. Sa'dawi shows here that equality within a relationship is impossible unless both partners are emotionally independent and have a mature sense of their own selves. The young man is shown to have doted on his mother. After her death, he had hung all his hopes on the lady doctor filling the void she had left. The doctor's integrity is in stark contrast to the young man's behaviour, especially when he nonchalantly dismisses the opinions he had professed before marriage and disregards the fact that she had taken them seriously. She sees him in a different light thereafter and realizes what a terrible mistake she has made.



In dealing with the young woman's dilemma, Sa'dawi speaks frankly about marriage from the wife's point of view, saying that in the event of a mistake, a woman should have some means to, and the courage to extricate herself from her situation. Here is a vindication for all Egyptian women who have sought or would seek divorce to regain their self-respect after an unfortunate marriage. The author then proceeds to criticize those who would uncharitably, and in the doctor's case ungratefully, condemn a professional woman for initiating a divorce.

"I sat in my clinic and put my head between my hands and admitted my mistake. Yes, I'd been mistaken. I'd believed the man's words, in the dark, without seeing his depths. His pathetic look of need had seduced me, without my realizing that the weak person hides under his skin a number of complexes and inferior characteristics which the strong person has shed. Yes, I'd made a mistake. I'd disobeyed my heart and mind and obeyed the man by signing the marriage contract which resembled a transaction for a flat or shop.

With this extraordinary transaction hadn't I made him the person holding authority over me? Hadn't this contract made him my husband? This word which I'd never uttered! My husband! What do the words 'my husband' mean to me? That fat body that takes up half the bed.. that gaping mouth that eats and eats.. those flat feet which make his socks and the sheets foul.. that horrid nose that keeps me awake all night with its snorting and wheezing..

But what am I to do now? Must I bear the burden of my mistake by living with him for ever? And how can I live with him? How can I talk to him? How can I look into his eyes? How can I give him my lips? How can I degrade my body and soul by submitting to him?

No.. no.. the mistake which I've made doesn't warrant all that punishment.. it's not worth it! Everybody makes mistakes. Doing right and wrong is part of life. In fact we can't realize what's right except through what's wrong. There's nothing shameful or foolish in making a mistake, but in perpetuating the mistake, there certainly is.

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People gape in protest and astonishment. 'How could you leave your husband? And why?'

How dare they! These people who submit to me their bodies and souls that I should save them from death and destruction.. why should they object to a personal matter of mine? Why should they tell me what they think? I'm the one who advises them what to eat and drink, and tells them how to breathe, how to sleep, how to live and multiply. Have they forgotten? Or do they imagine that when I take off my stethoscope and white coat I take off my mind, my intelligence and personality? How ignorant they are!

My mother wasted my childhood; learning consumed my youth and adolescence; I have only a few years left of being young.. I shall not waste them! And I shan't let anyone else waste them."<sup>18</sup>

For the first time in modern Arabic literature, we see a picture of a young, liberated Egyptian woman living alone and relishing her freedom, which for her means having a home and bed to herself and leisure to write or sit and think as she pleases. This picture is all the more successful for having been drawn by a woman writer. Sa'dawi stresses the importance for the young working woman to be able to take off her poses after the day's work, all the more so if it is of a demanding nature. Life becomes too problematic if she has to assume yet another role on returning home. This economic independence makes emotional independence possible for the young doctor and constitutes her basic liberation. By focusing on social pressures to marry, and people's attitudes to the divorced woman, the author demonstrates the popular tendency to regard the form of marriage as more important than its content, namely that the woman's happiness is of little account as long as she is married.

It is a refreshing change to find a heroine in an Arabic novel who rebels positively against society's standards. Sa'dawi's character acknowledging her need for a man, decides that the best way to avoid making a second mistake in marriage, is to find a suitable partner by searching for herself. In a series of pertinent questions, posed in a persuasive rhetorical style, the doctor demonstrates how vital it is for her to base her choice on experience of the man, prior to marriage. It is Sa'dawi's voice which can be heard pleading that the two sexes should have the chance to meet and mingle naturally, to discover the depth of feeling and attitudes of mind in a possible partner. This comes across as direct criticism of the opinion that pre-marital relationships are to be condemned:

"Isn't it essential that I should search him out from among men? Yet how can I do so if I am not free to go here and there and look into the faces and eyes of men, hear their voices and feel their breaths, touch their fingers and moustaches, and examine the depths of their hearts and minds? Is it possible for me to get to know a man in the darkness, or from behind a blind or from a metre's distance? Isn't it essential that I should see him in the light, and test him to get to know him? Isn't it essential that experience should precede knowledge? Or do they want me to make the same mistake twice? I have no option but to embark boldly on some kind of trial.. the most momentous trial in a woman's life.. that of choosing a man: the trial of the search for love." 19

Sa'dawi is of the opinion that women have been deprived of their natural right to select a man. She urges women to break out of their conditioning. Beside this heartfelt plea of Sa'dawi's young doctor, Najla's proposal to Ahmad in 'Inayat al-Zayyat's novel Al-Hubb wa'l-Samt, which at first might seem a bold step for a young woman, fades into

insignificance, and this was written some seven years after Sa'dawi's work.

"I was certain that our lives had to be linked.. and I thought of proposing marriage to him on his return. Why shouldn't we women have the right to declare our wish to get married to someone we love, just as men do? Isn't this that equality which they talk about?" 20

This is not the self-assertive act of an emancipated girl, for Najla is desperate to keep her man: Sa'dawi's young doctor is desperate that she and others should choose the right one in the first place.

The lady doctor accepts the invitation of the surgeon to visit his house, out of curiosity to see how he reacts to their being alone together. The lustful look in his eyes is enough to alert her to an impending struggle in which she as a woman will be greatly disadvantaged. She reflects on how the whole weight of tradition, laws and religion in her country stretching back for centuries, are all ranged against the woman, while they buttress the position of the man. It is probably much easier for the author to get away with such an all-embracing indictment of her society, in fictional rather than factual writing. It is obvious that Sa'dawi feels keenly the injustice of all male-dominated societies where woman is regarded only in relation to man, as the non-male, the deficient, and the repository of all negative traits. She swiftly cancels any aura of romance or mystery that might surround the idea in a female reader's mind, of being a man's object of desire, by her scornful comments on the surgeon. So much is he a prey to his sexual urges, that he is reduced, in her eyes, to a pathetic animal on

all fours.<sup>21</sup> Sa'dawi likewise demolishes the myth that women will seize any opportunity to be seduced, when she makes the doctor shun the surgeon's advances and calmly take her leave saying that he is not the man she wants.<sup>22</sup> The waste in terms of human potential, which the doctor perceives as the result of this constant struggle between the sexes, occasions her angry questions as to why there seems to be no awareness and understanding of truth and justice?<sup>23</sup>

There are many passages in this work which provide good examples of Sa'dawi's ability as an author to promote a new consciousness in her readers. If we take the following passage as representative of this aspect of her work, we can see how Sa'dawi's personal experiences are only thinly disguised as fiction. The themes and questions contained in this rebellion against society were to form the subjects of her factual books written a decade later:

"Since childhood I have been plunging into a series of never ending struggles and here I am now facing a new one: a struggle with society, an entire society, millions of people with millions more behind and in front of them. Why don't things carry on in life in the way that they ought? Why isn't there any perception and understanding of truth and justice? Why don't mothers accept that a daughter is like a son? Why doesn't the man acknowledge a woman as an equal, a partner? Why doesn't society acknowledge the woman's right to have a normal life mentally and physically? Why have they made me waste my life in such struggles?

I put my head in my hands and sat thinking. Should I plunge into a struggle against society at large, or should I submit and be swept along by it? Should I bow my head to it and shut in my soul within the walls of my house and seek the support of a man, like all other women?

No.. that's impossible! I shan't submit to society.  
I shan't be driven along to follow it, nor shall I  
bow my head or seek to be supported by a man!

I shall plunge into the battle and support myself,  
by myself, with my own strength and by my own skill  
and success." 24

The feminist ideas in this book are very persuasively argued. This is altogether a far more forceful and energetic work in terms of ideas than Sa'dawi's earlier volumes of short stories. How much more inspiring as a role model is this independent heroine than those drawn by Ba'labakki, al-Khuri, 'Inayat al-Zayyat, 'Abd al-Quddus or Suhayl Idris! The short phrases and simple sentence structure that follow the natural flow of speech which Sa'dawi achieves throughout this work, makes it more comprehensible to the teenager than the more symbolic and staccato style of Ba'labakki for example. What makes Sa'dawi's heroine here so much more attractive than Ba'labakki's Lina or al-Khuri's Rasha, is that her alienation from society draws out her finer qualities and strengthens her to take an active and positive role. This is demonstrated here by the doctor's concern to protect the young girl patient who has been accused of fornication and who fears vengeance from her male relatives.<sup>25</sup> In several of her fictional works, Sa'dawi draws heavily on her personal experiences as a doctor, but none more so than in Mudhakkirāt Tabība where she states through the young doctor, that she has seen all society's tragedies at her clinic, even those which people would deny. This is Sa'dawi's justification for dealing with the subjects she chooses, whether in her factual or fictional works.

From here Sa'dawi's heroine leads naturally into another angry charge against her society for condoning crimes of honour where the very man who 'murders' his sister or daughter thinks it no more than an exercise of his masculinity to seduce an unfortunate girl. Little wonder that understanding and a sense of justice are lacking, when society is upholding contradictory values: at one moment broadcasting passionate love songs, while at another, dealing harshly with those (women) who fall prey to their normal desires.

In time, the doctor becomes famous. Her enemies turn into friends and men flock around her. Yet for all her popularity, she feels coldly isolated from others, she is so far advanced in her thought that she has no one to share her elevated level. She feels as though she is watching from way up above as humanity makes its slow progress down below. It dawns on her that being a pioneer and comprehending what the mass of ordinary people have not yet learned, is a very lonely experience. At this point, Sa'dawi could have punished her protagonist for her rebellion by perhaps making her subdue her personality to a man's, as 'Abd al-Quddus does to Amina, or by ending her life like al-Khuri's Rasha, but instead she rewards the young doctor by leading her into an emotionally satisfying relationship with a member of the opposite sex. The doctor falls in love with a composer of music and invites him to her home. We notice that it is he who enters her sphere of life, by sharing with her the emergency visit to a patient and helping with the blood transfusion, where he is clearly out of his element. Sa'dawi is suggesting here that in an ideal world, men and women would share jobs and services, helping each other with whatever



skill or support was required. Sa'dawi prepares for this ending by what amounts to a psalm to the loneliness of rebelliousness and fame.

'How harsh is silence! And how gentle people's voices, even if they are being rowdy..

How cold is loneliness! And how warm people's breaths, even if they are sick..

How ugly is stillness! And how beautiful is movement, even if it is a struggle..

How terrible is emptiness! And how sweet it is to think and be busy, even if it ends in failure.."26

The doctor regains contact with real people and life, through her discovery of love and the virtue of renouncing payment for her services as a doctor. In the dramatic final scene where the doctor saves the life of the young man, a truly pathetic image of the sick patient reaching for a pound to pay her, strikes home to the reader the hypocrisy of charging for medical services.

If we required any evidence of the didactic aspect of Sa'dawi's fictional work we need look no further than her helpful indications to the reader as to what constitutes 'good' behaviour in the modern independent woman. For example, she suggests that not hiding behind a mask of make-up, but showing her natural self to the world, being able to take the initiative in a relationship, being honest about one's intentions and emotions and, most emphatically, speaking plainly to men, without any coy pretences, are infinitely more attractive than the unnatural behaviour and dainty manners which Egyptian women are expected to affect.<sup>27</sup> Yet Sa'dawi is not completely dismissive of women's

traditional role. She shows that it is after this initial and genuine attraction between the sexes, that the woman's delight in nurturing and domestic tasks can come into play, which is why we see the doctor all in a flutter, baking a cake, tidying the room, arranging flowers and making a jelly for her guest.

No one can doubt Sa'dawi's resolve in this book, to show women as responsible human beings well capable of assuming full responsibility for their person and profession, and deserving greater freedoms than they at present 'enjoy' in her society. She boldly accuses society as a whole for the disadvantages and oppression from which women suffer and which prevent their maturing into responsible beings. She condemns men and women alike: men for their double-standards, and women for the way they bring up their daughters, by teaching them to limit their ambitions to marriage and cultivating their bodies not their brains. Sa'dawi pleads the case for equality between the sexes in forceful language, getting back to the basic nature of human beings, demolishing the myths about what constitutes femininity and masculinity and replacing them with her own values, and asserting that it is society alone which has made women's oppression and man's hypocrisy part of the cultural tradition.

Sa'dawi's doctor could well provide a role model for the young intelligent female reader in the Arab world who is disillusioned with society and lacks sufficient vision of what behaviour and attitudes are most appropriate to her achieving an emotional maturity and independence. The reader is confronted with a dynamic young heroine, who is seen

making her own significant choices, growing through her experiences, questioning life, working professionally and emerging as a human being. The tensions felt by a young professional woman forging her way in a male-dominated society, breaking out against her conditioning, and the mental strains produced by such a situation, are well-depicted. It is encouraging that the doctor finds fulfilment through her life, without having to betray her principles, and has achieved maturity and liberation and found her man. The situation for young women in her society, Sa'dawi would have us believe, is not so hopeless after all, although it is clear that being a social pioneer, as for the author herself, entails a life of struggle.

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References to Mudhakkirāt Tabība

- 1) This is one of the subjects which Sa'dawi deals with in her factual works.
- 2) Marjorie Hall also noticed this point. Commenting on Sa'dawi's characterization in general, she says:

"The dynamic character of her heroines bears a striking resemblance to her own, and their inability to reconcile themselves to traditional demands reflects her own rejection of certain values upheld in Egyptian society."

Marjorie Hall, The position of women in Egypt and Sudan as reflected in feminist writings since 1900, thesis presented for the degree of Ph.D., University of London, 1977, p. 140.

- 3) Mudhakkirāt Tabība, p. 7.
- 4) Ibid., p. 9.
- 5) Ibid., p. 17.
- 6) Ibid., p. 12.
- 7) Ibid., p. 15.
- 8) Inayat al-Zayyat, Al-Ḥubb wa'l-Ṣamt, Cairo, 1967, p. 40.

- 9) Mudhakkirāt Tabība, p. 15.
- 10) Ibid., p. 22.
- 11) Ibid., p. 25.
- 12) Ibid., p. 26.
- 13) Ibid., p. 40.
- 14) Ibid., p. 46.
- 15) Ibid., p. 61.
- 16) The ma'dhun is the religious registrar who conducts the marriage ceremony.
- 17) Mudhakkirāt Tabība, p. 65.
- 18) Ibid., p. 71 f.
- 19) Ibid., p. 76.
- 20) Inayat al-Zayyat, Al-Ḥubb wa'l-Samt, p. 165.
- 21) Mudhakkirāt Tabība, p. 81.

22) Ibid., p. 82.

23) Ibid., p. 84.

24) Ibid., pp. 83-4.

25) Ibid., p. 85.

26) Ibid., p. 90.

27) Ibid., pp. 94-101.

2.

AL-GHĀ'IB

Summary of Al-Ghā'ib\*

Fuada, a thirty year-old office worker in the Egyptian Ministry of Biochemistry, is disillusioned with her work. Her only joy in life is her relationship with Farid, her boyfriend, whom she meets on a weekly date. When he fails to turn up one evening she is plunged into despair which is exacerbated when she is unable to contact him by phone or trace his whereabouts. After arguing with her boss when he objects to her repeated absences from work, Fuada decides to rent a flat, create her own laboratory and carry out independent research. She also plans to attract customers who need private analysis of their specimens. In connection with this she finds a suitable flat, and when she meets its owner, a Mr Sa'ati who turns out to be a prominent businessman and politician, he agrees to let her have the flat at a reduced fee because he admires her ambitions. Even so, Fuada has to beg her mother to lend her the money for the deposit. We learn later that Mr Sa'ati falls in love with Fuada.

Within a week of Farid's disappearance, Fuada is installed in her new flat and doing a double shift; working at the Ministry in the morning and the laboratory in the evening. Her mother is seriously ill and Fuada decides to try and diagnose the illness in her lab, but we

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\* Since Al-Ghā'ib is not yet available in an English translation, I shall provide a brief summary.

are not told if she reaches a conclusion. Meanwhile, Fuada grows more anxious about Farid. The fact that he has not contacted her leads her to wonder if their relationship had meant nothing to him and she begins to doubt her own feelings.

One evening, Mr Sa'ati visits Fuada in her lab and declares his love by presenting her with a diamond ring. She is too upset about her personal problems to consider him; she has no respect for his values or his expensive gift. The following day she leaves early after failing to respond to her mother's imploring look for company. When Fuada returns though, much later, she finds that her mother has died and that the house is filled with mourning relatives. She runs from the house and Mr Sa'ati catches her up in his car, and drives with her to the desert trying to console her. When they stop, Fuada in a semi-conscious state of shock, dances to the music on the radio. When her frenzy subsides and she drops exhausted to the ground, Mr Sa'ati takes advantage of her sexually, she is too numb to know what is happening.

Some days later she receives a letter from Farid, explaining the mystery of his disappearance. He had apparently been arrested on account of his political activities and put in prison. From his letter we learn that their relationship had not been a purely emotional affair, but that Farid's ulterior motive had been to try and awaken Fuada's consciousness to political and social issues. At their last meeting he had seen encouraging signs that she was beginning to think independently and that she would soon be able to break out of the patterns of thought and behaviour forced upon her by her home background, her work at the



Ministry and the social conditioning that had limited her thus far. He also implies that his purpose in relation to her had been achieved.

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Sa'dawi's second novel Al-Ghā'ib published in Cairo in 1968, deals with the personal problems which a young intelligent woman faces: her relationships with her boyfriend and her mother, her work, ambitions and feeling of alienation. In this work Sa'dawi certainly reflects on some of the current social difficulties experienced by young people in her society. For example, Fuada finds her job poorly paid and totally without any prospects. Even the physical atmosphere of the smelly, stifling office repulses her. Her love affair with Farid provides enough excitement to allow her to bear such a dull position. When he suddenly disappears (and he is the one to whom Al-Ghā-ib refers), she finds her mental and emotional balance upset. Fuada had not realized how dependent upon him she had become and wonders how she could have let a man become so central to her being. Farid's disappearance, by starting off a chain of events proves to be the catalyst for her assuming responsibility for her life. Although she suffers withdrawal symptoms from being deprived of his company, Fuada is forced to assess the relationship she has had with him and plan some kind of productive career as a more secure outlet for her mental energies.

Fuada suffers from frustration and alienation which seem to spring from the discrepancy between her expectations and lack of means

to achieve them. When she had shown promise at school in chemistry, her teacher had singled her out as an achiever, one who outshone the other pupils. Fuada's mother was also important in shaping the young girl's sense of her own ability. Ever since her own father had stopped her from going to school, Fuada's mother had developed a loathing for men which extended to her husband, Fuada's father, for showing lack of interest in their daughter. The mother had tried to fulfil her own thwarted ambitions through her daughter by constantly telling her that she was destined for success,<sup>1</sup> perhaps even the discovery of something important in the field of science. Unlike the young girl in Mudhakkirāt Tabība whose mother shouted at her that marriage was her destiny, Fuada was brought up not to aim for marriage but rather for a career. Fuada's mother would shout: "Your future is in studying my dear, men are no use!"<sup>2</sup> Thus Fuada grew up under pressure of a different kind and suffered from being unable to live up to her mother's ambitions. Fuada later learns that the corruption in academic circles makes it practically impossible for an original researcher in Egypt to gain credit for his work.

Fuada is essentially a strange mixture of passivity and assertiveness. She is shown as feeling so alienated from life around her, that she imagines her own self to be of no significance. Her sense of the futility of life as Sa'dawi describes it also indicates Fuada's alienation from others:

".. she looked around her in contempt at the people as they hurried panting after buses, flinging themselves into or out of them blindly. Why are these

ignorant people running? Does any one of them have any idea of what made him sleep the previous night? Does any one of them know that if he fell under the wheels of a bus and died, or if the whole bus toppled over and everyone inside it including him was drowned in the Nile.. that that wouldn't mean anything to the rest of the world?"<sup>3</sup>

Fuada's boss complains about her absences from work, and she suddenly demands what she feels is her 'right' after working there for six years, namely to do research. Fuada is clearly frustrated by not being able to find a pathway to a satisfying career. Graduates in Egypt are guaranteed work as a result of the government's full-employment policy which is designed to prevent them from becoming a vocal force of opposition to the state's policies. Sa'dawi, in common with many modern Egyptian writers, most notably Najib Mahfuz, Yusuf Idris, Ihsan 'Abd al-Quddus, Sherif Hetata and Yusuf al-Qa'id, is focusing here on the damaging effects on the individual of the typical routine office job in which many graduates find themselves impossibly stuck. This type of job, particularly for young women, often presents no challenge, no prospect of advancement, and no opportunity to use one's initiative or skill which might in turn encourage the development of the individual's personality. It only leads the young person into a disillusionment with the world of work. There are ways to gain promotion or transfers to more pleasant positions but these are for those who have good connections, who are prepared to sell themselves or their work for the favours of their seniors or who are willing to bribe and be bribed. Fuada wants to be taken seriously by her boss, which is why she demands to do research, but she goes about it the wrong way. She smiles as he gets angry at her audacity, which only provokes him to demand why she is smiling. She

retorts angrily, "I won't allow anyone, whoever he might be, to trample on any of my rights. I know how to defend them!"<sup>4</sup> This apparent assertiveness may seem impressive to Sa'dawi and many of her readers, but when we consider that Fuada is here only demanding the right to smile sarcastically and not be asked why, it seems paltry in comparison to her neglect of others' right to an explanation of her absence from work and her absence itself. At first her boss is livid with her arrogant stance, then becomes apologetic. Fuada later develops a plan to make her own laboratory so that she can work independently. Mr Sa'ati from whom she rents the flat is described as an elderly businessman, with oscillating eyes, whose general manner makes Fuada suspicious of his motives. Fuada discovers later that he is the Director for Buildings and Installations.

Fuada is, we are to believe, a young woman who appreciates her independence. She does not wish to play the role of wife, but yet needs admiration from a young man. She and Farid have developed a rather unusual type of relationship, although on reflection, she feels that they were so close that they were exchanging their souls, she does not realise until after his disappearance how little she actually knew about him. It appears that she gave far more than he to their affair in terms of devotion, which included tolerance of his secretive habits and staying out late. She made no demands on him or questioned his behaviour but was content for him to become the pivot of her life. She accepted all his terms including the fact that he was not prepared to marry. It was a secretive relationship and no other friendship competed for Fuada's attention. Throughout the novel we learn only Fuada's attitude to the

affair. It is unfortunate that the reader has to wait until the last page to learn the nature of Farid's commitment to Fuada, because by this time he will probably have already made up his mind that it was a very one-sided relationship and that Fuada had been taken advantage of by an irresponsible young man. A certain degree of furtiveness about their friendship, as well as Fuada's lack of any control over the terms or development of their relationship, in which Farid's right to behave independently went unquestioned, is only to be expected in a society where contact between young unmarried people is not encouraged and where the young woman is far more likely to incur ostracism if she behaves freely in this way. This lack of openness about such an important area of life to Fuada, obviously contributes to the degree of devastation she feels when he disappears. No one can sympathize with her or share her anxiety. On the other hand, she is only able to continue such a relationship because of the absence of those who might try to discourage it, namely, a father, brothers, male relatives, the very people who might have provided her emotional support in other circumstances.

One curious point needs to be observed which is that Fuada is not shown as having any friends, her only relative is her mother. While this is indeed a negative kind of independence we must ask, why has Fuada no friends? Even her relationship with Farid has not allowed her to become included in his circle, so marginal is she to his life. If we look at the main female characters in several other novels by Sa'dawi we can find similar situations of supposedly intelligent, ambitious young women who also have no female friends, and what is more, are not shown

as interested in making friendships with members of their own sex: for example the young doctor in Mudhakkirāt Tabība and Bahiyya in Imra'atān fi Imra'a. In the case of the latter, she is shown as actually despising her female colleagues at university for their 'feminine' traits, their clothes, way of laughing and walking etc. Even Firdaus in Imra'a 'inda Nuqtat al-Sifr can be included as failing to make a mature friendship with another young woman. As for Fuada, she is shown as alienated from other women, finding she has nothing in common with them, unable to share their values. She appears to have no one with whom to share her thoughts or life, that is apart from the missing Farid. Even when she makes an attempt at self analysis, she is so unaccustomed to it that she can find no answers within herself.<sup>5</sup> "What do I want? Why don't I want those things that women want? Aren't I a woman like them?" Sa'dawi, by limiting her female characters in terms of their social contacts, is of course able to concentrate entirely on the dilemma facing the individual, but one could also light on it as probably having a deeper significance, in view of the fact that it occurs frequently. Is Sa'dawi perhaps hinting that female friendships are in some way so irrelevant to the strong, ambitious modern young woman, that she can dispense with them? Or is this just a reflection of Sa'dawi's own frustrations with members of her own sex who do not, or perhaps did not when she was younger, share her views?

Sa'dawi aims to create the impression that Fuada is a serious scientifically-minded young woman who has no interest in make-up, clothes or women's gossip. It is mentioned that she reads scientific books and is frequently preoccupied with the many wonderful ideas and theories

which compete for attention in her creative mind. It is hard to accept this description of Fuada as someone with a trained, logical mind, given the many examples of her complete lack of self scrutiny and the obvious imbalance in her daily life. She seems not to connect her depressed state of mind, which has arisen from her emotional problems, lack of job satisfaction and creative outlet for her vitality, with the incapacitating nausea and malaise that she suffers every day. We have further evidence of Fuada's intellectual weakness when we learn that it was Farid who had taught her about life by awakening her thoughts to social and political problems. She had accepted his views unquestioningly and his words permeated her thoughts. At one point she admits to herself that she has only ever voiced others' opinions without really having her own independent thoughts. Sa'dawi has overlooked this inconsistency in her portrayal of Fuada.

Sa'dawi makes various criticisms of girls' education in this work. Fuada was lucky to have had an encouraging chemistry teacher. She was not discouraged from pursuing what in many people's minds is a 'masculine' subject. At school Fuada comes to realize that it is men who make the discoveries in science; with the exception of Mme Curie, there are no female inventors. Sa'dawi credits Fuada with an advanced insight into sexual politics when she describes her as feeling that men's predominance in the scientific field is not due to their superior mental ability, but that maleness is in some way a prerequisite for becoming a famous scientist. Fuada apparently derives this idea from the fact that she can sense within her the power to create or discover. Apart from this difference between the sexes, Fuada becomes aware early

that life is very different for boys and girls in her society. Sa'dawi also shows how Fuada's attempts to discover about human reproduction meet with censure from her embarrassed schoolteacher,<sup>6</sup> while Fuada's mother actually lies to her by saying that babies are born from the mother's ear. Fuada's mother is also guilty of not preparing her daughter for menstruation, a fact which causes the girl much anguish. It is when Sa'dawi describes Fuada's distaste at menstruation<sup>7</sup> that we see evidence that there is a legitimate difference between the way a male novelist and a female novelist writes today, which is directly due to their differing experiential awareness of life. No male writer, especially an Arab one, could honestly recreate the type of passage Sa'dawi writes here, nor would he probably ever dream of writing on the subject of menstruation, yet from Sa'dawi's pen it seems to come naturally, never seeming incongruous, in the narratives but always fitting into the self-absorbed, self-conscious thought patterns of her protegees.

There are various instances of the way in which Fuada feels abused in public, such as being pushed around on the crowded bus, ogled at or touched unnecessarily. On a trip to the cinema, she finds herself sitting next to a lecher who strokes her leg,<sup>8</sup> and when she comes to arrange the rent of the flat, she feels ill at ease with the elderly Mr Sa'ati and suspicious of his moves. Within days of Farid's disappearance, Fuada moves into the flat and installs the necessary equipment to conduct her experiments. She remains distraught and her entire equilibrium is still shaken, but this proves to be the spur to her beginning to think over their relationship. She becomes conscious of



having made him the central point in her life.

"Farid used to make everything possible. She would look into his shining brown eyes and feel that there was nothing in the world as important as he; the Ministry paled into insignificance, her scientific research became a mere empty illusion, her ambition to discover became a faded childhood dream.

Farid had absorbed her pains and her dreams and she had become in his company trouble-free, with no need to dream. She became with him, another Fuada, different from the one to whom her mother had given birth: a Fuada without a past or a future, a Fuada who lived for the moment, and he had become her every moment.

How had he become so? How had a man become all of her life? How had a person swallowed up all her interests and concerns? She didn't know how that had happened. She wasn't the kind of woman who gave her life to anyone. Her life was too big to give to just one man, and above all, her life didn't belong to her, it belonged to the whole world, the world which she wanted to change.."<sup>9</sup>

After her mother's death, Fuada finds a letter from Farid in which he tries to explain his disappearance. He had seen his role, and one which he says many others like him were playing (and here we are to suppose that they were all attractive young men committed to higher ideals trying to awaken the minds of malleable young women), as an awakener of her thoughts, a role which involved his talking and her listening until such a time as she was able to think for herself. He had felt at their last meeting that she had reached that stage in her mental development and that it was her task from then on, to try and make something new out of her life and become a new person. He had been conscious of an idea struggling to get out of her mind. This idea had to wrestle with a barrier in her thoughts which she had not been born with. We are to suppose that she had acquired this obstacle to her mental processes

through her education and social environment. The nature of this barrier is not exactly clear, it may have been a reluctance to take the initiative in her life, or responsibility for developing her career and using her talents creatively at an age at which most young women, if not already married, would still be hoping for a man as protector and provider. He adds that the barrier in her mind is one of silence, implying that she has not been accustomed to articulating her thoughts and feelings which would have clarified her position for her and prevented her apathy. Although it appears from his letter that Farid had already made up his mind to keep his distance from Fuada, he goes on to say how he was set upon by a group of men and taken off to prison because of his political opinions. Even though he is surrounded by prison walls far away from her, he says that he feels her presence comforting him.

There are various interesting parallels with Layla Ba'labakki's Anā Ahyā which we may recall was written ten years earlier. Both works portray young intelligent women who are frustrated at society's refusal to provide them with opportunities to develop their creative abilities in worthwhile pursuits. Both feel a degree of alienation because of their social situation and because they can rarely find someone to take them seriously. Both young women are attracted to a young socially and politically aware young man who serves to awaken their thoughts as well as provide an outlet for their romantic-sexual inclinations and an opportunity to rebel, if only on the moral plane, against the standards of society. Whereas Ba'labakki's Lina revolts against society and family, becomes disillusioned by Baha and attempts suicide, Fuada has a happier fate because her young man appears to have taken a serious

interest in her intellectual growth and felt a responsibility towards helping her develop as a person. Fuada shows that she has more strength of mind than Lina, by trying to pull herself out of her apathy and set her ambitions to work to create a better future for herself. This she does despite her personal suffering, from the loss of Farid, her mother's death and the social environment which she feels gives her scant regard as a human being. While Lina had to struggle against parental opposition, Fuada was able to do something positive to help herself because she had no one at home trying to impose a certain type of life-style upon her.

One curious scene shows the consequences of the typical Egyptian education as already illustrated by Sa'dawi and the resulting ignorance about basic biological facts which can cause such distress to individuals in their personal lives. The scene in which the man has brought his wife to Fuada in order to have his wife tested for infertility might well have been lifted from one of Sa'dawi's casebooks.

"The man said in a harsh voice, 'We've come for you to find out the reason for my wife's infertility.' He pointed to the woman who was sitting with her head bowed in silence. Fuada said, addressing the woman, 'Have you been examined by a doctor?' The woman stared silently at her, and the husband replied, 'She's been examined by many doctors and has had tests and X-rays, but we still don't know the reason!' Fuada asked him, 'Have you yourself been examined too?' The man looked at her in angry surprise and said, 'Me?' Fuada calmly replied, 'Yes, you. Sometimes it's the man who is the cause.' At this he flew up pulling his wife by the arm saying crossly, 'What's this nonsense? She won't have a test done here!'

He would have taken his wife and left, but she wouldn't move from her place. She remained standing stiffly staring with wide unblinking eyes at her husband, as

if she had died and frozen on the spot.

Fuada felt afraid, and drew close to the woman to pat her shoulder saying, 'Go along with your husband then.' But as if there had been an electric charge in her touch, the woman jumped and grabbed Fuada's arm with all her might and said in a strange voice, 'I won't go with him! Save me! He hits me every day and takes me to doctors who stick metal things into me. They have examined and tested everything and they say that I'm not infertile. He's the one who is sick! He's the one who can't have children! He married me ten years ago and I'm still a virgin. He's not a man! He doesn't know my backside from my head in the dark!' The man pounced upon her like a wild beast, and began hitting her with his hands, feet and head. She began to hit him too with all her strength. Fuada drew back alarmed muttering to herself, 'He's mad! He's going to kill her in my lab! What can I do?'"<sup>10</sup>

At that moment the deus ex machina comes in the shape of Mr Sa'ati who slaps the husband and throws him and his semi-conscious wife out of Fuada's flat.

Another evening Mr Sa'ati calls at Fuada's lab, declares his love for her and presents her with an expensive diamond ring. Fuada is unimpressed and rejects his proposal and gift, which he duly takes back. She also rejects his offer to arrange a job for her through a friend of his who holds a high position in the Ministry of Science. Mr Sa'ati cannot appreciate her reluctance to accept, but nevertheless recognizes in her the same youthful ambitions to stick by one's honest principles, which had caused him to be branded a non-conformist in his youth. He had found trying to live according to his principles caused so much conflict in his daily life that he felt obliged to abandon them in order to adapt.

By developing the facility to lie and deceive, he was able to rise to a high position in politics and business in what Sa'dawi suggests is a corrupt society.<sup>11</sup> There is no doubt that she is speaking critically of her own city Cairo throughout this novel.

We are shown various scenes of the distraught Fuada searching without success for Farid in their old familiar haunts. She eventually discloses to her mother the cause of Farid's disappearance, and it appears that her mother probably had a vague idea of their relationship. Fuada is unable to talk deeply about her problem, despite her mother's obvious sympathy. She decides to wander alone with her thoughts instead. The poignant scenes between Fuada and her mother only highlight the fact that the two are not close enough to talk intimately. Further revision by Sa'dawi would have eliminated the type of contradiction that we find with Fuada at one time blaming her mother for not having confidence in her ability, and at another, accusing her mother of putting her under too much pressure to achieve because of her vision that Fuada was intellectually superior to her classmates.<sup>12</sup> When Fuada returns later that day she discovers the house is full of relatives mourning her mother. Fuada's initial reaction is to run away, but even then Mr Sa'ati follows her and tries to comfort her. She is filled with remorse for not having responded to her mother's look of desperation that morning, and wishes that she had stayed with her. Fuada allows Mr Sa'ati to drive her out to the desert. When they arrive she leaves the car and dances to the tune on its radio, a frenzied convulsive dance, while still in a state of shock. She falls limp and exhausted and comes to her senses some moments later to find Mr Sa'ati embracing her. While

Fuada is still semi-conscious he makes love to her and again she is incapable of resisting because she is hardly aware of what is happening to her. We can see that Sa'dawi somewhat sadistically has brought Fuada to the lowest point imaginable: she is frustrated with her work, disillusioned about her laboratory and the possibility of her making any valuable contribution to science given the corruption in research circles in her society, she has lost her boyfriend, her mother has died, she has financial problems and appears to be entirely friendless, without any social contacts apart from the bulbous-eyed Mr Sa'ati, to whose rape she has been a passive victim.

After a story of unmitigated gloom told with a uniformly pessimistic tone, Sa'dawi changes the whole atmosphere in the last two pages to end on a rising wave of hope, love and optimism. How does she do it? The answer is simply by solving the riddle of the 'absent one', when Fuada receives Farid's letter. It is not a love letter but rather one in which Farid's concern for Fuada is nevertheless obvious. This we can feel sure is enough to keep her feelings for him alive and to restore her balance. It appears however, that the revolutionary class-struggle is Farid's greater concern and his interest in her had been to try and recruit her into the ranks of the faithful few who were fighting for freedom of speech in a repressive society. He had foreseen signs of her potential for independent thought but had known that certain mental barriers or illusions would have to be shattered before Fuada could begin to think clearly. Fuada, he believed, had to be liberated from her home life, the Ministry, life in society and her own self-imposed limitations. From the way that Sa'dawi has prepared for this ending we can feel

optimistic that Fuada may be able to turn her setbacks into some kind of productive action.

Fuada remains an unusual 'heroine', she does not inspire our sympathy strangely enough, despite the tragedies that she faces. There is much that can be criticized from the artistic point of view in Al-Ghā'ib but the basic themes which it covers of the problems of the young intelligent single woman in Egypt which were still in the late 1960s a novelty to Arab readers, renders it of interest to anyone curious to understand something of the intellectual and emotional environment of the times.

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References to Al-Ghā'ib

- 1) Al-Ghā'ib, p. 18.
- 2) Ibid., p. 25.
- 3) Ibid., p. 38.
- 4) Ibid., p. 41.
- 5) Ibid., p. 101.
- 6) Ibid., p. 79.
- 7) There is adverse criticism of the male religious teacher for instructing Fuada's class that women's bodies were shameful and must be concealed, just as their voices should never be raised before men.
- 8) Al-Ghā'ib, p. 77.
- 9) Ibid., p. 87.
- 10) Ibid., p. 91.
- 11) Ibid., pp. 108-114.
- 12) Ibid., pp. 67-9.



3.

IMRA'ATĀN FĪ IMRA'A

Sa'dawi's third novel Imra'atān fī Imra'a,<sup>1</sup> first published in Cairo in 1974, is a concentrated exploration of a critical period in a young woman's life. Bahiah Shaheen, like Sa'dawi's heroine in Mudhakkirāt Tabība, is a strong-willed character, capable of asserting herself, of questioning her family's and society's standards and acting independently. We see Bahiah progress into a mature, independent woman, through overcoming the obstacles threatening her self-fulfilment, not least of which is her divided self.

In her books Al-Unthā hiya al-Asl and Al-Mar'a wa'l-Sirā' al-Nafsī (1974 and 1976 respectively), Sa'dawi investigates the problem of conflict between society's demands and the needs of the individual. The greater the strength of the person's desires to fulfil himself as a human being, the more likely he will be to clash with the values around him. The internal struggle to grow, and the pressure to conform set up tension within. In Bahiah, this tension is acute enough to make her feel schizoid. At first it is manifest as general dissatisfaction with her lifestyle and social environment, then it develops into contempt for those around her and resentment against her family. Bahiah is very conscious of a real self, deep down, but as yet hardly developed, which is submerged by the role she plays of dutiful daughter and hard working medical student. Her real self finds its only outlet in art<sup>2</sup> until she meets Salim: it is significant that they meet at an exhibition of her

pictures. Sa'dawi stresses their physical resemblance and how there is an instantaneous deep communication between their souls. Salim is the male counterpart to Bahiah. Although we know next to nothing about him, he acts as a spur to Bahiah's development. The attraction she feels for him gives her true self enough courage to surface. As in Sa'dawi's novel Al-Ghā'ib it is a politically-aware young man who awakens the conscience of the 'heroine': a modern version of Sleeping Beauty roused by the prince's kiss.

It is interesting to see how Sa'dawi makes Bahiah aware of her conflicts, and how she resolves them. The real Bahiah is, of course, the one of whom Sa'dawi approves: she is a model young lady, brave and intelligent with her own instinctively good moral values. Bahiah's life has so far been determined for her by her relatives. They have plans for her future too.<sup>3</sup> Bahiah is set apart from her fellow students in every way. She is alienated from them to the point of feeling invisible, even by her very posture: Sa'dawi repeatedly stresses the girl's confident stride, her strong limbs and loose-legged gait in comparison to the flabby bodies and excessively modest walk of the other female students and women in general.<sup>4</sup> Bahiah is alienated too by her values: she is contemptuous of the students who scabble for the best seats in the lecture hall, who learn parrot fashion only what they need to pass their exams, and who will follow the usual example of doctors who, Sa'dawi suggests, profit from their patients' distress.<sup>5</sup> Bahiah is estranged from her family and feels that she does not belong to it. Blood ties, so sacred in Arab society, are meaningless to Bahiah, because they are not voluntarily formed. "Only human choice gives this

bond any meaning," she says.<sup>6</sup> Sa'dawi is challenging her society's standards here, showing up how arbitrary and artificial they can be. Bahiah logically feels the desire to establish a bond with Salim. That alone, she decides, will give her life meaning because it will be a deliberate assertion of her whole being.<sup>7</sup> Bahiah's relationship with Salim is sealed by their lovemaking.

Sa'dawi gives the subject of sex much attention in this story. She contrasts sex, as reflected in popular mentality, with the ideal of an integrated mental, physical and spiritual experience, which Bahiah attains. Bahiah grows up with the inhibitions and feelings of shame and disgust about her body and anything connected with sex, typical of girls in Egyptian society. Such attitudes are all traced to various childhood experiences as being scolded by her mother for showing an awareness of sexuality and an interest in her own body, and the popular concept that circumcision is necessary to purify the girl.<sup>8</sup> The fact that Bahiah actually escapes circumcision is a source of distress to her. She is clever enough, at the same time, to spot the discrepancy in society's attitude: if God had not created something bad in girls' bodies that needed to be cut out, why was circumcision necessary?<sup>9</sup> Until middle-class urban society in Egypt solves the problem of adolescent sexuality, parents will continue to impose on themselves the difficult task of trying to keep their daughters virgins, while making them as alluring as possible to attract a good husband.<sup>10</sup> It dawns on Bahiah that "parents thought of nothing but sex and imagined that their offspring were just like them".<sup>11</sup>

Bahiah is detached enough from her society to be able to see it with unusual clarity and objectivity. Hence she feels keenly the irony that, after marriage, it is expected that sex, helped along by the bizzarrest methods of titillation, will take over her life, whereas until that time, she is expected to be completely ignorant of anything sexual, and without any desires of her own. This sudden leap from sexual ingenue to fully-sexed wife, is wonderfully described by Sa'dawi when Bahiah opens the wardrobe upon the trivia with which she is expected to transform herself into an acceptable target for her husband's lust.<sup>12</sup> No male writer could ridicule his sex as effectively as Sa'dawi does in the bedroom scene between the young couple.<sup>13</sup> Given that Bahiah has grown up with mental reservations about the whole subject of sex, a conviction that sexual desire is abnormal and a disgust at any suggestion of sexual organs, it comes as some surprise that she responds to Salim so positively. Sa'dawi draws a sharp contrast between Bahiah's experiences of sex: outside marriage, with Salim, it is a happy and spiritually rewarding act which changes her life by liberating her capacity to love; within marriage, it threatens to be a degrading, bestial and loveless encounter. By reversing the traditional view in Egyptian society, that sex is only compatible with marriage, Sa'dawi is pleading for honesty in relationships between the sexes, admitting that adolescents feel strong sexual desire, that marriage is not always the best solution for the problem, and by arguing against the taboo on pre-marital sex. Sa'dawi has to use suitably veiled language to suggest Bahiah and Salim's love: the reader only knows for sure what has happened when Salim mentions that they might have a baby after nine months.<sup>14</sup>

Sa'dawi prefers to concentrate entirely on the spiritual dimension of their lovemaking. This extra-marital affair is justified by the honesty, depth and true involvement of each partner. Since we only know Bahiah's side of the story, we must suppose her commitment is matched by Salim's. Sa'dawi wants us to see that Bahiah's affair is one that raises her life onto a superior level; this is reflected in the symbol of her ascent up the Muqattam.<sup>15</sup> In every sense, Bahiah rises above her life thus far.<sup>16</sup> Further justification can be found in the tremendous energy this new relationship releases in Bahiah to allow her real self to surface once and for all, to change her life, which means rejecting her marriage and family, and in the all-embracing love which she experiences. Bahiah realizes that her newly-awakened capacity to love has enabled her to respond in the political demonstration to the wider demand to love her country.

"Real love makes us capable of loving everything and everyone; we open our arms to embrace the earth, the sky and the trees."<sup>17</sup>

Sa'dawi suggests that this heightened emotional vitality is the natural consequence of truly loving an individual. It is significant that the experience of sex, and marching in the demonstration, both give Bahiah the sense of transcending herself and her human condition, and of blending with something vaster, namely creation. Even her art, which had been so essential as a means of self-expression, self-assertion and release from the feelings of being dominated by others, is subordinated to her political activity and is put to use as a means of supporting herself independently of her family or a husband.

One interesting point to notice is that despite Bahiah's supposed emotional maturity, Sa'dawi permits her to display a staggering naivete for a medical student, about the sexual act. If she wrote this story again, would she credit Bahiah with enough sense to use some form of birth control? Although Sa'dawi is only trying to illustrate the paradox that in the moment of sheer transcendence, the physical fusion of cells takes place, that something as tangible as a child begins to grow at the point when any sense of reality is lost, Bahiah's disregard of the possibility that she might become pregnant, detracts from her responsibility for the reader. Another quibble about Sa'dawi's style is that we are supposed to believe Bahiah to have chosen to go and make love with Salim, yet one gets a much stronger impression that she has done it automatically, swept by a deeper, irresistible emotion, submitting to the pull of fate.<sup>18</sup>

It is obvious to an attentive reader that Sa'dawi can never resist a paradox. To see the paradox in the first place usually demands a high degree of objectivity, or at least the ability to view phenomena from an unusual perspective. There is plenty of opportunity for Sa'dawi to put forward what must be her personal philosophy at the same time. A good example of the way in which she combines paradox and philosophy can be found in the passages where she piles up antitheses to achieve a kind of climax,<sup>19</sup> in which she, as omniscient narrator, feeds new insight to the inexperienced reader. We are very aware of Sa'dawi speaking through Bahiah when she reflects that people seek, yet flee from death, desire it and fear it, but that the supreme irony is that death is not to be found in the dissecting room, thus implying that it is to be found

rather in Egyptian society at large. When Sa'dawi says that death is to be found "only in a living brain",<sup>20</sup> she refers, I presume, to the complete stultification of the personality under social pressures to conform. One can imagine that split between body and spirit which Bahiah describes, to have been Sa'dawi's own experience.<sup>21</sup> The sensation of one's soul yearning to return to the cosmic essence from which it came and to which it knows it will return after death, is strong enough for Bahiah to feel an almost physical pull from the earth's gravity, which acts against her impulse to soar.<sup>22</sup> Sa'dawi's heroines all want to leap and fly: a symbol for wanting to rise above the earthly limitations placed on them because of their femininity. Jumping is of course especially significant because it is taboo for young girls. Mothers dread the fact that such strong exercise may give the impression later that their daughter is not a virgin.<sup>23</sup>

After participating in the demonstration, the exhilarated Bahiah realizes that, "When you have overcome the fear of death, you become capable of anything in life, including death itself".<sup>24</sup> This heightened state of vitality, when the adrenalin flows and one feels invulnerable can be the prelude to martyrdom. It is what urges her on when she is being tracked down by the police.

"It was a frightening moment. She feared it as much as she desired it. She longed to escape from it and yearned to pursue it. It was the only time she saw that she was real and alive. We feel alive only when we face death."<sup>25</sup>

Language itself poses a problem for Bahiah. She finds it difficult to respond to her name when she is called because inside she does not

identify with the character whom it represents, that is until Salim gives it meaning. She ponders over the inadequacy of words to express emotions and the inadequacy of the senses to understand feelings:

"Names are so far from the reality of things. The senses are so hopeless in understanding feelings.."26

and

"She realized that people have other senses, as yet undiscovered, that they lie latent in the inner self. But these other senses are more capable of feeling than the senses that are known to us. They are the real, natural senses, but they have never been developed by our upbringing, or by education, regulations, laws, traditions or indeed by anything at all."27

The above translation in the English version\* perhaps conveys a better sense than what is literally conveyed by the Arabic, which is: "They are the real, natural senses, unspoilt by our upbringing, education etc.."28

It is only too easy to ignore the spiritual description in Sa'dawi's work here as merely poetical passages, while panting for the next bit of action. Imra'atān fī Imra'a is too subtle for a cursory reading. Its events are often implied, or realized only in retrospect. Sa'dawi has been very selective in what she describes, which gives the work a greater concentration. There is a high degree of realism for the sensitive and spiritually-aware reader which makes it satisfying to read. Sa'dawi is sparing with her passages of straightforward factual description, but these show her usual flair for creating an instant atmosphere with a succession of images deftly piled up.<sup>29</sup> Sa'dawi is not a socio-realistic

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\* Two women in one, Al-Saqi, London, 1985, translated by Osman Nusairi and Jana Gough.



writer who leaves nothing for the imagination even though she is a committed writer who is keenly aware of social issues. Sa'dawi's realism can be seen more clearly in the way in which she conveys psychological and emotional states, so that the reader, instead of being an onlooker, is drawn into identifying with the main character.

There are, however, a few features of Sa'dawi's style which easily irritate the reader, such as the repetition of Bahiah's dream-like amazement at everything that happens, for example, such phrases as, "... such moments as these seemed like a dream."<sup>30</sup> There is also the essential meaninglessness of such contradictory images as, "She felt a profound hidden sadness overlaid by a strange overwhelming happiness,"<sup>31</sup> and:

".. she wanted something else, something different, unknown but definite, specific yet undefined, something she could draw with the tip of her pen on the blank sheet of paper like an individual black line. But when she looked at it, it became a long line stretching as far and wide as the horizon, with no beginning and no end."<sup>32</sup>

The repeated stress on Bahiah's 'unfeminine' posture is also overdone. The sequence of ideas on page 9 seems illogical and forced. Sa'dawi shows Bahiah taking a great mental leap to arrive at the conviction that, "... people deliberately forget real memories and replace them with imaginary ones", simply from the fact that her mother had forgotten her own childhood memories. What is more, following a scolding for showing her mother that she knew the difference between girls and boys, Bahiah deduces that, "... people suppress only their real desires, because they

are strong, while unreal desires are weak and need no laws to keep them in check." The parental admonition would have induced shame and guilt. That the child would have realized by her own intuition that her mother was wrong and over-reacting is rather implausible, bearing in mind how strong an influence are the parents' values in Egyptian culture. After crediting the young Bahiah with this ability to deduce such 'truths' from her mother's example, which then, we are told, sets her off on a search for the truth behind all taboos, Sa'dawi tells us the opposite, that Bahiah grew up with a complex about sex because she did not know what was normal. "Since she did not know what was normal, she imagined that sexual desire was abnormal."<sup>33</sup>

The kind of inconsistencies we find in this novel are perhaps less of a failing in Sa'dawi than a pervasive characteristic of modern Egyptian fiction, in general. What Khamash observed in her study, with particular reference to the portrayal of students in the Egyptian novel, holds true for Sa'dawi's work too:

"The intellectual range of the students portrayed is very limited and their personal culture low. Discussions, comments, criticisms are empty of thoughts. Ideas about religion or philosophy are not their own, but borrowed. Political events are reported at length, interpreted and combined in an undisciplined or illogical manner. Similarly inconsistencies seem to possess them on occasions when social questions are discussed. The most significant aspect of this mental poverty is the sudden change of subject whenever a crucial point is reached in a discussion or conversation.

The students reflect to a great extent their authors' own limited horizons."<sup>34</sup>

Sa'dawi is careful to show that Bahiah's opinion of her parents is not totally negative.<sup>35</sup> With her mind she hates them for the way they have determined her life: she grows to feel that her home is a prison and her father an authoritarian figure.<sup>36</sup> Bahiah's suppressed love and compassion for him only manage to surface when she envisages him being threatened.<sup>37</sup> She is touched and humbled by the image of him as a responsible father, working hard to support his family. As for her mother, Bahiah is able to recognize her as a source of comfort in times of insecurity. She yearns to escape the world by being able to re-enter her mother's womb.<sup>38</sup>

This work is dedicated to young men and women as are many of Sa'dawi's books. This very untraditional love story is likely to find a happy response among those intelligent, sensitive adolescents who are disturbed by the very problems that Bahiah faces. In Sa'dawi's heroine, they find a girl who rebels positively against all that is shallow and insincere. Bahiah breaks the rules by having pre-marital sex (and incidentally, not becoming loose-moralled or sex-crazed because of it!) and by refusing to submit to her arranged marriage. She develops strength of character and thinks through her moral values, guided apparently by her innate good sense and honesty. Bahiah is rewarded by finding love, which opens her heart to love her fellow beings; fulfilment, because she can express herself through art; and an independence that enables her to live according to her conscience. Bahiah shows the positive traits so much admired by Sa'dawi: courage, an open mind, ability to think for oneself, positive activity, self-confidence and dedication to a wider cause.

This tale is very much an Egyptian tale. The Cairo background would be as familiar to Sa'dawi's readers, as the cloying emotional atmosphere she conveys. It is a tribute to Sa'dawi's ability as a writer that she is able to depict the enormity of Bahiah's acts, with a sense of excitement, like for example, her developing a relationship with Salim, rejecting her husband with physical assertiveness, and creating an independent life, away from her family. What would be considered a mundane act by Western readers, that is boy student meets girl student and they fall in love, comes across as the crisis it proves to be for Bahiah. We are made fully aware of the social and psychological consequences of such behaviour by a young girl in Egyptian society.

Sa'dawi also voices here the female experience, such as horror at circumcision,<sup>39</sup> menstruation,<sup>40</sup> masturbation,<sup>41</sup> first sexual experience,<sup>42</sup> and disgust at being treated as a sexual object.<sup>43</sup> It is important to observe that the idea of Bahiah being two women in one does not apply throughout the story.<sup>44</sup> She feels the struggle inside her between the true and the false sides of her nature, a problem which she can resolve only by letting the true triumph over the false. She also shows another form of split, that between body and spirit, which is also reconciled by her experience of love. By the end, we see how Bahiah has achieved that integrity which allows the human being to function fully.

The ending contains both tragic and happy elements: we rejoice that Bahiah has developed courage and found fulfilment and love, but we must

lament that her society is not yet able to provide a place other than  
prison for its healthy, independent young people.

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References to Imra'atān fī Imra'a

- 1) This work was originally entitled Al-Bāhitha 'an al-Hubb and subtitled Imra'atān fī Imra'a (Two women in one) which is the title taken for its English translation and later Arabic editions. Since Imra'atān fī Imra'a is far more effective at capturing the essence of the internal struggle inside Bahiah than the vaguer Al-Bāhitha 'an al-Hubb (The young woman in search of love), I should like to refer to the work by this title, and henceforth in the abbreviated form Imra'atān.
- 2) It is interesting to note that other Arab writers, male and female, give their heroines a flair for Art, e.g. Amina al-Sa'id's early novel Al-Jāmiḥah, Colette al-Khuri's Ayyām Ma'ah, Sahar Khalifa's Lam Na'ud Jawārī Lakum, Ghada al-Samman's story "Faza' Ṭuyur Ukhra", in Layl al-Ghurabā', and Sherif Hetata's Al-Shabaka etc.. As a theme, an interest in Art is seen as a socially-acceptable occupation for a woman in Arab society, it can also be used to symbolize the individual's search for self-identity by providing a form of self-expression, besides being a way of channelling unfulfilled sexual and maternal urges.
- 3) Imra'atān, pp. 80, 106-7.
- 4) *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- 5) *Ibid.*, pp. 21, 118.

- 6) Ibid., p. 64.
- 7) Ibid., p. 65.
- 8) Ibid., pp. 82-4, 108-111.
- 9) Ibid., pp. 109-119.
- 10) Ibid., p. 108.
- 11) Ibid., p. 108.
- 12) Ibid., pp. 113-4.
- 13) Ibid., pp. 113-6.
- 14) Ibid., p. 77.
- 15) The Muqattam is a very high range of hills overlooking Cairo. It has been widely used as a burial place and is sparsely inhabited.
- 16) Imra'atān, p. 44.
- 17) Ibid., p. 94.
- 18) Ibid., pp. 38-50.
- 19) Ibid., pp. 18, 33.

- 20) Ibid., p. 38.
- 21) Ibid., p. 47.
- 22) Ibid., pp. 47-8, 92-3, 140-141.
- 23) It is not only mothers who have this dread. That it is shared by fathers we will see from the case referred to in the section on Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins, see below p.
- 24) Imra'atan, p. 83.
- 25) Ibid., p. 140.
- 26) Ibid., pp. 71-5.
- 27) Ibid., pp. 71-5.
- 28) Ibid., p. 72.
- 29) Ibid., passim, but see especially pp. 112, 118-9, 132, 136.
- 30) Ibid., p. 94.
- 31) Ibid., p. 97.
- 32) Ibid., p. 65.



- 33) Ibid., p. 111.
- 34) Salwa Khamash, A study of social problems in Egypt, p. 470.
- 35) Imra'atān, p. 111.
- 36) Ibid., pp. 64, 108.
- 37) Ibid., pp. 70-71.
- 38) Ibid., p. 134.
- 39) Imra'atān, p. 110.
- 40) Ibid., pp. 16-17, 28.
- 41) Ibid., p. 83.
- 42) Ibid., pp. 73-4.
- 43) Ibid., p. 111.
- 44) This short work by Sa'dawi is described on the title page as a 'novel'. Perhaps 'story' in English would be a more accurate designation. If we take into account E.M. Forster's definition of a story, "the lowest and simplest of literary organisms", as ".. a narrative of events arranged in their time sequence," its only merit "that of

making the audience want to know what happens next," its only fault "that of making the audience not want to know what happens next", then we can see that Imra'atān fits these criteria on all counts as a work having 'merit' in that Sa'dawi keeps our interest from flagging at all times. E.M. Forster, Aspects of the novel, 1927. Perhaps Imra'atān fits the category of 'story' rather than 'novel' also in view of the fact that the whole is related by a narrator. Sa'dawi never goes as far as advancing action and characterization through dialogue as she does, for example, in Maut al-Rajul al-Wahīd 'alā al-Ard.

"I feel that my novels and short stories have a social message but it is not a direct message nor intentional. It is part of the artistic work", says Sa'dawi. She prefers to call her commitment, "an urge for justice".<sup>1</sup> She goes on to add, "I wish to see young women more brave, more independent more creative, more revolutionary than the characters in my novels and stories." Bearing this in mind it would indeed be hard to imagine anyone braver, more independent or revolutionary than Firdaus in Imra'a 'inda Nuqtat'l-Sifr. First published in 1975 in Beirut, Sa'dawi's third novel is the story of a young woman condemned to death for killing a pimp. Sa'dawi tells the whole tale through the eyes of a successful prostitute, Firdaus, in a daring attempt to reveal the personal and social position of that most disreputable and discredited of women, the prostitute.

According to her preface, Sa'dawi was profoundly affected by one of the prisoners whom she met at a prison mental clinic, while researching on women's neuroses.<sup>2</sup> Her experience with this unusual woman for whom Sa'dawi developed great admiration, gave rise to this novel. It is introduced by a narrator, a doctor (one cannot help imagining that it is Sa'dawi herself) who tells how she met Firdaus during her last hours on earth awaiting execution. The 'point zero' of the title refers to the fact that Firdaus's sentence has run out, she has no more time left to live. Firdaus narrates in a sketchy form, various incidents which she

considered important or particularly poignant in her life. Her long monologue takes the reader through her village childhood, her marriage to a repulsive old man, her prostitution followed by a short period as a 'respectable' secretary, her disillusionment with love when she falls for Ibrahim, a government official and union leader, and her return to prostitution. Firdaus awaits her punishment without fear, knowing that even if she were granted a reprieve, there would be no possibility for her of a life other than prostitution.

Firdaus is portrayed as a thinking woman; her comments on the position of women in her society give the reader a unique perspective on not only the life of the prostitute but also that of the married woman. Firdaus's comments are all the more interesting because she has formulated these opinions for herself from her own observations. It is interesting to see how Sa'dawi challenges society's moral standards: the prostitute in Egypt is considered inferior to all other women, she is regarded as immoral; a sinner beyond redemption as far as religion is concerned. Yet, according to Firdaus, her lot is preferable to that of the Egyptian wife, hitherto regarded as the most respectable position for a woman in Arab society, for a wife cannot even enjoy the prostitute's freedom to choose her own bedfellow, name her price and make her own living. Firdaus reflects:

"I never felt for a moment that I was an unrespectable woman. I knew that my profession had been created by men who are the ones who have the power in this world and the next, that it is men who force women to sell their bodies for a price, and that the cheapest of all women are wives. All women have to be prostitutes in some form or another, but because I was intelligent

and aware of things, I preferred to be a free prostitute rather than an enslaved one, so every time I gave my body I would collect a high price."<sup>3</sup>

For Firdaus, the whole nature of male-female relations is such that she can envisage no situation in society, where women would cease to be exploited by men. Women, she says, are deceived by men and then punished by them for being deceived.

"All women are deceived. Men impose deception on you then punish you for being misguided. Men make you sink to the depths of decay then punish you because you've fallen. Men force you to marry, then punish you with beatings, insults and continual servitude. The least deceived of women happen to be prostitutes; those women who go for love or marriage tend to receive a worse punishment."

It would be interesting to know what reaction these ideas would call forth from women in the Arab world. Would they be able and willing to let themselves see life from Firdaus's point of view, to live through her experiences and then perhaps be forced to see their own situation from a different angle? Even more interesting would be Egyptian men's attitude to Sa'dawi's ideas as expressed through Firdaus. Before we even meet Firdaus, the narrator suggests to us that she is in some way a superior being.<sup>5</sup> Thus a very different type of heroine is introduced to Arabic literature, the highly principled prostitute. There is no doubt that Sa'dawi's Firdaus is a highly moral character: her efforts to achieve respectability in society are immense. At one stage she gives up prostitution with all the material comforts it afforded her, to go to work as a secretary, only to find that a working life does not automatically offer Egyptian women any prospects of becoming respectable, and

that many of her female colleagues were forced to give sexual favours in order to keep their insecure jobs, or gain promotion.<sup>6</sup>

Firdaus falls in love and devotes her mind and body to Ibrahim the leader of the company's revolutionary party, believing that such a strong commitment from a woman to a man and his lofty ideals, would automatically engender his respect for her. Just how deluded she is for trusting her own intuition and not taking account of society's condemnation of extra-marital love, can be seen when she is stunned to learn that Ibrahim has married the chairman's daughter.

Firdaus becomes and remains a prostitute because that is the only lifestyle her society offers to an unmarried woman like herself from a poor background, without parents or private means and without the opportunities which higher education can bring. The secondary school certificate of which she is so proud, is of no practical use at all. For a young woman of the lower social class, there is no alternative to marriage. Firdaus is married off by her uncle's scheming wife, to a repulsive old man, in return for a sizeable dowry. He treats her so badly that she runs away and is forced to trust in the first kindly face she meets, in this case Bayoumi's. Bayoumi takes her in, gives her shelter but soon begins to exploit her as a prostitute. She runs away again only to fall into the arms of Sharifa, a madam who trains her in the arts of a high-class prostitute. It is significant that Firdaus, as a prostitute, is without a class in society and without a recognized position. Since she can cross social barriers she almost seems to belong to all classes: she can claim that by birth she is a member of

the lower class,<sup>7</sup> with her secondary school education and frustrated ambitions she is middle-class and with her make-up and expensive clothes, she is indistinguishable from any politician's or ambassador's wife.

When the reader considers the unfortunate events of Firdaus's life which determined that she become a prostitute, besides her childhood which was devoid of parental love or a strong reciprocal relationship, it is impossible to adopt an attitude of censure towards the character Sa'dawi has portrayed. Firdaus's case is all the more poignant because the author invests her with commendable youthful ambitions to rise to a professional position of doctor or lawyer,<sup>8</sup> and with a well-developed social conscience which enables her to see through Egyptian society's double standards as, for example, when Firdaus criticizes the Arab prince for squandering his hungry people's wealth on prostitutes. "You are worth no more than a gnat for spending thousands of pounds of your hungry people's capital on prostitutes!"<sup>9</sup> Sa'dawi also endows Firdaus with a strong moral sense which leads her to be imprisoned for not agreeing to escort the important foreign dignitary who resorts to sending his policeman to threaten her when she refuses to sleep with him, and also with an emotional sensitivity to those rare moments of deep communication between souls which she experiences with Miss Iqbal (a teacher at her primary school) and on the first night that she meets Ibrahim in the garden.

Practically all the men mentioned in the book are disagreeable most of the time. There is Firdaus's father who beat his wife, took the best food and warmest place for himself; the senile husband, repugnant to

Firdaus in his appearance and manners, the violent Bayoumi, her rough clients with their dirty fingernails, the dishonest Ibrahim and the threatening pimp. Firdaus's uncle shows her the most consideration, especially when she is young and orphaned, when he takes responsibility for her care and education, though this is borne of his lust for her. Later, though, under the influence of his wife, he becomes very harsh to her and is totally unsympathetic when Firdaus complains to him of her husband's beatings. Even the cultured Diya who prefers to talk to Firdaus, before getting down to business, shows that his attitude is superficial and patronizing for he regards her as unrespectable and is callous enough to blame her for her situation.<sup>10</sup> The nearest Firdaus gets to a meaningful relationship, (as far as she is concerned at least) one based on respect, love and cooperation, is with Ibrahim. No possibility otherwise of real understanding or communication between men and women is even hinted at. It is ironic though, that her uncle rather than his wife, is the one who shows concern over Firdaus's marriage, he is worried at first about her marriage to such an old and strange man, and when he is persuaded that it will be in her best interests, he cares enough at least to suggest that Firdaus should have new clothes for the occasion.

Sa'dawi pinpoints some of the worst inequalities which can attend Egyptian women in her society right from birth: the female child may be of no account, her death no cause for sorrow, but if a boy child dies, the father beats his wife. The girl is confined to the house after puberty; her circumcision prevents her from experiencing any normal, healthy sexual response. Sa'dawi attempts to describe the mixed feelings



of pleasure and pain, with the awareness that something essentially feminine has been lost, that the physical reaction is incomplete, as experienced by the circumcised girl. The girl's educational opportunities are limited; Firdaus soon learns that only young men may attend the Azhar. Sa'dawi shows how the arranged marriage can be to the great disadvantage of the young wife, how her role as wife entails total submission to her husband's whims, how precarious her position is before the law since her testimony carries less weight than a man's. Here it is ironic that a successful prostitute can afford to hire a good lawyer to plead her case, which gives her an advantage over the married woman. Sa'dawi describes how difficult it is for a woman of the lower or middle-class to lead an independent life, the lack of decent work available and the society's contempt for women in employment. She exposes too the double standards that allow a young man to indulge in premarital affairs then make a respectable marriage, while the girl who does the same is utterly condemned and forfeits all chance of becoming a decent wife. Sa'dawi draws attention to the irony that even though there are some men who consider themselves as saviours of the fallen woman and would try to rehabilitate the prostitute, these same men would never dream of going to the help of a badly beaten and starved young wife. She also considers it a paradox that an individual can only remain honourable in Egypt if he is rich, and to become sufficiently rich necessitates his losing his honour.<sup>11</sup>

Firdaus is described as a sensitive child who perceives early in her life the oppression of women. Her view that men are corrupt, tyrannical and cruel is reinforced by her reading of history, when she learns what

atrocities male rulers have committed against their people. Despite the admirable qualities of Firdaus, her feminist consciousness and the fast pace of the narration which leads the reader racing from page to page through successive injustices and atrocities, certain technical inadequacies mar this work. Various incongruities hinder the reader from completely identifying with Firdaus and trusting her story. Even if we had not been given the preface by Sa'dawi asserting that the character Firdaus was inspired by a real prisoner whom she had met during her period of research, the very opening of the work introduced by a woman doctor-narrator invites one to believe that the whole of this story is true. "This woman is real, made of flesh and blood, whom I met in the Qanatir prison some years ago."<sup>12</sup> Elsewhere we will find Sa'dawi claiming in fiction to be writing about real situations and almost compelling us to believe her word.<sup>13</sup> We would do well to remember the words of Vladimir Nabokov on the nature of fiction at this point. "Literature is invention. Fiction is fiction. To call a story a true story is an insult to both art and truth."<sup>14</sup> In the case of Sa'dawi's woman at point zero, we are entitled to ask; if this work is to be considered a novel, how far is it fictional? If it is true, then it demands an overwhelming response from the reader on behalf of women suffering like Firdaus. If it is not true, then why should the reader let Firdaus's narrative disturb his thoughts? And finally, why does Sa'dawi's narrator claim that Firdaus is real?

What Sa'dawi really achieves in this work is to challenge her society's view of the prostitute as an inferior, contemptible being. She does this by allowing the prostitute to speak for herself, to give

the reader a brief account of her life, the experiences and lack of opportunities which made inevitable her drift into prostitution.<sup>15</sup> It must be remembered that Firdaus was a highly successful prostitute, the fate of those less 'lucky' would have been far more depressing. Firdaus is not by any means the first prostitute to appear in Egyptian literature Sa'dawi herself comments in The Hidden Face of Eve on what she considers the artificial images of prostitutes as they occur in the works of Najib Mahfuz,<sup>16</sup> and objects to his stigmatizing the 'fallen woman' who engages in love outside of marriage.

"It is ironic, then, that the woman prostitute plays a much more important role in Arabic literature than that which is accorded to the pure and virtuous woman. It is as though purity and virtue are not attractive enough to evoke interest, whether in real life or in the stories of men and women conjured up by an artist's imagination. The prostitute seems to symbolize real woman, woman without a veil or a mask. She is real woman for she has lifted the mask of deceit from her face and no longer feels a need to pretend that she is in love, or to simulate virtue and devotion.

Contemporary Arab literature is crowded with these prostitute figures. This is particularly the case in the novels of Naguib Mahfouz who is very fond of enveloping his prostitute characters in 'mists of humanity' which are the vapours of his superior soul, tempered with kindness and socialist ideas. Circumstances for him are the cause of what befalls these women. However, his understanding of their situation has not moved from a superficial analysis of their social conditions to a deep and sensitive realization of the tragedy women are made to live, or a profound understanding of the real factors that have made them victims of unrelenting injustice."<sup>17</sup>

To return though to Sa'dawi's work, probably the most memorable episode is that in which Firdaus submits to the old man's 'lovmaking'.<sup>18</sup>

The following passage will show the dramatic quality of Sa'dawi's style. Firdaus's husband is sixty; she is only nineteen. He is physically objectionable with a festering sore on his chin. He abuses and beats her.

"He leapt upon me like a mad dog, and the hole in his boil was oozing drops of putrid-smelling pus. But I did not turn my face away nor my nose. I submitted my face to his face and my body to his body. I submitted against my wishes and without resistance, without even a movement or sign of life, just as if my body were dead, or a piece of furniture left lying, or a shoe abandoned under a chair."<sup>18</sup>

With this vivid description of the potential tragedy of marriage, Sa'dawi is breaking new ground in Arabic fiction. This sort of abuse described in such dramatic terms has not yet appeared in Arabic literature from previous writers, male and female. There is of course a high degree of sensationalizing of the sordid and the sexual here, which Sa'dawi is never afraid to exhibit.<sup>19</sup> While such writing might shock the Egyptian or Arab readership in the 1970s-80s, for its explicitness, whether this work has more endurable qualities has yet to be seen. Imra'a 'inda Nuqtat'l-Sifr is undoubtedly a novel which gives insight into the workings of Egyptian society at its worst, by drawing attention to the plight of those who have no voice or status in society, i.e. the abused wife and the prostitute. Social attitudes are reflected passim: for example, when Firdaus complains to her uncle about being beaten by her old husband:

"He beat me once with the heel of his shoe until my face and body were swollen, so I left the house and went to my uncle's. But my uncle told me that all husbands beat their wives and his wife said that my uncle beat her. Then I said to her that my uncle was a respectable man who knew about religious principles and therefore could not possibly beat his wife. But she replied that a religious man was more likely to beat his wife because he knows that religion permitted him to do so, and the good wife should not complain of her husband, her duty was complete obedience."<sup>20</sup>

Examples like the above and Firdaus's own views on Egyptian society are revealing of the conditions of women both single and married. They offer an alternative and original opinion conveyed in a persuasive style, that shows how social respectability is impossible for lower and middle-class women like Firdaus to attain, especially if they fail in the role of wife. Firdaus shows too how the most respectable role of all, that of wife, can often be little more than the most 'respectable' and socially-sanctioned oppression of women.

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References to Imra'a 'inda Nuqtat al-Sifr

- 1) Quoted from a letter dated 17th July 1987.
- 2) See below the section on Al-Mar'a wa'l-Sirā' al-Nafsī.
- 3) Imra'a 'inda Nuqtat al-Sifr, (henceforth Nuqtat al-Sifr) p. 101.
- 4) Ibid., p. 96.
- 5) Ibid., p. 9.
- 6) Ibid., pp. 84-5.
- 7) Ibid., p. 16.
- 8) Ibid., p. 30.
- 9) Ibid., p. 110.
- 10) Ibid., p. 79.
- 11) See the example of Mr Sa'ati in Al-Ghā'ib as one who has achieved success after sacrificing his integrity.
- 12) Nuqtat al-Sifr, p. 5.

- 13) See her short story "'Ayn al-Ḥayāh" discussed below.
- 14) Vladimir Nabokov, Lectures on literature, ed. F. Bowers, London, 1980, p. 5.
- 15) Perhaps in this work Sa'dawi gives us the most interesting picture in all of her novels or stories of the way in which the adult is formed by his childhood experiences.
- 16) HFE, pp. 164-7.
- 17) Ibid., pp. 166-7.
- 18) Nuqtat al-Sifr, p. 52.
- 19) See also her novel Maut al-Rajul al-Wahid 'alā al-Ard and the short story "'Ayn al-Ḥayāh" for other examples which show Sa'dawi willing to exploit the subject of sexuality and the grotesque to shock her readers.
- 20) Nuqtat al-Sifr, p. 51.

Sa'dawi's fifth novel Ughniyat al-Atfāl al-Dā'iriyya, published in Beirut in 1978, comes as a complete contrast to her other works so far discussed. The key to this work lies at its very end in the sentence, "It is impossible for a living human being to keep his tendency to evil inside him without letting it out, otherwise he dies."<sup>1</sup> We have already been prepared for this idea at the beginning when we are told that corruption, iniquity and moral depravity are a necessary part of life and that from the artistic point of view, when this objectionable side of life is not given expression, its effects are even more insidious.

"Immorality, whether in the form of trying to corrupt others or being immoral oneself, is an essential part of real life and of being a real person. A human being cannot retain his urine for ever in his bladder unless he is dead and it thus follows that when a person keeps his immorality inside himself he dies, though from the scientific point of view he may appear healthy. From the artistic point of view, the immorality imprisoned inside him is more damaging than that which is expressed."<sup>2</sup>

This generalization can be seen later to have special reference to Sa'dawi as an artist. In this work she is attempting probably consciously and unconsciously, to exorcize herself of the less pleasant mental images which arise from the subconscious. If we can bear this in mind from the outset it will help us to make sense of what appears to be a total and nonsensical departure from her style in the novel so far. To some



degree, this work was forshadowed by the symbolic, unconscious sexual fantasies attempted by Sa'dawi in her story "Al-Khayt".<sup>3</sup>

I have tried here to take the reader through Ughniyat al-Atfāl al-Dā'iriyya pointing out wherever possible, its symbols, and trying to shed light on some of the images Sa'dawi uses. There is no coherent story or train of events which can be summarized or described with any clarity, upon which we might fasten our attention. Not surprisingly its ambiguity makes this novel one of her least appealing works.

Sa'dawi has covered a full range of depravity and corruption in this work under its seemingly innocuous title, which is translated literally as "The children's circular song". The circularity referred to is echoed in some features of the structure. The work begins and ends with a narrator watching a group of children singing in a ring. They repeat their song about Hamida who abandons her baby by the canal. The narrator then takes pains to convince us about the author's obligation to ensure that every minute detail of the text is exact and that no slip over the ending of a word must appear, which might render the female, male, for example. Too much precision though, says Sa'dawi, distorts art and this 'distortion' is exactly what she has intended to express in this story to make it convincing.<sup>4</sup> The narrator sees a connection between the identical repetition of the song, whose beginning and end run into each other, and the story she wishes to tell. She sees a child, Hamida, break out of the ring, with whom she identifies herself. Then begins a long journey in which the parallel fates of Hamida and her twin brother Hamidu are recorded. We are to imagine the two children to

represent dual aspects of the narrator's confused psyche.

The narrator follows the girl, Hamida, into her house, sees her fall asleep and observes a hand belonging to an unnamed male relative, start to molest her. Hamida wakes to find her nightmare is real and becomes aware of a man smelling of tobacco lying upon her.<sup>5</sup> Sa'dawi quickly creates the atmosphere of the Egyptian village with a few apposite remarks on the landscape and stagnant canal,<sup>6</sup> and we gather that Hamida is a typical village girl who helps her mother with the domestic work and is subject to the usual forms of abuse. As always, Sa'dawi is not afraid to refer to the taboo subjects of incest, rape etc., and normal female functions such as the blood of Hamida's period which spots her apron. When Hamida becomes pregnant, her mother puts her on the train to send her to the city. For a girl to leave her village if she becomes pregnant, is a typical solution to this problem.<sup>7</sup>

There is a change of focus and we now see village life through Hamidu's eyes.<sup>8</sup> In the children's game of catch, he is seen trying to pull down Hamida's pants, but after fending him off she disappears. Sa'dawi reflects that there is something 'grown-up' about village children,<sup>9</sup> by which she means an absence of innocence and an awareness of sexuality, due partly to each family's cramped living conditions. Not only do they lack toys, they also lack privacy and the fact that they have to help with the real work of tending animals or younger siblings, from a young age which puts an adult responsibility on children's shoulders. An example of this loss of innocence can be found in Hamidu's desire to creep near to his mother every night and sleep by her side.<sup>10</sup>

Sometimes she would hug him tightly in an embrace that made him shiver because of its unfamiliar sexual dimension, and sometimes push him away. Both Hamidu and Hamida are seen later to have conflicting memories of their mother: they looked to her for comfort on occasions but recall being painfully rebuffed. Hamida and Hamidu's stories begin to develop in parallel. The use of two different characters allows Sa'dawi to contrast the fate of a boy with that of a girl from an identical background who is involved in the same scandal. Hamidu too is sent away to the city on the train, but in his case by his father, who gives him a knife and tells him with the usual formula, "Only blood washes away disgrace,"<sup>11</sup> to avenge the shame Hamida has brought on their family by her pregnancy.

At the outset then we have an interesting predicament and our sympathies are aroused: Hamida is to be punished for becoming pregnant even though a victim of rape; Hamidu must kill his beloved sister to save the family's honour. Both are catapulted from the village into big city life.

"The roaring din swallowed up her cry for help just as the waves of the sea swallow up a droplet, or a piece of straw, a butterfly or a fledgling that cannot fly. No one heard her voice, and the world carried on as before, thundering like a waterfall whose pounding waters crush the bodies of crocodiles and the wrecks of ships, dissolving them so that its waters remain as white as ever."<sup>12</sup>

See how beautifully Sa'dawi creates the sensation of Hamida's loneliness and bewilderment in the midst of the city, in these poetic terms.<sup>13</sup>

A passage such as this makes it easier for the reader to tolerate the

occasional obtrusive medical fact, for instance that, "Tears, like all bodily fluids, contain salt,"<sup>14</sup> which seems pedantic.

The morning following her arrival in the city, Hamida is caught by a policeman for stealing a loaf. She does not know who or what he is, she only notices the many shiny buttons on his coat. He surreptitiously fondles her breast as he escorts her away to his dim lodging where he brutally rapes her.<sup>15</sup> He takes advantage of his authority and the fact that she has committed a petty theft. Afterwards Hamida escapes. It is interesting that Sa'dawi focuses attention on the uniform as being the man.<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere, she describes policemen as automatons devoid of humanity,<sup>17</sup> and by doing so, highlights the alienation felt by the ordinary person in the face of the authorities.

Unfortunately, the style and content of this promising beginning are not pursued. The text becomes increasingly abstruse. Sa'dawi herself says that,

"The narrator in Ughniyat al-Atfāl al-Dā'iriyya both Hamida (the woman) and Hamidu (the man) - the two sides of one person - and also two persons developing in parallel, sister and brother. You have to feel the novel in its ambiguity. No clear cut answers to questions." (sic)<sup>18</sup>

Hence the reader is free to make whatever connections he wishes between the various elements of the story.

Hamidu's arrival in the city is described next.<sup>19</sup> He imagines that he has spotted his sister and prepares to kill her, but he too is

captured by the authorities and wakes up to the fact that he has been recruited into the military service. Hamidu suffers through having to kill by command: first his father's order to restore the family honour, then the officer's order to shoot with the firing squad. When the body falls, it reminds him of the slaughter of a sheep for the 'eid<sup>20</sup> and how his father had belittled him for crying like a girl.<sup>21</sup> Events then begin to take on the quality of those in a nightmare or a feverish hallucination induced by sunstroke. Reality is manipulated with surrealistic touches. Hamidu, now a conscript, is kicked for fainting in the hot sun on parade.<sup>22</sup> The superior officer is attending in person and any slip is unforgiveable, but Hamidu's shoe gets stuck in the molten asphalt and he falls trying to retrieve it. His bare foot is exposed to all, much to the amusement of the spectators, and even the superior himself.<sup>23</sup> Hamidu is conscious of his gaucherie in the presence of the chief, which is worsened by his suddenly thinking sexual thoughts about the fall of Adam.<sup>24</sup> We are now told, incidentally, that Hamidu is dead, at least he sees himself as dead and discovers he has a woman's body. The ensuing confusion over his sex can be interpreted as his feelings of being emasculated, occasioned by his intense humiliation. Parallel to Hamidu's entry into military service, Hamida has become engaged in domestic service, the only job available for a girl in her circumstances. At the least it offers her some protection from being molested in the street. Sa'dawi describes Hamida now as having a keen X-ray-like vision by which she can penetrate the walls to the dining room to see the greedy family tucking into its food while her own hunger is acute. As Hamida searches for a scrap of food in the rubbish, her master enters and presents her with a sheep which is to be slaughtered for the anniversary of her mistress's death.

As in Hamidu's story, the sacrifice of the sheep precipitates a disintegration of the individual's state, because it triggers off painful childhood memories. In Hamida's case it brings to mind her circumcision and the moment when she had looked around terrified, for her mother's support, only to find her standing passively near by. This detail is taken from Sa'dawi's own life,<sup>25</sup> but is typically experienced by a girl during circumcision. Hamida is called to wash the dead sheep.<sup>26</sup> The family all sit round to eat, except for the mother whom we are told has 'died' in the bedroom. The following kind of juxtaposition gives a surrealist dimension to the work: the picture of Hamida washing the sacrificial sheep now becomes without any warning, Hamida washing down her mistress's corpse. Before the reader has time to find his bearings, he is back to the washing of the sheep. He must keep this strange experience in mind for it is somewhat clarified later. Hamida was used to dressing poultry, but the sheep's heart feels large, warm and faintly pulsing.<sup>27</sup> The blood clot that falls on to her foot recalls to her mind her first period.<sup>28</sup> A girl's memory of her first period, with its attendant distress, if not terror, could almost by now be referred to as Sa'dawi's trademark; it appears in all the novels so far discussed.

Until women started to write about the onset of menstruation, this momentous event for at least half the world's population, so unforgettable, whether accompanied by alarm or joy, had never been mentioned in literature. For women readers, its inclusion acts as a powerful archetypal symbol, one that links their own self to the whole of womankind past and present. Its very inclusion in an artistic work gives positive value to this experience (which all helps to counteract the taboo,

especially in Muslim society, surrounding the unmentionable female function of menstruation). Muslim tradition does not regard menstruation in a positive light. It has always been seen as polluting and defiling. Many sayings exist to advise the menstruating woman what she may not do in Islamic culture. Female circumcision similarly strikes a chord within female readers, but as a symbol it is not so effective as menstruation because it is not so universally applicable.

We find Hamidu standing on duty under the blazing August sun feeling as though his skull is on fire and that flames are coming out from every opening of his body.<sup>29</sup> His familiar nightmare returns in which he sees himself firing at Hamida and watching a body fall. This time the body stares up to heaven at what appears to be the gods, sitting cross-legged on the edges of the clouds.<sup>30</sup> The sun has set, the national anthem is played to celebrate victory, hands clap and raise up the dead body. It is raised high enough for its nose to smell the bad odour from the pendent foot of one of the gods. The corpse turns away in disgust, to the crowd's delight. The inference is that religion must be in a sorry state if even the dead find it instinctively repellent. As the corpse reaches out to claim its badge of honour, another hand snatches it away and the night sky is lit up by searchlights. We learn that it was Hamidu's dead body and that it was his father who stole his medal. Hamidu's dream within a dream framework, shows that he feels himself unconsciously to be a victim because of the task his father has set him and the orders he is expected to carry out as a soldier. Who will be the victor when Hamidu has committed his crime of honour and killed Hamida? Their father will be, and his 'prize' will be the restoration of

the family's honour. Hamidu saw himself as blameless, his role was that of agent: he had committed no fault but nevertheless had the task of redressing it.

After a succession of gruesome pictures, and without any helpful asterisks to mark the change to a new section and hence a different character, we now find ourselves with Hamida who is hiding behind the kitchen door, trying to pinch a morsel of meat.<sup>30</sup> The narrator cannot resist intruding here to enlighten the reader on the consequence of mankind's invention of eating utensils, namely that the teeth grow weak and the gums get pyorrhea!<sup>31</sup> If this remark is intended to be taken seriously, the effect is grotesque. Whole books are written on the complex factors contributing to dental decay. It is asking a lot of the Egyptian reader that he should believe it all the fault of knives and forks. It is also supposed that he can wrench himself out of this convoluted text, from its previous image of a starving girl gnawing at a piece of bone, to 'digest' a scientific fact, even if it is in parenthesis, and then plunge himself back into its complexities with the same spirit. If it is included for satirical effect, and Sa'dawi can be seen to use obvious sarcasm elsewhere in the book,<sup>32</sup> then it is ineffective. On occasions Sa'dawi's heavy irony is successful in conveying universal truths about human society, for example, her comment on the amount of refuse people leave in proportion to their affluence.

".. a person's rubbish increases in proportion to his standing in society. The belly of one whose upper opening consumes more than that of others obviously loses more through his opening at the bottom end. And the belly of Hamida's master was



unequivocably the largest of all, which made his rubbish the greatest in quantity. It would be put by the servants into the garbage cans and then carried off by dustcarts to be heaped up in a high pyramid somewhere far off in the desert, where the tourist would look at it with amazement."<sup>33</sup>

Hamida hears her mistress call from the top of the building;<sup>34</sup> height shown literally here as a symbol for the mistress's social superiority. A fibre of meat between Hamida's teeth gives away the fact that she has eaten some of their meat. Since her master and mistress have agreed on sharing the task of disciplining the servants, it is her master's turn to beat Hamida. She resists and kicks him in the belly.<sup>35</sup> The feel of her youthful flesh to his hands contrasts with that of her mistress's, who has, we recall, 'died' in the bedroom. The wife's 'death' can be taken metaphorically as referring to her frigidity. Starved of food Hamida's master may not be, but starved of sex with responsive flesh he certainly appears to be. He loses no time in tearing off his clothes and flexing his muscles. Hamida screams, but to no avail. One important feature of Sa'dawi's fiction is her skill at suggestion: for example, she does not need to give a detailed account of the beating. The sorrowful picture of Hamida afterwards, as a creature crouching naked, bleeding and fearful in the silent darkness, is far more powerful because of the atmosphere it evokes.<sup>36</sup>

Hamidu walks alone looking up at the familiar bright star in the black sky. Sa'dawi only describes his physical state with a few bare details, but it is enough to convey his degeneration: his hands are stained with congealed blood and nicotine, his nails filthy, his cough rends the silence of the night and his sputum is streaked with blood.<sup>37</sup>

The authorities catch up with him and after a medical examination, he is pronounced fit for domestic service only. As the author describes his uniform, particularly the heavy shoes and brass buttons on the jacket, it suddenly dawns on the reader that Hamidu, or someone in a similar wretched condition, may have been the 'uniform' which had raped Hamida. Migration from the village to the city in Egypt has raised the level of urban crime such as theft, rape, prostitution and drug offences.<sup>38</sup> Hunger, loneliness and dire personal need can distort the mentality of the young peasant, who being without resources of any kind, easily falls prey to exploitation. In Hamida and Hamidu, Sa'dawi expresses much of the confusion felt by the individual and his alienation from every aspect of life in the metropolis. Hamidu soon learns that a servant can even be oppressed by a spoilt child, when he is humiliated into letting the boy ride him like a donkey.<sup>39</sup>

By now, both Hamida and Hamidu are conscious of hatred growing deep within them. For Hamida the hatred is pictured as a foul-smelling foetus. The security agents, that is, her master and mistress, soon detect the odour, and although she denies it, her body gives itself away. Her body has become the crime, says Sa'dawi.<sup>41</sup> Those who have abused her have consumed her body through enslaving her and draining her of every ounce of life; what dregs they have left, which are of no use to them, amount to something offensive, but it is all Hamida has and all she is. As before in her hour of need, she turns to her mother, this time she imagines a vision of her on the dark road but again she receives no comfort. In order to describe the nature of Hamida's sadness, Sa'dawi personifies the emotion in a very effective passage in which we see it

'invading' Hamida's body from every orifice, almost intoxicating her, but at the same time fortifying her.

"She let her body relax on the bench, its pores open for sadness to invade through all its orifices. It filled her to the point of intoxication and it gave her strength. Sadness does not always give; in fact it rarely gives. It singles out a rare kind of person for its gift; one able to give in return, and Hamida could give her whole self. She devoted herself to it, lived on it, ate, drank and digested it. Its essence ran in her blood, her bowels excreted it and the pores of her skin secreted it. It flowed like glistening threads upon her skin, which she licked with her tongue and nose, then swallowed again into her belly to ingest and exude again."<sup>42</sup>

Hamida imagines giving birth to sadness as a fully formed child and sees herself searching for it in the darkness.<sup>43</sup> A beam of light shows the child being approached by something deadly: a snake perhaps. She is surprised to see that it is not a male snake but a female for she had thought anything deadly must be male. Those discarded by society are not even permitted to live out their degradation unobserved, there is always an eye watching.<sup>44</sup>

The glimpses of Hamidu and Hamida follow each other more quickly at this stage of the book, as their physical and mental states rapidly decline and their fates bring them closer together. Hamida has no fear of death, she carries it upon her body like a second skin or a parasite that had died within her.<sup>45</sup> It is impossible to determine her age. She appears from the back to be a child, but her eyes are those of an old person.<sup>46</sup> Those whose birth has gone unregistered, says Sa'dawi, exist above time: their lives cannot be pinned down to the usual consecutive

stages. Hamida stands behind a lamppost, her cracked lips and wrinkled face are disguised by make-up.<sup>47</sup> Anyone would have imagined her a 'lady of the night'. She stares at the sun and imagines Hamidu in the centre of its circle moving slowly with his lop-sided gait.<sup>48</sup> She fears to announce her presence, lest he see her swollen belly and shoot her, but her putrid smell gives her away and he reaches out. Suddenly his voice resembles hers and his body too, as if he were imitating her. She is momentarily deceived that his imitation is in fact her own self, and so she emerges from her hiding place, but only to recognize the round yellow buttons like eyes on his uniform. By giving him her name, she feels exposed, just as Hamidu had before,<sup>49</sup> as if she were being stripped, shaved all over and circumcised. One supposes that she has been arrested for being a prostitute and that she has to be cleaned before entering the cell. Her vision of circumcision as being essential to the process, reflects the deep belief among village women that it is an operation of purification. In the prison cell, Hamida feels herself lying in a pool of blood, manacled and trussed up in a chastity belt (the latter arguably not effective as an archetypal symbol of women's sexual repression for Egyptian society!). An X-ray of her belly shows it brimful of hate.<sup>50</sup> The doctor examines it and recognizing its explosive quality shouts, "Gunpowder!"

Hamidu we are told, had somehow known that prison was to be his fate.<sup>51</sup> He had learnt to relax during his years of captivity as a means of reducing the tension of torture. Blood flows away from his wounds into the cracks of the earth. His fate, like that of Hamida, is linked to that of countless others for whom a spot like dried blood upon the

cell wall is the only trace left of their lives.<sup>52</sup> Hamidu's sigh is followed by that of millions of others in space. He imagines that he sees Hamida lying dead in the moonlight. Hamida's moan too, strikes a sympathetic note among all the suffering peoples of mankind past and present, and the dawn resonates with the familiar sound that rouses them, because they identify with it; the sound of sobbing (which may be why Sa'dawi sarcastically refers to it as 'the national anthem').<sup>53</sup> Hamidu imagines that the minute listening device embedded in his body has detected the sound of her dead fingers cracking under his pressure, and his own internal sounds. It is flattering to him to think that such tiny sounds are worth recording: it must be proof of his importance to the prison authorities. He smokes a cigarette and inhales deeply. Hamida recognizes the smell of tobacco and dreams of how she used to buy it for her father or brother, she imagines Hamidu present and embracing her.

In the morning sun Hamida sees how alike they have become: their shoulders uneven, their fingers swollen and festering, with black nails. Recognizing herself in him she embraces him.<sup>54</sup> Then, feeling for his wallet, she takes it to buy herself some food. With the money she finds a photo of herself and a note from her father to Hamidu to avenge her disgrace. With the money she buys food, a fashionable mini-dress and high-heeled shoes. The irony is that as she totters down the street in her new outfit, that suggests she is from a well-to-do class, the policeman courteously lowers his gaze. She is automatically 'respectable', though half her body is exposed by the dress. When covered in gallabiya and shawl, as before, she was automatically a man's prey.<sup>55</sup> Hamida leans

against a lamppost in the dark and notices her master get out of his car and invite her in.<sup>56</sup> The reader is to note that he does so chivalrously. She relaxes into the soft bed, but suddenly becomes filled with terror at the sight of a deformed ape-like creature before her, i.e. the man. Her reaction is to scream inwardly and spit out the fear tightening in her throat. Her master laughs with his mouth full of meat, then sleeps. She takes his wallet, then leaves, imagining herself driving off in a white car like her mistress's, past the policeman who salutes.<sup>57</sup> Hamida notices Hamidu in the deserted street and holds his hand, pitying him as one who has shared her fate. His hot tear falls on her cheek and sadness again invades her body, this time like splinters of glass.

Sa'dawi describes the complex expression of Hamida's face concentrating on each feature at a time, with particular attention to her eyes. Despite its strange irregularities, her face is curiously harmonious and attractive, giving the impression of being multi-dimensional or even something else altogether. A face is not necessarily a mirror of the condition within, suggests Sa'dawi; the refined visage of the 'noble', like Hamida's master does not reveal the internal rottenness.<sup>58</sup> As her master's face moves towards her in the dark, Hamida stares him in the eye, the trait used elsewhere by Sa'dawi to characterize a self-respecting woman who can 'see through' a man.<sup>59</sup>

Characters and sex are now changing too quickly for it to be possible to see what is happening; the reader gets an impression of total passive confusion. There are surrealist touches, such as when

Hamidu imagines himself firing the gun and millions of children falling with blood flowing from their faces.<sup>60</sup> He feels as if he is drowning in a sea of corpses. He is a child again, being pushed towards the train by the large swollen hand. He lays his head on his mother's breast but she pushes him away and he recalls his father's eyes and his instruction to regain the family's honour. Finally, Hamidu imagines himself like Hamida, buying the tobacco at the shop and being chased for not paying the shopkeeper.

The anticlimax comes when we are told that Hamidu, the boy, wakes up from his dream and goes out to play with his friends as they sing their circle song. So the narrator has taken us on a whirlwind tour into the possible degradation, physical suffering and disturbed consciousness that she fears might lie in store for a village girl who is abused, and also those that her brother might experience under the pressure of being charged with the task of avenging her disgrace. It is necessary to describe the two sides of the situation, from the male and female viewpoint. The question as to whether Hamidu himself was responsible for Hamida's pregnancy can never be answered.

The dream technique in fiction is a convenient device for authors, enabling them to leave the reader high and dry without any explanation, after he has followed his way through fantastic ramblings, struggling to abstract some meaning from a confused text. Sa'dawi's use of this ploy is disappointing,<sup>61</sup> despite the fact that she achieves a symmetrical form by treating the reader to an almost literal repetition of the opening<sup>62</sup> and balances the narrator's description of watching Hamida at the

beginning with her watching Hamidu at the end.

There is no doubt that Sa'dawi has achieved the expression of that perversion, corruption and immorality which she set out to do. One could only get away with it, in her country, within an unrealistic symbolic framework. Probably it was all necessary for the cathartic effect it must have had on the author. In a society which has strict censorship over publications on political, religious and sexual subjects, the creative writer, according to Sa'dawi, has no legitimate way of expressing the negative aspects of sadistic violence and sexual crime of which he is aware. His only other options, one presumes, would be to express himself in pornography or in a way similar to Sa'dawi here. Was Sa'dawi seeking not only to release her own frustrations but also the suppressed emotions of sadistic violence and sexual crime (especially where they arise from traditional mores) in the minds of her readers? Only by taking this view can we begin to make sense of the ambiguity which the author regards as central to this work, and the onus which she places on the reader to interpret it all for himself. Tension is not adequately maintained throughout the novel and the reader flounders hardly able to connect the events of one page with the next. That he is set down to earth at the end, is little recompense.

Sa'dawi has shown herself here unafraid to innovate in the technique and form of the novel. She has attempted to achieve a circular effect in an interesting experiment. At no point, however, least of all at the end, does the reader feel that continuity and repetitiveness which is suggested by the comparison with the children's song. It is hardly a



complete cycle. One is entitled to ask whether the author is on a different level at the end of the work from that on which she started? It is tempting to say that perhaps she is, though this will be seen as higher or lower according to the reader's enthusiasm for the work or his disappointment.

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References to Ughniyat al-Atfāl al-Dā'iriyya

- 1) Ughniyat al-Atfāl al-Dā'iriyya, (henceforth Ughniyat), p. 123.
- 2) Ibid., p. 10.
- 3) For a discussion of this story which was published in 1972, see p. 580 below.
- 4) Ughniyat, pp. 9, 122.
- 5) Ibid., p. 18.
- 6) Ibid., pp. 21-2, 29.
- 7) See the case of Nafisa in Maut al-Rajul al-Wahīd 'alā al-Ard, pp. 40-2.
- 8) Ughniyat, p. 25.
- 9) Ibid., p. 32.
- 10) Ibid., p. 33.
- 11) Ibid., p. 35.
- 12) Ibid., p. 36.

- 13) Ibid., p. 37.
- 14) Ibid., p. 30.
- 15) Ibid., p. 42.
- 16) Ibid., pp. 47-8.
- 17) See the scene where Kafrawi is chased by a policeman in Maut al-Rajul p. 92.
- 18) Quoted from a letter dated March 17, 1986.
- 19) Ughniyat, p. 44.
- 20) The 'eid is a religious festival. The one referred to here is the 'Eid al-Adha during which a sheep is sacrificed, by families who can afford to do that.
- 21) Ughniyat, p. 51.
- 22) Ibid., p. 52.
- 23) Ibid., p. 55.
- 24) Ibid., pp. 56-7.

25) See The Hidden Face of Eve, p. 8.

26) Ughniyat, p. 67.

27) Ibid., p. 69.

28) Ibid., p. 70.

29) Ibid., p. 72.

30) Ibid., p. 77.

31) Ibid., p. 77.

32) Ibid., p. 114.

33) Ibid., p. 63.

34) Ibid., p. 78.

35) Ibid., p. 79.

36) Ibid., p. 81.

37) Ibid., p. 81.

38) See HFE, p. 81.

39) Ughniyat, p. 83.

40) Ibid., p. 91.

41) Ibid., p. 85.

42) Ibid., p. 86.

43) Ibid., p. 88.

44) Ibid., p. 88.

45) Ibid., p. 91.

46) Ibid., p. 92.

47) Ibid., p. 93.

48) Ibid., p. 94.

49) Ibid., p. 47.

50) Ibid., p. 98.

51) Ibid., p. 99.

- 52) See the collection Al-Khayt wa'l-Jidār for various stories concerned with the effects of torture on the individual prisoner.
- 53) Ughniyat, p. 101.
- 54) *Ibid.*, p. 106.
- 55) *Ibid.*, p. 106.
- 56) *Ibid.*, p. 108.
- 57) *Ibid.*, p. 110. With her reference to this gesture, Sa'dawi is making a mockery of Hamidu's military salute.
- 58) *Ibid.*, p. 113.
- 59) See in particular the short story "Maut Ma'ali al-Wazir Sabiqan" p. 17.
- 60) Ughniyat, p. 117.
- 61) See also her early stories "Aḥlām" in Ta'allamtu'l-Ḥubb and "Nāma al-Rajul ba'd al-'Ashā'" in Lahzat Sidq.
- 62) There is an almost literal repetition on pp. 122-4 of the opening pp. 8-10.

Published in 1979, Sa'dawi's sixth novel, Maut al-Rajul al-Wahīd 'alā al-Ard, is her most interesting fictional work so far. She manages to break away from the heavily autobiographical style of her first four novels by creating a different world and a whole new set of character types. We are no longer in the city seeing life through the eyes of an intelligent solitary young woman who is struggling to maintain her integrity in the face of an immoral society which is prejudiced against her sex. It is almost as if the dissonance of the preceding work Ughniyat al-Atfāl al-Dā'iriyya was necessary to clear Sa'dawi's mind and unblock the way towards a mature artistry in which she would be able to draw on a deeper fund of creativity. In Maut al-Rajul we are still dealing with the individual's struggle against a corrupt environment, but this time Sa'dawi presents us with a whole gallery of male and female characters in a realistic setting in rural Egypt. Sa'dawi's novel can be seen as continuing the tradition of Egyptian novels concentrating on the lives of the fallāhīn, the peasants, a tradition which goes back to Haykal's Zaynab.<sup>1</sup> Sa'dawi's novel, however, depicts the life of the villagers with unprecedented realism: this is no rosy view of healthy, country life, with the peasants living harmoniously with Nature. Sa'dawi spares the reader none of the squalor, the abysmal ignorance, unmentionable perversions and injustice which form the regular pattern of daily life. It may not be unreasonable to hazard a guess that all the

situations presented have their roots in reality of the not too distant past. The author has dedicated her work to her cousin Zaynab and the children of the village Kafr Tahla.

By giving the reader an inside and outside view of the various characters, and by balancing their private feelings against their public behaviour, the author offers much insight into the social relationships that exist in the village. Against the background of exhausting physical toil in the fields, various events take place which each present a personal crisis for the individual concerned. Since the plot is composed of several independent strands of story, involving some twelve characters, that interweave throughout the novel, it is necessary to give a brief summary of the main events and their relatedness.

Zakiya is a strong peasant woman who labours in the fields. Her son, Galal, has been conscripted into the army, but she believes him to be dead, which accounts for her anguish. Zakiya's brother, Kafrawi, has just lost his daughter, Nafisa, who has disappeared mysteriously from the village. Kafrawi tries to console his sister and urges her to pray, but she already shows signs of being disillusioned with religion. The most important man of the village, the umda or 'mayor' lives a life of affluence, he is the central government's representative. His every whim is catered for by his three cronies, Sheikh Hamzawi, the leader of the mosque, and Al-Hajj Ismail, the local barber surgeon. The umda is in search of a new servant girl now that Nafisa has disappeared, someone attractive whom he can take advantage of sexually.



Al-Hajj Ismail notes that the umda is taken by the appearance of Zaynab, Nafisa's younger sister. Al-Hajj schemes in order that the umda should have Zaynab as his next diversion. We are told Nafisa's background, how she had been beaten at twelve years old and sent against her will to serve the umda. We learn that she has run away from the village because of her pregnancy, for which her master is to blame. Next we are introduced to Fathiya, Sheikh Hamzawi's young wife. The story of her arranged marriage, the defloration ceremony and wedding procession give Sa'dawi an opportunity to include these events, as experienced by the young bride herself, for the first time in the Egyptian novel. The impotent Sheikh Hamzawi who has tried every means to father a son, regards it at first, a blessing from heaven when he stumbles over a foundling outside his own home. A rumour imperceptibly spreads through the village that the baby was Nafisa's and that a certain villager, Alwan, was to blame. Alwan was easily under suspicion for his taciturnity and reserved behaviour in general, and the fact that he did not worship with the Muslims's in the mosque. The umda's wife, however, clearly suspects her husband to be the father.

Kafrawi, alone in the field, shelters from the midday sun in the buffalo hut. He is startled by a loud cry and goes to investigate. The moment he discovers the dead Alwan, he is apprehended by Sheikh Zahran, who has suddenly appeared on the scene. Although we are told nothing explicitly in this story we can deduce later, especially on a second reading, the action behind the scenes, for example, that Zahran has killed Alwan, and laid the blame on Kafrawi in order that he can be jailed and his daughter Zaynab can be forced to become the umda's maid.

We are also introduced to Mitwalli, the village idiot and necrophiliac who assaults the newly dead and steals their shrouds. Sheikh Zahran has brought along the police to catch Kafrawi. He is taken before the judge who tries to make him admit to killing Alwan on the grounds that the latter had sullied his honour by abusing Nafisa. Kafrawi refuses to be goaded into condemning Alwan and rejects the hearsay evidence by which the judge is trying to incriminate him, but to no avail: Kafrawi is sent to jail. Zakiya is distraught that Kafrawi has gone. Her distress is interpreted by the villagers as a manifestation of demon possession. They hold a zar<sup>2</sup> ritual which proves ineffective in relieving Zakiya's psychological stress. al-Hajj Ismail tells Zaynab to take her aunt Zakiya to the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab.<sup>3</sup> The two women travel to Cairo by bus. Their first impression of city life is one of bewilderment and fear. At the shrine, Zaynab and Zakiya are singled out from the crowds of pilgrims and given instructions as to what they must do for absolution. Zaynab is amazed that the holy man at the mosque seems to know all the details of their case and even the position of their house in the village. It becomes obvious to the reader that this consultation is bogus. In essence, the supposedly 'holy' man is part of Al-Hajj's plan. For he blames Zakiya's illness on Zaynab's 'sin' of refusing to work for the umda. Their prescription for a cure which is to be carried out on their return to the village, involves complicated ritual gestures, invocations and Zaynab's departure to serve the umda. The latter is delighted at Al-Hajj's cunning when he sees Zaynab come voluntarily to serve him, and he loses no time in seducing her.

Meanwhile, Sheikh Hamzawi is dismissed by the umda from his post as leader at the mosque. We are again left to deduce for ourselves that it is because the umda does not want his bastard to be brought up in the village. Even religion, we learn, is subject to the umda's control. A small fire which breaks out around the time of the failure of the cotton crop, are linked in the people's minds to Hamzawi's sin of sheltering the child. The angry peasants pursue Fathiya, who refuses to be parted from the baby and, in a mad frenzy, tear her and the child limb from limb. Mitwalli, who helps Hamzawi retrieve their battered bodies, is so affected by the tragedy that he does not desecrate Fathiya's burial place.

Galal returns after four years service in the army. Zakiya tells him of the tragedies that have occurred in his absence. When he marries Zaynab, his childhood sweetheart, she is reluctant to continue working for the umda. It then falls to Sheikh Zahran to try and find some way of making her resume. He decides to implicate Galal in a crime of theft so that the innocent young man is led away to jail. Zaynab sells the buffalo, the family's only means of support, to go to the city to try and visit Galal in prison, but her money runs out and she is taken advantage of by an unscrupulous man, never to be heard of again.

Zakiya suddenly connects the whole wretched train of events and sees behind them the intrigues of the umda. She takes an axe and resolutely strikes him dead. She is taken to prison and in the middle of the night she murmurs to her cell-mate that God is dead. The ending is somewhat ambiguous and can be seen to have a deeper significance

if we keep in mind the umda as a symbol of Egypt's temporal government on a local and national level, and also as a symbol for a god in whom the people are exhorted to believe. Whether he represents God or simply the umda (or even the president!), he is credited with superior power and purported to have the peasants' best interests at heart. In both cases he is ineffectual and bogus: the people's faith in him is not rewarded.

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The original title to this work was "God dies by the Nile",<sup>4</sup> which was rejected by the publishers in Cairo and Beirut. Sa'dawi says that this was because:

".. the word 'God' is very very sacred. You cannot use the word except for prayer or other sacred things, and also because God should not die at all. Though I told them (the publishers at Dar al-Adab in Beirut) that 'God' here in the title and in the novel is just a symbol of the authoritarian governor, but (sic) they were afraid to publish the title and changed it to "The Death of the Only Man on Earth"."<sup>5</sup>

(The original title, however, is retained in the English translation, God dies by the Nile.) Sa'dawi goes on to say that during one of her visits in 1986 to the United States:

".. some Arab Moslem students in the University of East Washington were very angry because of this title. They said to me, 'How can God die by the Nile?' Other Arab students who were enlightened and open-minded were pleased and said they liked the book and the title."<sup>5</sup>

It is interesting to see the powerful hold of traditional values, and the way in which they can be manipulated to keep the peasants subdued. These ancient beliefs and practices are not specifically Islamic, being based more on ignorance, superstition and folk religion, but they have come over the course of time to be regarded as not incompatible with Islam and hence accepted as part of Muslim culture in Egypt<sup>6</sup> like, for example, the giving of amulets and the zar ceremony, defloration and female circumcision, regarding the political leader as Allah's representative on earth, and the belief that bastards bring bad luck etc. While such social practices and attitudes are invaluable to the survival of the village because of the continuity and stability which they lend to the community, they are dangerous in that they make no allowance for liberality of thought or an independent view. Our attention is drawn to the hypocrisy inevitably underlying such a society. Hamzawi finds that people individually agree with him that it is not the child's fault that he is illegitimate, but en masse they are easily swayed to reject him as their religious leader.<sup>7</sup> Those villagers who dare to think and act independently of the 'herd' are severely punished. The umda's desires are achieved because of Al-Hajj Ismail and Sheikh Zahran's understanding of the peasants' gullibility and volatility. To a certain extent, the peasants themselves are roused to carry out Zahran's dirty work.

Kafrawi, however, is a character who refuses to be deflected from his opinions, in order to conform to his society's expectations. Hence he is condemned by the judge because he does not admit that it would be natural for him to want to murder Alwan merely because the people

insinuated that it was the latter who had seduced Nafisa. Kafrawi is very unusual for sticking to his good opinion of Alwan. We do not know from where he acquired such a tolerance for his neighbour's individuality, nor why he did not instinctively react with vengeance to kill Alwan. In these circumstances his liberality is surprising, for the man who fails to avenge a crime against his family's honour is himself condemned. There is also the irony here in that if Kafrawi had confessed to killing Alwan for the sake of honour, he would almost certainly have been excused punishment for this socially acceptable crime of passion. The whole course of events, beginning with his capture and leading up to his protests against the judge's assumptions, are all very reminiscent of Taufiq al-Hakim's novel Yaumiyyāt Nā'ib fī'l-Aryāf.<sup>8</sup>

Since Sa'dawi has chosen to give an inside as well as an outside view of her characters, the reader is able to make a better assessment of the behaviour of individuals with regards to their neighbours. No character, not even the tyrant umda, the scheming Zahran and cunning Al-Hajj Ismail is completely bad. This is evidence of Sa'dawi's increasing maturity as a writer: she is not content to deliver stereotypes of the virtuous or vice-ridden. We learn that the umda has insecurities of his own, having grown up in the shadow of a successful brother. The people have good reason to fear the umda's power, for he can act as a demigod. Yet we are shown him being gentle and considerate for Zaynab on her arrival, so we are surprised to find this type of behaviour and sentiments in one who has such a record for destructive acts. Sa'dawi even hints that he is henpecked by his forceful wife.<sup>9</sup> As for Zahran and Hajj Ismail, they suffer feelings of inferiority

beside the umda and are for ever under stress to cater for his whims. Even the village idiot, Mitwalli, with his disgusting habits is allowed to have a sensitive side,<sup>10</sup> while the upright Kafrawi is shown as 'closer' to nature than most people would find acceptable for finding solace in sharing his buffalo's bed and drinking her milk.<sup>11</sup> This entire scene with Kafrawi in the stable might almost be a parody of earlier literary works in Arabic that romanticized the peasants' connections to the soil and nature.<sup>12</sup>

Although the men in Maut al-Rajul appear to hold power in the village (they are certainly the ones who act most destructively), it is the women who emerge as the really strong characters. Zaynab, Zakiya, Fathiya and Nafisa are all described as having a proud, upright bearing. They show a determination to survive their victimization, regardless of possible consequences. Thus Zaynab, who believes that she was sent to the umda by God as part of her conditions for forgiveness, believes after her marriage that it would be a sin for her to continue working for him.<sup>13</sup> Her decision not to go leads to Galal's arrest and her own destruction.

The umda's wife also possesses strength of character. She is capable of retorting to her husband from her superior attitude of contempt for his behaviour. We gather that she is fully aware of her husband's and son's sexual adventures and knows who is responsible for Nafisa's pregnancy. An interesting domestic scene in which she holds her own against her partner and ridicules her son, demonstrates that the child of a broad-minded mother with liberal views will not necessarily share this maturity of outlook, in spite of modern education. The umda's son

is a university student and a keen adherent of traditional values.

He complains:

"Here in Kafr al-Tin,<sup>14</sup> a girl has a baby and abandons it in front of the house of the sheikh of the mosque and then flees. Girls have no morals today anywhere, Father.'

The umda agreed with his son's words saying, 'Yes, my son, girls have no morals, and women are the same.'

He stared at the plump, half-exposed thighs of his wife under her tight modern skirt. His wife shifted her leg with irritation and said in a tone of annoyance, 'Why don't you say that it's men who have no morals?'

The umda laughed saying, 'Men have never had any morals, but women have only recently become so... and that's the tragedy.'

His wife's lips, coloured red with expensive lipstick parted in a sarcastic smile as she said, 'Why do you call it a tragedy? Why not call it justice or equality?'

Their son shook his head with its girlish long hair and said to his mother, 'No, Mother, I don't agree with this idea of equality. Girls are different from boys. A girl's honour is the most valuable thing she has.'

His mother let out the familiar sardonic laugh of society women in Cairo, a sort of drawn out snorting or braying sound which a madam is likely to use when she dislikes the tone of conversation. Raising one eyebrow and lowering the other she said, 'Oh indeed, Master Tariq? Now you are putting on a sheikh's turban and talking about honour. Where was your honour then last week when you stole ten pounds from my purse and went to visit that woman whose reputation I know of very well? And where was your honour last year when you assaulted Sa'diya the servant girl so that I was forced to throw her out to avoid a scandal?'"<sup>15</sup>



Sa'dawi is far more explicit in her description of the ignorance, suffering and squalor of the village and in capturing the essence of village life, than any previous Egyptian novelist. There is, for example, her brief description of Um Saber, the local midwife, which is a brilliant vignette of the curious phenomenon of the Egyptian dāya, which, incidentally, will always be a mystery to the male writer, for her function as untrained overseer of all women's intimate rites.<sup>16</sup>

H. Kilpatrick noticed, in regard to novels concerned with rural conditions, that an "... inability to try to understand the peasants as individuals in their own right has been a consistent part of Egyptian writing about the countryside from Zainab onwards."<sup>17</sup> Whilst for novelists like Mahfuz, Taufiq al-Hakim and Ibrahim al-Mazini this is attributable to their urban origins, even those of peasant stock such as Yusuf Idris, Louis 'Awad and 'Abd al-Hakim Qasim show an ambivalence to the peasants, at times writing with sympathy for their condition and at others with contempt for their degradation. When Sa'dawi writes about the fallāhīn there is uniformity of tone;<sup>18</sup> there is no censure and no disgust at their plight, and what sympathy she shows is not of a maudlin kind. This is because she is narrating here almost in the role of an impartial elder villager who takes the peasants' situation for granted.

In Kafr al-Tin, Sa'dawi's peasants all suffer physically from their poverty and difficult working conditions, and mentally from the ignorance and ingrained attitudes of those around them, especially when these are exploited by the umda's cronies. In general, the men fear the police and the authorities, but all the peasants feel that the government works against them. For example, they know instinctively that Kafrawi is not

a murderer, but this does not prevent him from being accused of the crime. As they watch him trying to escape arrest, the peasants

".. felt a mysterious secret delight, they wanted Kafrawi to escape, not for the policeman to catch him up. They had an almost instinctive hidden feeling that Kafrawi was neither a murderer nor a criminal, and an instinctive hatred towards the officer, all policemen, and all representatives of the authorities. It was an inveterate hatred which the peasants harboured for the government, for they realized, but how or why they did not know, that it had always acted against their interests and had always exploited their hard work."<sup>19</sup>

Sa'dawi is able to convey the personal suffering of individuals in the village, and is unafraid to expose the barbarity which erupts periodically. There are humorous scenes and moments of pathos throughout the novel which lighten the tone and prevent it from being a work of total gloom and deprivation. The book ends with the indication that things are changing: the umda's popularity is fading and the people are beginning to open their eyes. This is chiefly due to the fact that the government has pushed them to the limit. Sheikh Zahran confesses his fears of the peasants' rebellion against the authorities, to Al-Hajj Ismail:

"People have changed, Hajj Ismail, the peasant who couldn't look me in the eye has started to raise his eyes. Some of them raise their voices too. Only yesterday one of them refused to pay part of his debt to the government and said to me angrily, 'Sheikh Zahran, we work night and day throughout the year and still get nothing but debts to the government.' I never used to hear this kind of talk before from any of them. The peasants are hungry, they can't find anything but

dry bread and worm-eaten cheese to eat. Hunger makes people fear no one. They will show no respect for us or even for God. Hunger means unbelief, Hajj Ismail." 20

Perhaps the justice meted out to the unda by Zakiya, and Sheikh Zahran's presentiment that the peasants will not be put down for ever can be seen as a positive note on which to end.

In the final scene we see Zakiya in prison smile serenely to her fellow prisoner and tell her that God lies at the heart of the Nile.

"In the middle of the night while she was lying beside her fellow prisoners, Zakiya's eyes would remain open, staring into the darkness, her lips pressed together in a resolute silence. But one of her cell mates heard her whisper to herself one night, 'I know who it is.' The woman asked her out of curiosity, 'Who is it, my dear?' Zakiya replied as if in a dream, 'It's Allah, my child.' The woman sighed sadly and said, 'Where is he? If he were here he might spare us this torture!' Then Zakiya replied quietly, with a faint smile, 'He's over there, my child. He is lying at the bottom of the Nile.'<sup>21</sup>

There is a certain amount of ambiguity here for the Arabic reader and Sa'dawi leaves him to draw his own conclusions. It seems very clear to me though that she is suggesting that the peasants will not be duped for ever by a government which seeks to exploit them, (especially by using religion to do so) and that the peasants' religion itself contains nothing at all which will alleviate their sufferings or improve their lives, and that the more intelligent of them, like Zakiya, will eventually abandon their blind belief.

There is added significance in the fact that Zakiya refers to Allah as dying in the heart of the Nile, when we reflect on the importance of the river in the peasants' mentality. In describing the physical background, Sa'dawi makes many references to the Nile, to the changes of its surface or the rippling waves which look like wrinkles on the face of a sad and silent old man. The Egyptian peasants have always been dependent on the Nile for their livelihood, for them it assumes the role of a God. It is also an ever-present symbol of stability.

One particularly pleasing aspect of Sa'dawi's technique here is worth drawing attention to, and that is the way in which she lightens the tension of the plot and unites unconnected scenes whilst also recalling the landscape, by showing how a name or sound bounces from one character to another.<sup>22</sup> This gives the impression that the village inhabitants are naturally receptive to thought transference, as if a kind of telepathy existed between them.

By focusing on some of the worst areas of village life, Sa'dawi has been able to demonstrate the dangerous consequences of traditional values when compounded by superstition and ignorance. Maut al-Rajul al-Wahid 'alā al-Ard shows considerable advances in Sa'dawi's technique and style as a novelist. This mature, fascinating and complex work can rightly take its place in world literature as a truly Egyptian novel.

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After taking a detailed view of Sa'dawi's novels to date, and before going on to discuss her memoirs from prison, it is worthwhile reflecting on the words of Evelyne Accad:

"On the whole, the production of fiction by Arab women writers is remarkable for its variety and its occasional aesthetic excellence, as well as for its very existence in the face of a tradition which has supported no such ambitions or achievements."<sup>23</sup>

Although she was not referring to Sa'dawi's work but to those of earlier women writers, what Accad says is applicable to Sa'dawi. We should never overlook the fact that the very existence of Sa'dawi's fiction is a triumph, regardless of its weaknesses as literature.

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References to Maut al-Rajul al-Wahid 'alā al-Ard

- 1) The Egyptian writer Muhammad Husayn Haykal is generally credited with having written the first truly Egyptian novel, Zaynab (Cairo, 1914). While being essentially a nostalgic view of the Egyptian countryside, Zaynab is also concerned with the sufferings of peasant women resulting from their social condition.
- 2) The zar is part of Egyptian folk tradition. Ostensibly a form of exorcism to rid a person of an evil spirit, it is more of a socially-acceptable outlet for women to release pent up psychological and sexual frustrations. It usually takes the form of a frenzied dance accompanied by music and incantations from the Qur'ān. It is performed by and for women almost invariably, the only men present being the musicians, and in this case, the village idiot.
- 3) This famous mosque in Cairo, named after the Prophet's daughter, is a popular venue for those seeking cures and help with personal problems. Elements of folk religion are blended with Islam in real life, as in Sa'dawi's story here.
- 4) In Arabic, Al-Ilāh Yamūt fī Hudn al-Nīl.
- 5) From a letter dated 17 July 1987.

- 6) This is particularly true of the uneducated classes and the peasants. Those who are of higher social levels and educated are more likely to see these aspects of popular culture as extraneous to Islam.
- 7) Maut al-Rajul al-Wahīd 'alā al-Ard (henceforth Maut al-Rajul), p. 159.
- 8) Al-Hakim's novel, published in Cairo in 1937, has an important place in Arabic literature as an early and relatively successful attempt at a realistic depiction of some aspects of peasant life. Most noticeable are the mutual misunderstandings between the peasants and the local representative of the centralized legal system.
- 9) Maut al-Rajul, p. 94 f.
- 10) Ibid., p. 178.
- 11) Ibid., p. 72.
- 12) For example, Taufiq al-Hakim's novel, 'Audat al-Rūh.
- 13) Maut al-Rajul, p. 203.
- 14) Literally 'Mud Village'.
- 15) Maut al-Rajul, p. 61-2.

- 16) Maut al-Rajul, p. 109.
- 17) H. Kilpatrick, The Modern Egyptian Novel, p. 159.
- 18) We will recall that Sa'dawi's background combines both urban and peasant elements.
- 19) Maut al-Rajul, p. 91.
- 20) Ibid., p. 193.
- 21) Ibid., p. 207.
- 22) Ibid., Chapter 5.
- 23) Evelyne Accad, Veil of shame: the role of women in the contemporary fiction of North Africa and the Arab world, Editions Naaman, Quebec, 1978, p. 95.



Sa'dawi's experiences in prison are transformed into print in two works: a play Al-Insān (The human being), subtitled "Ithnā'ashar imra'a fī zanzāna wāhida"\* (Twelve women in one cell), and her memoirs, Mudhakkirātī fī Sijn al-Nisā'. Since the latter, for its dramatic style and subject matter, reads almost as a novel, and in fact is not without fictional content, I have decided to include it in the section on Sa'dawi's novels. It then seems logical to include the play here also because of its common subject. Both works were published in 1984, with the memoirs preceding the play.

In Mudhakkirātī fī Sijn al-Nisā' Sa'dawi relates her experiences of arrest, detention and trial during a three month period in the autumn of 1981. She was among the 1536 people whose arrest President Sadat ordered under an emergency decree, following the recent Muslim-Christian clashes. Although prisoners were strictly forbidden to have writing materials, the ever-resourceful Sa'dawi acquired a pen, which enabled her to scribble down notes in secret, on cigarette paper or toilet paper. Thanks to these efforts, we are able to read a faithful account of conditions at the Qanatir women's prison and also gain a clear idea of the chaotic nature of Egyptian 'justice' during the end of Sadat's era.

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\* To be grammatically correct the title should read "Ithnata 'Ashrata Imra'a..", I reproduce it here, however, as it appears on the cover of the Arabic edition and throughout.

Under the Decree No. 562 of 1981, the President was

".. empowered to arrest and detain people suspected of endangering national unity or public order, as well as to authorize searching of their persons and homes or offices, without recourse to the normal procedures set down in the Criminal Procedure Code.."<sup>1</sup>

Since Sa'dawi was unaware that this decree had been issued, when the police came to arrest her she demanded to see their search warrant. Under the new ruling, however, this formality was not necessary, nor was it illegal for them to break down her door and search her flat. One can feel her anger and sense of outrage at seeing the men going through her private things and even fingering the draught of a new novel which she had been writing that afternoon. Sa'dawi was understandably frightened as they drove her away, for she had no idea where she was being taken or why.

By the same evening, she had been taken to the Qanatir prison, just outside Cairo, at all times ushered by armed men as though she, a single unarmed woman, posed a violent threat. She had to exchange her name for a number, No. 1536.<sup>2</sup> The hardest moment of her life, however, was the moment before she entered the cell.<sup>3</sup> She felt as though she were going down into a dark grave. Suddenly everything changed when she recognized among those previously arrested and already occupying the cell, two old friends, one a writer and journalist, the other a university professor. During the next two days, two more friends joined them, one of whom was the writer Latifa al-Zayyat, which brought their number to fifteen. There was a brave and genuine camaraderie between these women as they

swopped stories of their arrests, all of which had taken place in incongruous circumstances and been conducted by armed men. One had been seized while on holiday, another while busy moving house. None of the women at the time had had any notion as to why she had been detained.

A recurrent theme in Sa'dawi's fiction is the ability of human beings to adapt and overcome the worst of circumstances. Sa'dawi's own resilience in prison is easily observed, but others found it harder to adapt. Sa'dawi herself noticed this and accounted for it in the following way. For those who have been spoilt through luxury, or have been accustomed to having others at their service, prison is more difficult than it is for those like herself who have always worked hard, managed for themselves, washed in cold water and had developed strength through physical exercise.<sup>4</sup> Yet even for the robust, Egyptian prison conditions were sadly inadequate, and all the women united to demand immediate steps to improve the toilets, eliminate the cockroaches, set up a shower, provide them with civilian bread rather than the infested prison bread, and to shut off their wing from that of the mothers' with their children because of its disturbing noise. Much to their surprise, the prison authorities quickly satisfied most of their demands, though not those of providing pens and paper or of informing their families of their whereabouts. Sa'dawi reflected that their situation was like something out of the theatre of the absurd. Only in prison could pen and paper be more difficult to obtain and more dangerous than a revolver, she comments ironically.<sup>5</sup>

The wardress later became aware that Sa'dawi was writing secretly, but overlooked it probably because of the rapport which the two had developed and because she was sympathetic to Sa'dawi's work.<sup>6</sup> When the wardress asks Sa'dawi if it is true that she has written against Sadat, she replies that while she would never write against someone personally, she felt that she ought to be entitled to express her opinion freely, in principle, since Egypt was supposed to be a democratic society.<sup>7</sup> In turning a blind eye to Sa'dawi's writing, the wardress was taking a great risk for if a written work was discovered in a cell, the wardress would be punished more severely than the prisoner. Sa'dawi observes the irony of this situation, where the prison workers are in some ways more rule-bound than the inmates, and how even the middle-ranking officials are powerless to act, only ever awaiting orders from above.<sup>8</sup> Though they strut about clean-shaven and in uniform, they must suffer the underlying anxiety of knowing that their jobs are insecure: a change of regime and they could find themselves behind the bars.<sup>9</sup>

In describing her fellow prisoners, Sa'dawi gives an interesting portrait of a Muslim fundamentalist and a socialist. She allows their behaviour to reveal the dangerous hypocrisies and inhumanities which surface in everyday life as a result of adherence to an inflexible dogma. One soon gains the impression that prison is doubly difficult for such women because it amounts to a second imprisonment; they are already captives of their particular ideology. This may help to account for their suffering more depression in comparison to the other women who bravely try to rally their spirits. Baddur, aged about thirty, is a strict veiled Muslim.<sup>10</sup> She constantly recites the Qur'ān like a dirge,

pronounces on everything that is ḥarām, or forbidden, under her interpretation of Islam, which happens to include Sa'dawi's singing and healthy laughter.<sup>11</sup> Fauqiya, also aged about thirty, is a socialist. Talk of politics and 'the Workers' is always on her lips. Both women have closed minds, a tendency towards quarrelsomeness, and a poor physique.<sup>12</sup> Their views of the world are poles apart: one believes that God shaped the world, the other, economics.<sup>13</sup> Both want to dominate the group rather than show solidarity with their fellow prisoners. Both evade personal responsibilities such as washing their dishes and clothes: neither can bear the cold shower.

By contrasting the behaviour of the Muslim group with that of the other more liberated and alive individuals like herself, Sa'dawi shows how restricting the negative attitudes of the former can be. Her constant appreciation of the health of the whole person recurs throughout: for example, Sa'dawi regards laughter as exerting a beneficial physical effect on the body by activating certain brain cells, yet Baddur condemns it.<sup>14</sup> Laughter can be the proof of thought and a lively mind, Sa'dawi adds. It is not necessarily a sign of frivolity any more than a long face is proof of seriousness. The Muslim women even provide comic relief with their excessive modesty, constant spitting and uttering of oaths to ward off evil. Their outlook on life does not permit them to understand or tolerate non-believers nor extenuating circumstances which might drive a person to crime, such as in the case of Fathiyya who murdered her husband because he had raped their daughter.<sup>15</sup> Baddur is even eager to judge her fellow Muslim who has been mortified by the punishment she has received for hiding a written note.<sup>16</sup> When the unfortunate girl is

in need of love and reassurance, Baddur unsympathetically tells her that her beating was well-deserved and had come as a divine purification for her having failed to memorize the Qur'ān. Later she praises the wardress for her kindheartedness to animals, saying that God will reward her for he demands mercy for animals and all creatures, but Sa'dawi swiftly comments that women would not appear to be included!

As a doctor, Sa'dawi is particularly aware of the inadequate health provisions in jail: one glimpse of the doctor's clinic<sup>18</sup> and the filthy sick bay<sup>19</sup> made her determined not to be ill. Being ill in prison is worse than death, she says. After an outbreak of impetigo,<sup>20</sup> Sa'dawi accuses the prison doctor of trying to deceive the prisoners about the infection, thereby violating his oath to medical science. Even though his conduct has irritated her, she can still pity him for being little more than a tool of police oppression. All the deficiencies she describes in prison diet, medical care and hygiene find corroboration in the Amnesty International report on Egyptian prison conditions and trial procedures conducted in 1982.<sup>21</sup>

Sa'dawi's prison memoirs contain a good deal of autobiographical material from her younger days. She recounts several earlier clashes with the authorities when her forthrightness caused her to be blacklisted. The inclusion of these details prepares the reader for the trial scene,<sup>22</sup> besides giving insight into the working of Egyptian bureaucracy. At a conference in 1962 before Nasser, when Sa'dawi was thirty-one and relatively unknown, no one was able to answer the President's question, "Who is the peasant?", until she gave her vivid description, "The one

whose urine is red!"<sup>23</sup>, thus implying lack of government medical care to tackle the problem of belharsia and the peasants' continuing ignorance of the condition. From then on, Sa'dawi was categorized as 'too bold', in the files of the Interior Ministry.

Eight years later, (still during Nasser's time) Sa'dawi had been invited to speak at a large gathering of the Socialist Union as a member of the medical profession. The three hundred delegates were kept waiting two hours for Sadat, who was then deputy president, and his entourage to arrive. Such long waits were apparently not unusual on similar official occasions. Sa'dawi however, commented in her speech on the late arrival, couching it in terms of lost productivity to the state and national income.<sup>24</sup> She then continued on the subject of lack of democracy and false slogans. Sadat only commented in general terms on her idealism and perfectionism, two attributes which were reserved for God alone, he added. Sa'dawi had also been under investigation by the Interior Ministry for a lecture which she had delivered at Ein Shams University in 1972 on women's place in Egyptian society.<sup>25</sup>

From various references made to her parents, it would appear that Sa'dawi had inherited from them a rebellious streak arising from a free spirit. They had taken part in political demonstrations and encouraged her to do likewise. 'My father and mother used to encourage me to take part in nationalist demonstrations against the king and against the English.'<sup>26</sup> Sa'dawi has always shown herself unafraid to rebel whether in private, against her brother and her former husbands,<sup>27</sup> or in public, as a schoolgirl, medical student, doctor or writer. In view of her

revolutionary spirit, it is hardly surprising that she sees her pen as a weapon<sup>28</sup> with which to defend herself and the freedom of people everywhere.

Sa'dawi speaks in various places about her attitude to her writing, and in so doing, illustrates her indomitable character and reveals much of her personal philosophy. The reader will always recall Sa'dawi's absolute resolve never to give up writing, whatever happens, and her optimism when she says, "Nothing is impossible in my life.."<sup>29</sup> Sa'dawi's faith is grounded in her personal experience for she feels that whatever she has truly desired in her life, she has obtained. She has always regarded ordinary human beings as innocent creatures, with the 'gods', i.e. the authorities, as the guilty ones. The very activity of writing itself is as enjoyable for her as it is necessary, even if only a fraction of what she writes is published, she does not regard it wasted effort. Her only regret is that she does not have greater freedom to express herself.<sup>30</sup> She deplors the debasement of words by insincere speakers, for it threatens to dilute the message of those who write the truth with personal conviction.<sup>31</sup> Words have lost their meanings or come to signify the opposite. Sa'dawi maintains that without freedom there can be no truth and truth is a prerequisite for creative art, but this ideal is impossible to realize when state security censors whatever it dislikes.<sup>32</sup> Sa'dawi considers her writing to be the most precious thing in her life.<sup>33</sup> She is aware of the power of words and how in her society to utter an honest word can even demand more courage than to kill. When she was writing in cramped circumstances in prison she felt that the important thing was that the words were being produced upon the paper, whether they could be seen or not.<sup>34</sup>



During her three months detention she met various people who had read her books or knew of those who followed her works eagerly. As we would expect, she has a substantial influence among young female university students, but even Sa'dawi herself was surprised that her arresting officer had read her books and novels,<sup>35</sup> although it seemed that he had not been convinced by them enough to change his chauvinist views. He exemplifies the typical Egyptian male-establishment view which asserts that women are rightly excluded from certain professions such as law, the army, police and religion, because of their 'inferiority' to men. When he asks if Sa'dawi is "against Islam", she replies to her critics at large, "There is not a single Islam.. every state interprets Islam as it wishes.. isn't that so?"<sup>36</sup> This vague answer which does not commit her to being either 'for' or 'against' Islam, is probably included to help exempt her from any possible criticism for her ridicule and unflattering treatment of Baddur the extremist Muslim.

Before she entered prison, Sa'dawi had fully realized that this was an experience which profoundly altered the individual:<sup>37</sup> she had been as curious to know the nature of this experience as she had been intrigued to learn about death during her medical studies. Prison, Sa'dawi soon learnt, was a place in which one could know the extremes of emotion, joy and pain, beauty and ugliness. Sa'dawi saw at close quarters the human capacity to adapt to privations.<sup>38</sup> Under such conditions, a person stands bared before himself and others: his true metal is revealed especially in times of crises.<sup>39</sup> It is interesting for the reader to see how Sa'dawi herself withstood prison conditions. Apart from her secret writing, she soon managed to structure her day as a means of preserving

her equilibrium.<sup>40</sup> Her routine entailed washing her clothes and bedding, physical exercises in the prison yard, vigorous digging in another section of the yard, group sessions for discussion with the other women, analysing the latest news which they obtained in secret from a radio and teaching one of the illiterate prisoners to read and write.

Sa'dawi rarely gave in to thoughts of depression. Her sense of humour remained buoyant.<sup>41</sup> She even managed to smuggle out a letter to her husband, a daring act that would have had serious consequences if it had been discovered. She was overjoyed to receive a reply from her husband, daughter and son.<sup>42</sup> They told her how they had searched for eight days before discovering her whereabouts and how they had received messages from all over the world in support of her, and that they had found her a good lawyer. How curious it seemed to Sa'dawi that so many protests had been made worldwide at her imprisonment, yet not one voice had been raised in Egypt by the people or by the doctors' or writers' unions.<sup>43</sup>

From an article in an Egyptian newspaper, Sa'dawi and her fellow prisoners learned that they had been accused of plotting against the interests of the people.<sup>44</sup> What made their offence worse was that in doing so they had supposedly taken advantage of "the freedom and democracy of the great hero Sadat's era." This was a fabricated charge, made without any investigation, but at least it forewarned the prisoners of what they might expect when they were summoned for trial. They held various discussion sessions in order to try and prepare their defences.

After twenty two days in jail, Sa'dawi's turn for trial came,<sup>45</sup> and she was taken before the Socialist Prosecutor General.<sup>46</sup> Under Egyptian law he is empowered to interrogate, among other cases, those supposedly involving

".. people who advocate doctrines which imply a negation of divine teachings; those who disseminate false or misleading information which could harm the national welfare.."<sup>47</sup>

Sa'dawi's Kafkaesque investigation began by her being blamed for not appearing the previous day, a situation entirely beyond her control, even if she had known about it in good time.<sup>48</sup> Her lawyer had been attending faithfully every day in the expectation that her case might be called. The examining magistrate accused her of inciting students to rebel, with her lecture at Ein Shams University in 1972. Sa'dawi wondered how they could have made so many mistakes concerning this event when its full details had already been taken down by the Ministry of the Interior years before.<sup>49</sup> Next she was accused of having Marxist tendencies, but from her background in psychology she knew that 'tendencies' are only feelings, and that possessing such philosophical leanings is not a crime for which one can be sent to jail under the Egyptian constitution.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, she asserted her political independence and was then questioned about a magazine article found in her flat at the time of her arrest, which she had not written or even read. She was also accused of opposing the Camp David agreement at the World Conference of Women at Copenhagen in 1980,<sup>51</sup> another error which she corrected. Her attendance at this conference had been by virtue of her position at the United Nations, to talk on the problems of Palestinian women. Although the

Camp David agreement had not been under discussion, Sa'dawi made no attempt (nor has she made any attempt since) to hide her opposition to Sadat's policies in general. When Sa'dawi was told that the Internal Security Police had reported that she had attacked the Camp David Treaty, she immediately asked if it was Jihan al-Sadat, the President's wife (who had also been attending the Copenhagen Conference) who had informed on her.<sup>52</sup> From this incident and the previous unflattering references to Sadat's wife which arose during a conversation recorded by Sa'dawi between herself and the wardress, one can sense a certain bitterness in Sa'dawi's attitude towards Jihan al-Sadat. Even though the criticisms of the President's wife are not actually voiced by Sa'dawi, but by the wardress, they have still come from her pen and to include them as they stand, which is in the form of malicious gossip, without any attempt to redress the balance, reflects badly upon the author and to a fair-minded reader might even appear to be grounds for libel.<sup>53</sup> Sa'dawi does not even allow Mrs Sadat to be referred to by her Christian name, but only, sarcastically, by her title as the 'First lady' or, impersonally, as 'Sadat's wife'.

"The wardress opened her eyes and said suddenly, 'And Sadat's wife? They say here in prison that it was she who goaded her husband against you.' I said, 'Why should she goad him against me?' The wardress smiled slyly and said, 'Don't you know?' I replied, 'I know nothing about it, how should I when I'm in prison?'

The wardress rubbed her eyes with her thin brown hand.

She said, 'They say that she is jealous of any woman who is more beautiful or more intelligent than she is. She is the First Lady of Egypt and she doesn't want any other woman to surpass her.' I said, 'Who told you this?'

She stared at me with her narrow eyes and smiled cunningly saying, 'Oh Doctor.. don't you know all this?' I replied, 'No, I don't.'

The wardress went on, 'They say that you have written something against her.'

'I don't remember ever having written anything against her personally. But I am against the wife of the ruler being regarded as the First Lady. This is an American custom and I am opposed to this kind of imitation. It is as though one were putting the function of wife, or that of the ruler's wife, above all other functions. There are Egyptian women who put in a lot more effort than the wife of the ruler, and who have greater standing in the hearts and minds of the Egyptian people than she does. One ought to respect a woman for her own efforts not because she is the wife of a man who has influence and power.'

The wardress said, 'Every day we read about her activities in the newspapers and about the great efforts she is making.'

I said, 'We only heard about her activities after her husband came to power, and who knows if her activities will continue after her husband leaves power?! And what kind of activity is it anyway?! Has it done anything to change the position of women or solve their problems, especially those of the poor women who work inside and outside the home?!'<sup>54</sup>

In order to redress the balance somewhat, we might consult Earl Sullivan's Women in Egyptian public life, where he credits Mrs Sadat with substantial personal achievements.

"When Jihan Sadat was the first lady of Egypt, she acquired and exercised political power. She was an important part of her husband's efforts to 'modernize' and update Egypt, and she served as his helpmate in a variety of ways. She provided him with information and advice, entertained his foreign and Egyptian guests, and shared the job with him of representing Egypt to the world. She also served as an advocate of various causes, especially that of women, and is at

least partly responsible for changes in the laws affecting women and the family, as well as laws regarding the participation of women in politics. By associating herself with the feminist movement, and using her position to give it impetus, she helped to make Egypt different from what it was."<sup>55</sup>

Sullivan refers to her as the "most visible articulator of feminist concerns in Egypt" in the mid-1970s. Quite clearly the slightest action of Mrs Sadat earned a wealth of publicity which opposition figures like Sa'dawi could never command.

After three hours of ineffectual interrogation, during which it became clear that the prosecution had nothing substantial against Sa'dawi, no question was asked about any possible involvement she might have had in foreign plots to foment civil discord, as she had been accused of in the papers. Even though she was innocent, Sa'dawi could not be released without an order from the President, which was in accordance with his special decree. Her experience appears to have been typical of those questioned by the Socialist Prosecutor General.<sup>56</sup> Following this interrogation, Sa'dawi not surprisingly felt that she had lost all hope of justice.<sup>57</sup> The power of the Prosecutor General to sidestep the law and wipe out truth and reality seemed absolute.

On 6th October, just over a week after her interrogation, Sa'dawi heard that Sadat had been shot. (One of the female prisoners from another wing, who had been permitted more mobility, had been watching the military parade on a television belonging to one of the privileged inmates, when shots had been fired and the transmission stopped.) The prisoners had had to wait until later that evening to know the true

situation. After three hours of secretly trying to work their radio, in the smelly toilets, Sa'dawi was able to tune in to the BBC World Service to learn that Sadat was dead. The prisoners were all overjoyed to hear the news, though they had no idea who had killed him or why, or what effect it might have on their fate.

When the prison officials paraded the next day looking pale and red-eyed, showing no intention of informing the prisoners of the new situation, Sa'dawi took them by surprise by asking for a pen and paper to write to Sadat.<sup>58</sup> The period following the assassination was one of emotional turmoil for Sa'dawi: conditions became more relaxed as family letters and food parcels were permitted, but there was still much uncertainty. When a glimmer of hope appeared that things might be improving, Sa'dawi and her fellow inmates wrote several letters and telegrams to prominent people including President Mubarak, complaining of their treatment and demanding release, but there was no response. What was more, Sa'dawi was outraged at her patriotic and professional reputation being slandered in one newspaper<sup>59</sup> and at the new trend of printing articles critical of Sadat's policies, calling for a stand against corruption and oppression (probably the reason for her own detention!).

Sunday 25th November 1981 was the day of Sa'dawi's release. She was taken to join many others for an audience with Mubarak. Mubarak's direct sincere speech impressed her, with its call for an end to the exploitation of the crushed majority by the privileged minority, and demand for respect for differing views, for justice, equality and

productivity, and an end to corruption.<sup>60</sup> In her own speech, Sa'dawi warned that no single man, however good, should govern alone and that the realization of democracy needed legal guarantees to protect those who held strong opinions, from the violence of the authorities. After meeting Mubarak, she was free to go home and was soon reunited with her family.

Mudhakkirātī fi Sijn al-Nisā' is a valuable account of a difficult period in Sa'dawi's life, at a critical time in the history of Egypt. She has provided much background material in the way of autobiographical detail which shows the continuity of her personal struggles against various forms of oppressive authority. That she has needed to rebel so often is probably due to what Sa'dawi refers to as her feeling of having been born at the wrong time. "I haven't lived the life that I was born to; I wasn't born at the right time."<sup>61</sup> Sa'dawi's acute sense of freedom and passion for the truth have made her collide constantly with the lies and restrictions she has found in everyday Egyptian life. Since she is living in a society where those who think, seek truth and justice, write literature, call for freedom, conduct scientific research or have philosophical inclinations are likely to be sent to prison for so doing,<sup>62</sup> it is hardly surprising that she has found herself behind bars, for she has committed all these 'offences'. An even greater 'crime' than all these, she says, is that she lives as an independent woman at a time when society demands women's self-effacement and subservience.

Sa'dawi's rigorous denunciation of ignorance and injustice is always tempered by her sense of humour and deep compassion for the sufferings of others.<sup>63</sup>

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References to Mudhakkirātī fī Sijn al-Nisā'

- 1) Egypt: violations of human rights, Amnesty International, London, 1983, p. 23.
- 2) Mudhakkirātī, p. 43.
- 3) Ibid., p. 47.
- 4) Ibid., p. 64.
- 5) Ibid., p. 75.
- 6) Ibid., p. 111.
- 7) Ibid., p. 99.
- 8) Ibid., p. 74.
- 9) Ibid., p. 81.
- 10) Ibid., p. 59.
- 11) Ibid., p. 60.
- 12) Ibid., p. 66.
- 13) Ibid., p. 169.

- 14) Ibid., p. 168.
- 15) Ibid., p. 154.
- 16) Ibid., p. 175.
- 17) Ibid., p. 176.
- 18) Ibid., p. 139.
- 19) Ibid., p. 141.
- 20) Ibid., p. 144.
- 21) Egypt: violations of human rights, Amnesty International, p. 15.
- 22) Mudhakkirātī, p. 191 f.
- 23) Ibid., p. 151.
- 24) Ibid., p. 108.
- 25) Ibid., pp. 17, 209-10.
- 26) Ibid., pp. 7, 205.
- 27) Ibid., pp. 7-8.

- 28) Ibid., p. 8.
- 29) Ibid., p. 9.
- 30) Ibid., p. 11.
- 31) Ibid., p. 13.
- 32) Ibid., pp. 11, 17.
- 33) Ibid., p. 156. She mentions that it was her mother who taught her to write. p. 157.
- 34) Ibid., p. 116.
- 35) Ibid., p. 38.
- 36) Ibid., p. 39.
- 37) Ibid., p. 62. Sa'dawi's husband Sherif Hetata had spent thirteen years in prison as a political prisoner before they were married, and many prominent intellectuals known to Sa'dawi, who had also been jailed, would have, no doubt, given her some idea of what to expect there.
- 38) Mudhakkirātī, p. 57.
- 39) Ibid., p. 173.

- 40) Ibid., p. 134.
- 41) Ibid., p. 197.
- 42) Ibid., p. 186.
- 43) Ibid., p. 188.
- 44) Ibid., p. 127.
- 45) Ibid., p. 191.
- 46) Ibid., p. 205.
- 47) Egypt: violations of human rights, p. 25.
- 48) Mudhakkirātī, p. 197.
- 49) Ibid., p. 210.
- 50) Ibid., p. 211.
- 51) Ibid., p. 212.
- 52) Ibid., p. 214.
- 53) Ibid., pp. 109, 214.

- 54) Ibid., p. 109.
- 55) Earl Sullivan, Women in Egyptian public life, New York, 1986, pp. 90-2.
- 56) Egypt: violations of human rights, p. 25.

"The interrogation conducted by the office of the Socialist Prosecutor General has, in practice, tended to be of a general political nature, rather than focusing on a specific criminal act. For example, after the 1,536 arrests by presidential decree in September 1981, detainees were called upon by the Socialist Prosecutor General to describe their lives, often in some detail, and were then questioned on their activities dating back over a number of years. A lawyer was questioned about a legal case in which he had acted for the defence as long ago as 1949. Journalists were often asked about their activities within the journalists' union. Some detainees were summoned for questioning seven or eight times and their interrogations continued for hours at a time.

There appears to be no clear upper time limit to how long a person may be detained before being interrogated for the first time. Amnesty International knows of a case in the group referred to above where the detainee was summoned for the first time to the office of the Socialist Prosecutor General more than 90 days after his arrest. During this period he had no access to a lawyer or his family."

- 57) Mudhakkirātī, p. 223.
- 58) Ibid., p. 230.
- 59) Ibid., p. 234.
- 60) Ibid., p. 245.

61) Ibid., p. 252.

62) Ibid., p. 13.

63) Ibid., p. 7.

The reader may be interested in comparing Sa'dawi's memoirs here with a brief account of women in prison for political reasons, given by Laila al-Hamdani, "A Palestinian woman in an Israeli prison - personal notes", in Women in the Middle East, Khamsin, London, 1987. This distressing account of the dire sufferings and inhuman torture of Arab women in prison today makes the conditions Sa'dawi describes seem relatively easy and unrestricted in comparison, unpleasant though they were for her.

The material of Sa'dawi's play, (which was never performed on account of its being regarded by the Theatre Authorities as too political) is based entirely on her experiences in real life. The language is highly colloquial and all the details are realistic even to the point that some phrases are taken directly from her prison memoirs. The play can usefully be read in conjunction with the memoirs, for it helps to convey the atmosphere of tension amongst the women as it might well have arisen as a result of some twelve women from widely differing backgrounds and beliefs being herded together in a confined space. Sa'dawi makes use of the relatively greater freedom which she has when writing fiction to indulge in heavy ridicule of the religious fanatics among the Muslim prisoners.\* They are shown as unwilling to share the work and responsibility for looking after the cell. Sa'dawi sets the tone for the whole play by beginning with a religious argument. If she were in sympathy with the basic views of the Muslim group, Sa'dawi would not show them in such a poor light, for here they are seen arguing and being unfriendly not only to those who do not share their views, but also amongst themselves. Their lives are ruled by a long series of 'dos and don'ts'. The sarcasm of Zaynab the Thief's references to the Islamic veil as a "shroud"<sup>1</sup> barely disguises Sa'dawi's own scorn for this garb. At least by putting the disapproval into the speech of one of her characters, Sa'dawi can make her point while exempting herself from the criticism

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\* These women are portrayed by Sa'dawi as being typical of those who belong to religious groups, the various sister organizations to the Muslim Brotherhood.

which would rain down upon her from religious quarters for expressing such ideas personally. In contrast, the non-fanatic Muslims and the non-Muslims extend warm friendship to each other and to the Muslims too. The cell is the outside world in miniature; the arguments dividing the women in detention are focused on the religious and psychological factors which prevent their uniting in Egyptian society on a larger scale.

A short scene from the beginning of the play will demonstrate Sa'dawi's attitude towards the Muslim group. There is a flurry of activity as the women make themselves presentable, i.e. concealed by their veils and gloves, for the Governor.<sup>2</sup> The intricacies of the Muslims' arguments, however, prove beyond the scope of the examining officer who attempts to ask them the routine questions.

"(The officer made his way to Rashida and Nafisa, of whom nothing was visible, the whole head and body being covered by a thick black cloak. No face or eyes or anything showed.)

Officer: I can't tell them apart when they're like this. One of you will have to show her face so that I can identify her. (He points to Rashida.) Which one are you?

(Neither of the women shows her face or moves. Rashida makes no reply.)

Samira: (angrily) They can't show their face before a man.

Officer: (to Samira) Why do you show yours then?

Samira: Each group has its own view. My view is that a woman's face and hands are not shameful. The Prophet, peace be upon him...



(Rashida, I'tidal, Hadiya and Nafisa chant in unison)  
.. the peace of Allah be upon him.

Samira: (finishing her speech).. the Prophet permitted women to show their hands and face during the hajj pilgrimage.

Officer: (pointing to Rashida) O.K. so who are you?

(Rashida makes no reply.)

Samira: A woman's voice is also shameful.

Officer: (to Samira) So why do you speak then? Or aren't you a woman?

Samira: (very angry) No I'm not a woman. Women were created out of a crooked left rib of Man's. Women are inferior in mentality and religion. I'm not a woman: I'm a human being!" 3

Throughout the play we learn a good deal of each woman's background. This is brought out through their conversation and in their confrontations with the prison authorities in a realistic style which Sa'dawi would do well to try and incorporate into her novels. Sa'dawi tends not to use dialogue effectively to advance action in her novels. While this may have been connected with the issue of conveying naturalistic speech in modern Arabic prose, this difficulty has been largely overcome by novelists today and should no longer pose a technical barrier to the use of dialogue to enhance the dramatic quality of a novel. In this play Sa'dawi uses highly colloquial expressions and constructions.

Since the play contains characters clearly based on those who shared Sa'dawi cell, it is interesting to speculate as to which one of them represents Sa'dawi herself. Perhaps Basima, as the older more responsible and stable character, whom the women refer to as ustādhā (a term

of respect for a teacher or professor) bears some of Sa'dawi's traits, but then so does the energetic and optimistic Izza.<sup>4</sup> The women are obviously there for the same reasons as Sa'dawi and her cellmates in real life, i.e. for having outspoken views whether political, social or religious, which the President felt constituted a threat to public order. Basima comments:

"We are the kind of people who speak our minds. They told us this is a democracy. We believed them and when we put that democracy into practice, it led to the result that you see here."<sup>5</sup>

Basima makes an interesting comment on the effect of prison on the Muslims:

"You know, Izza, Samira and her group have an easier time than us. All day and night they pray and read the Qur'ān. For them the matter is simple: prison is more or less the same as outside, because outside the prison they confine themselves to home and read the Qur'ān and pray just the same. There's no difference at all. Perhaps the prison is even a bit better, there's more freedom, they can talk to each other and see other people like us, the wardress, the superintendent and the governor, the garbage man and so on.. And as for Salima, prison is actually better than her home, even the food's better. But for us, it's tiring doing nothing..

Izza: Yes, actually Basima, life in this wing is hard after our lives outside, which were full of constant activity, conferences and work, societies, travel and meetings. I never imagined that I could live without seeing the newspapers and listening to the radio and music, or without paper, pens, books, without anything at all."<sup>6</sup>

It is Aliya, though, who makes a dramatic entrance halfway through the play in the second act, who most closely resembles Sa'dawi herself.

Aliya has a commanding strength of personality, she also is in the process of divorcing her husband, and has a seven-week old child.<sup>7</sup> Aliya will not accept her detention quietly. She rejects advice from Basima and Madiha not to stir up trouble and cause problems for the overburdened wardress. Just like Sa'dawi, Aliya expresses a love of gardening which she had done when a child.<sup>8</sup> Like Sa'dawi too, Aliya claims to have had a strong-minded grandmother who had sold her bangles to educate her son and help him rise from the peasantry, and who supported her family singlehanded.<sup>9</sup>

The discussion between Aliya and Dhauba (Dhauba is the prostitute who cleans the women's cell) leads up to Sa'dawi's central message spoken by Aliya.<sup>10</sup> In essence, Aliya declares her love of sincerity and her feeling that if she were to renounce her outspoken views in order to avoid prison and stay at home to bring up her son it would be to abandon her true self and humanity. Aliya continues saying that people are too afraid of the consequences to speak out against the authorities; they are afraid of losing their livelihood and their families suffering as a result. Therefore they keep quiet and repress their intelligence and true selves. If they do that though, asks Aliya, what have they in the way of strength of character which might serve as an example to their children?

"Aliya: When you meet a respectable, educated, supposedly understanding person, you'll see he's afraid, unable to speak his mind, or he'll say something completely different. And you ask him why? He'll say, 'Because I want to bring up my children'. (Angrily) But what kind of an upbringing is that? Just food,

clothes and school fees? A child who sees his father a coward, unable to speak his mind, will grow up a coward who is unable to speak his mind as well. A child who sees his father sell himself or sell his opinion for money will grow up to sell his own self and mind for money too."<sup>11</sup>

Aliya feels that by going to prison and perhaps even dying there, she is giving her baby son a worthy example to follow.

When Aliya refuses to cooperate with the prison authorities, it is rumoured that they will punish another in her stead as a means of putting pressure on her and incurring the hostility of her cellmates against her. The warders take Nafisa away, which puts Hadiya and Salima, her supporters, into a panic. As they pray out loud to their God to help, the stage is plunged into darkness except for a picture of a man's face (it is implied, the President's) and a voice booms out, "I have no mercy!"<sup>12</sup> With this coming as the answer to their prayer, Sa'dawi is making a direct link between political and supposedly religious authority. Temporal powers (and Sa'dawi is clearly suggesting the President here) backed up by the higher echelons of Egyptian government appear to overrule any stated religious values. We see elsewhere Sa'dawi's idea of identifying the supreme political rulers as gods in *Maut al-Rajul* and *The Fall of the Imam*. What is more significant, however, is that Nafisa turns out to be a spy set by the prison authorities to inform on the other prisoners. When we recall her fervency, throughout the play, we realize that Sa'dawi is suggesting that Nafisa's extremism is a sham designed to carry along the weaker-willed Muslims and to unsettle the other women by their anti-social behaviour. By making the play end with the shooting of the man whose face is in the portrait, Sa'dawi is not even attempting to disguise

the fact that he represents Sadat. As the women celebrate at the news of their release, it is worth noting that it is two non-Muslims who in fact praise God at their freedom.<sup>13</sup>

The final scene shows a new face, that of the succeeding president in the official frame. The prisoners have all been released except Aliya. Her obstinate refusal to answer the officer's trifling questions has earned her Sa'dawi's admiration. When asked by the new examining officer if she is not tired of sticking out against them for so long, Aliya replies, "I'll never get tired." When he sarcastically asks if she's made of steel, she says that she is made of something stronger.

"Officer: Is there anything in the world stronger than steel?

Aliya: Yes.

Officer: And what's that?

Aliya: A human being."<sup>14</sup>

Sa'dawi is claiming that only the true human being can stick out against the tyrannical authorities. One is thus expected to conclude that Aliya is a heroine made of superior stuff to her fellow cellmates and to be admired for making such a stand against the prison officials, even though it is over essentially petty issues here. But when we recall that Samira, a fervant Muslim was ridiculed by the author for considering herself a real human being,<sup>15</sup> it seems to spoil Sa'dawi's theory, for we become confused wondering which of the two claims to human qualities we should believe. Although it is very clear that it is Aliya whom the author

wishes us to admire, the audience deserves a better heroine. Here obstinacy is held up as the criterion for a real human being, yet the strength of character which Aliya is supposed to express appears as more of an inhumanity in comparison to the sisterly devotion and flexibility, spontaneous emotion and sympathy of some of her comrades in the cell. Despite her bold desire to be a worthy example, Aliya does not show herself overly concerned for her fellow prisoners. Aliya has not yet learned that one man's truth is another man's lie, that to live in the world we have to allow for others' truths and the possibility that more might be gained by compromise. The truly strong women of this play remain the wardress, Dhauba, Zaynab the Murderess and Zaynab the Thief.

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References to Al-Insān

- 1) Al-Insān, pp. 144-5.
- 2) Ibid., pp. 26-7.
- 3) Ibid., pp. 38-9.
- 4) Ibid., pp. 61-2.
- 5) Ibid., p. 107.
- 6) Ibid., pp. 61-2.
- 7) Ibid., p. 99.
- 8) Ibid., p. 133. See Mudhakkirātī, p. 117.
- 9) Al-Insān, p. 133. See Mudhakkirātī, p. 148.
- 10) Al-Insān, p. 161.
- 11) Ibid., p. 162.
- 12) Ibid., pp. 181-2.

13) Ibid., p. 186.

14) Ibid., p. 189.

15) Ibid., p. 39.



### CHAPTER 3

#### THE SOCIOLOGICAL WORKS OF NAWAL AL-SA'DAWI

This chapter and the following will deal with Sa'dawi's sociological works. The first three, Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins (1972), Al-Unthā hiya al-Asl (1974) and Al-Rajul wa'l-Jins (1975) can be viewed as complementary volumes in view of their subject matter and the author's approach. The last three, Al-Mar'a wa'l-Sirā' al-Nafsi (1976), Al-Wajh al-'Ārī li'l-Mar'a al-'Arabiyya (1977) and The Hidden Face of Eve (1977), can then conveniently be grouped together as further discussion into questions raised in the first three sociological works.

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1.

#### AL-MAR'A WA'L-JINS

When Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins (Women and sex) was first published in 1972 in Cairo, it provoked strong reactions. On one side there was condemnation from a minority of religious and political authorities, which resulted in Sa'dawi's dismissal from the post of Director of Health Education in the Egyptian Ministry of Health, while on the other, there was the fierce loyalty of those who supported her efforts, who were sincerely grateful

for the information she had supplied. As far as Arabic sociological literature is concerned, this book ranks as a landmark for its reflection of the state of family relationships in Egypt during the 1960s. In relation to feminist writings, it constitutes a milestone, some seventy years after the works of Qasim Amin.<sup>1</sup>

For Western readers today, it may be difficult to see how Sa'dawi's material could possibly have been construed as inflammatory. It is not easy to gauge, looking from one known culture to another unknown one, exactly how such imponderables as traditional values, sexual morals and religious attitudes impinge on the personal lives of its people. Official family or marriage statistics give no indication of the underlying emotional dimension of a society's problems. It will be hoped that the following discussions of Sa'dawi's ideas, together with substantial quotations from her works will enlighten the reader as to the Egyptian psychological environment and cultural predispositions with which Sa'dawi is concerned. As a sensitive doctor, Sa'dawi has been in a position to absorb the currents of feeling that run in conjunction with the physical sufferings of her compatriots. From the recommendations she makes for changes in Egyptian standards of behaviour and the short shrift she gives to the prevailing moral values, the reader can make reliable assumptions about the nature of the status quo.

Sa'dawi's ideas on improving the quality of male-female personal relationships, parenthood, and women's role in society, are potentially explosive. If they are ever to come to fruition, Egyptian society will have to undergo a radical secular socialist change. Many Western and

socialist countries already enjoy a substantial degree of those progressive measures Sa'dawi so earnestly desires for Egypt, such as equal educational and job opportunities, equality before the law, women's ability to travel without male permission and to live independently, the provision of contraception, maternity benefits, abortions and nurseries etc., but none of these societies is a Third World state with traditions entrenched in orthodox Islam and whose present legislation claims the shari'a<sup>2</sup> as its main source, as is the case with Egypt.<sup>3</sup> Sa'dawi's prescriptions for change, if taken to their logical conclusions, would entail the dissolution of the patriarchal family, the very stronghold of Islam in Egyptian society: it is this which her critics must have sensed, along with the challenge, implicit in Sa'dawi's arguments, to the whole ethos of Egyptian Islam as the only valid order of society. They must have felt that their vested interests in preserving the existing state were threatened. While such authorities maintain their grip on the legal system, which denies full citizen's rights to the female half of its population, they are safe from any progressive ideas Sa'dawi might advocate to help ensure her fellow Egyptians a better life, or to improve her country's living standards.

Certain factors which hinder the reader from determining a coherent philosophy behind all of Sa'dawi's factual works should be borne in mind throughout any discussion of her works. There is, to begin with, the presence of censorship in Egypt, which intimidates the writer from precise criticism of his society, but there are also weaknesses in Sa'dawi's writing itself, in her style of argument for example, which time after time lacks that final conclusion which would identify

unequivocally the reactionary element in her society or its most harmful tenets. This can be seen most clearly in her obvious preference for socialism and apparent unawareness of its essential incompatibility with Islam. Another example which involves both the above points is that whilst advocating liberation of all spheres of human activity, Sa'dawi cannot allow herself to follow it to its logical end by advocating religious and cultural liberation. This would mean that the individual was free to choose which religion and which aspects of his culture, or for that matter of a foreign culture, he wished to live by. On those occasions where the inconsistencies in Sa'dawi's work are a direct result of the threat of censorship, we have to make allowances. It then becomes as necessary to read between the lines and observe what has been omitted, as it is to notice what she has written. Other more minor factors which act to cloud her issues include Sa'dawi's highly discursive style, a lack of organization within each chapter and throughout each book as a whole, a certain repetitiveness and a tendency to indulge herself in high-sounding rhetoric, where she uses emotive concepts like freedom, independence, love and truth, without sufficient definition of meaning and without always relating them to pragmatic issues.

It is now time to turn to see what Sa'dawi's purpose was in writing this book, the subject matter she deals with, what she condemns, what she approves, the new information she brings to her Arab readers, her didactic approach and her advice to the Egyptian woman.

Sa'dawi's purpose in writing the book was to open people's minds about themselves and their society. She writes specifically about Egypt

for the Egyptians, but her works are also relevant to readers throughout the Arabic-speaking world. Sa'dawi begins by recounting a typical case which she encountered as a doctor, that of a young bride being accused by her husband of not being a virgin because she had not bled on their wedding night.<sup>4</sup> As is often the case in Egyptian society, the doctor's medical opinion was sought to settle things once and for all. Sa'dawi discovered that the girl was indeed a virgin, as she had pleaded, and that she had not bled on her wedding night because she had a flexible hymen. The husband was not convinced by Sa'dawi's explanation (perhaps an indication that women even in positions of authority, are not respected, unless they tell men what they want to hear!) even though he was supposedly intelligent and educated. He divorced his innocent wife, who turned to Sa'dawi in desperation, afraid that her male relatives might try to wreak vengeance for her apparent disgrace. The girl was fortunate in having Sa'dawi as a doctor, for she made a personal effort to intervene on her patient's behalf by going to the father and explaining to him his daughter's condition. The girl was perhaps even more fortunate in having a broadminded father who took her side in the argument. He roundly condemned the Egyptian medical profession for concealing such scientific facts which led people, through sheer ignorance, to treat innocent girls unjustly. The father thus pinpointed a lack of available information in society, which Sa'dawi was quick to see as an indication of an inadequate educational system and conflicting social values. It was to supply this missing knowledge and to correct the misunderstandings which had filled its gap that Sa'dawi set out to write Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins. She was also motivated by her outrage at the oppressive traditions which govern Egyptian social life, and by her sympathy for

the women and girls who suffered as a result from such customs.

"Year after year went by with other tales of different problems passing before my eyes and numerous tragedies of young girls, women and children who fell victim to the widespread ignorance and prevailing customs. Some of them actually died during an abortion or circumcision or a birth under bad conditions, or from crimes of honour, acts of aggression, for not proving virginity by a show of blood. Some of them died a psychological or social death after some kind of a tragedy. How many reasons there are for which women in our society are liable to be exposed to psychological death, or made to live life in a situation that is akin to death. In fact, death may be more merciful in many instances."<sup>5</sup>

Sa'dawi realized that the problem which she was trying to deal with was not simply a medical one, that merely supplying a book of scientific facts was not going to make women's physical oppression disappear. The task demanded a multi-dimensional approach: the social, economic and moral reasons behind the traditions had to be understood and explained. As feminists everywhere would agree, there exists a whole body of information, of widely-accepted pseudo-fact about women in modern society, which is entirely false and which has largely been composed by men to serve their purposes.

"How desperate the world is for correct facts about women, in order to change the erroneous concepts that have been spread about them and to correct the information that has been circulated falsely in the world which, in most cases, has been written by men."<sup>6</sup>

This sentence is confirmation of Sa'dawi's feminist consciousness. In the preface to the second edition of Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins,<sup>\*</sup> Sa'dawi justifies her work by indicating the popular demand for the first edition. From

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\* (published in 1974)

then on, her readers' obvious needs began to dictate the content of her following sociological works.

"Many letters came to me from male and female readers asking for more of this information which is so essential for life. And I was very heartened by this support, believing deeply that the majority of individuals in our society are eager for knowledge."<sup>7</sup>

In the first chapter of Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins Sa'dawi breaks through the conspiracy of silence and misinformation surrounding women's sexuality. The way in which she explains female anatomy and compares it to the male's is done with all the impartiality of a clinical lecture. No one could take offence at this straightforward medical description. Masters and Johnson and Sherfey<sup>8</sup> are the most important modern authorities on sex to whom she refers in trying to give an accurate account of the nature of female sexual response, in particular drawing attention to the function of the clitoris as the organ of arousal rather than the vagina or cervix. Sa'dawi refutes the commonly accepted idea that the clitoris is a masculine vestige which needs to be excised,<sup>9</sup> (the rationale behind female circumcision) and also Freud's theory that a 'mature' woman reached orgasm through vaginal stimulation, the 'immature' through clitoral. She argues that female sexual enjoyment is normal and healthy, that it is not to be regarded as something embarrassing, sinful or something to be feared. Women, she stresses, have a right, equal to that of men, to the fullest enjoyment of orgasm.

The subject of virginity is sufficiently problematic to deserve a chapter all of its own. Sa'dawi mentions a study made between 1940 and

1970 in a Baghdad medical institute which, if it is to be believed, indicates that approximately only 41% of Arab girls could be said to have an average hymen with all the others ranging from the non-existent to the impenetrable.<sup>10</sup> After giving the physical statistics relevant to virginity and descriptions of the possible variations in female anatomy, Sa'dawi goes on to illustrate the psychological and social consequences of an incomplete awareness of such facts. She recounts the case of a father who consulted her to determine whether the physical exercise practised by his sporting daughter had ruined her hymen (and therefore her marriage prospects!) or not. The outspoken daughter declared that if she had to choose between sports or marriage, she would prefer the former. Examination revealed that the daughter's hymen was slightly perforated, which greatly alarmed the father. He said:

"'This is the greatest disaster I have suffered.'

And I replied, 'What is the disaster? Has your daughter lost an arm, a leg or an eye?'

And the father said, 'If she had lost an eye it would have been easier, but to lose the most valuable thing she has!'

So I pointed out the matter to the father and told him that the most precious thing his daughter possessed was not her hymen, which could have been torn without her feeling it while she practised her sports, but rather her free will, integrity and the ability to share in creating a better life for herself and society, which is the most valuable thing any human being possesses.

But he said, 'But who will believe that it was sports that did it, Doctor? Everyone will doubt her morals and respectability.'

Then his daughter replied angrily, 'I have confidence in myself and don't care about any suspicions, I shan't accept any man who doubts my integrity!'"ll



Western readers may well find the idea of going to a doctor to ask for a vaginal examination to ascertain the state of a daughter's or wife's hymen quite ludicrous, whether it is viewed as an outrageous imposition on the girl's person, or simply a waste of doctor's time. The daughter in the above case was exceptional for her self-assertion and Sa'dawi's admiration for her is obvious. More usually the young girl suffers in silence from her fears that she may have lost her virginity by damaging her hymen through exercise. She may abandon physical training altogether. It is not the ignorant mother who has misguidedly sown such fears in her daughter's mind who is to be blamed, Sa'dawi stresses, but rather a society which has made a flimsy internal membrane its criterion for respectability. In order to conform to such social expectations, the Egyptian girl must live in considerable anxiety, Sa'dawi demonstrates, whilst refraining from any healthful activity. Nor will the wedding night itself liberate the young wife from anxiety over proving her chastity, for she must constantly perform without betraying any hint of sexual awareness or enjoyment in order to keep her husband convinced of her sexual inexperience.<sup>12</sup>

Sa'dawi points out the unrealistic nature of society's demand for intact virginity by demonstrating even further, its unreliability. She tells of a young woman who had consulted her after becoming pregnant without actually having had intercourse. Sa'dawi refused to give the girl an abortion, but learned later that another doctor had, that the girl had gone on to get married and have children. Sa'dawi cannot help mocking the husband who was obviously satisfied at his wife's virginity and heedless of the abortion scar.\*

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\* The abortion had to be performed as a Cesarean section in order to leave the vagina untouched.

Sa'dawi states that women have been tricking men about their virginity for a long time. The dāya's sharpened fingernail, often used to deflower a girl in Egyptian villages, or the tiny pouch of chicken's blood she would give to the young bride on her wedding night, must have saved many a marriage. Out of curiosity, Sa'dawi had watched the midwives at such defloration ceremonies and testifies to the physical damage done to the girl internally. At any rate, the finger of the practised midwife was preferable to that of the rough hands of the peasant husband. Sa'dawi says that the number of cases of haemorrhage she has seen in connection with this problem are too numerous to mention.<sup>14</sup>

The issue of virginity is crucial to the girl's personal reputation and her family's. We see how Sa'dawi turns moralist in her efforts to make her readers assess the real criterion of personal virtue. She begins by getting to grips with the essential meaning of sharaf which is the relevant term in Arabic. In the more relaxed and tolerant Western societies, there is no equivalent to this Arab conception of female virtue. To translate sharaf as 'honour' tends to suggest a quaint medieval flavour, while 'respectability' does not carry the full force of social acceptability and family pride, with all its emotional and religious overtones, which the Arabic implies. In the absence of any more exact translation, the above two will have to suffice. That its precise meaning for Arabs is also vague becomes clear with Sa'dawi's challenge to her readers to define it for themselves.

"Some people may wonder, how can we judge a girl's honour then? But what is the concept of 'honour' for these people? Is it just that a person keeps his sexual organs intact? Is the respectable girl she who looks after her virginity but doesn't look after her thoughts, sincerity, ability to work and be productive in life? Is the girl who lies, respectable just because she was born with a hymen? Is it possible for 'honour' to be an anatomical attribute one is either born with or without? And if the hymen is the proof of girls' respectability, what is the proof of a young man's?"<sup>15</sup>

It would appear that male 'honour' is different from female. There is even the popular saying to reflect the folk attitude, "Nothing shames a man but his pocket."<sup>16</sup> which in practical terms means that providing he has work and money, a man is respectable. Sa'dawi has lighted upon society's double standards: the youth has nothing to lose from his pre-marital experience, the girl has everything. Furthermore, the girl is blamed for having believed the young man's protestations of endless love and promises of marriage. In the extreme, the sexually-abused girl has no recourse to any help from any institution or sector of Egyptian society. Sa'dawi condemns the unkindness of her society that would offer no understanding to a poor pregnant servant for example, but allow her assailant to heap blame upon her head.<sup>17</sup> Sa'dawi calls for a reappraisal of the concept of sharaf and for moral standards that apply equally to both sexes irrespective of class.<sup>18</sup> If chastity is held to be a virtue, it must apply to all.

In trying to get her readers to understand and sympathize with women for the heavier burden of chastity they must bear, Sa'dawi compares their relative lack of freedom to that of workers exploited by capitalists. The latter impose conditions on the workers which prevent them from

enjoying the freedoms or luxuries enjoyed by the ruling sector. Such an analogy is calculated to evince strong Egyptian sympathies which the author hopes her readers will then transfer to the case under discussion. She has thus invited her male readers especially, to identify with women as an oppressed class. The insertion of a reference to capitalist exploitation would probably attract the censors' sympathies too, at a critical moment in the text. How far the anti-capitalist, anti-Western stance is truly Sa'dawi's opinion (or personal bias) one can never be sure from reading her books. It is possible here that this is just as much one of her ploys for avoiding consorship as it is a move to mollify her male readers at certain points in the text where they may begin to feel uncomfortable because of her challenge to their image.

One of Sa'dawi's most important achievements in her factual writing is the way in which she conveys to her readers the complex subject of the society's economic situation dictating its moral values. In general Sa'dawi's arguments are remarkable for their clarity and simplicity. It is only by proving that human nature is not immutable, nor subject to some unalterable divine or natural law, that Sa'dawi can begin to dismantle the whole fabrication of prejudice, fear and suspicion that has been erected around women in her society. By singling out economic and social motives as the root cause of women's inferior situation, she is also defusing the subjects of sex, marriage, chastity etc.. of some of their high emotional charge. She is also giving to enlightened women and men, a convincing explanation of the social and historical development of women's inferiority and an argument against its continuation. This link between the ethical and the economic spheres is one that is

almost certainly new to her readers; it is again evidence of Sa'dawi as moralist. It is a stance that they are very unlikely to have met in either religious, psychological, sociological or economic literature. According to Sa'dawi, society has used motherhood as an excuse to restrict women. It is society, she asserts, and not 'Nature' that is responsible for the differences between the sexes. In order to prove this to her readers, she examines the environment and education which girls and boys typically receive in Egyptian society, and uses medical and biological facts to argue against any inherent debility in the female. On education in general she has this to say:

"The education which the child receives in our modern society is an endless series of prohibitions, what is shameful, forbidden and not right."

"There is no doubt that the girl's lot in regard to this education is much greater than the boy's, and that her share of repression is many times his. Thus the crushing of her mind and spirit are so much worse and more serious."<sup>19</sup>

Girls grow up with greater taboos surrounding any manifestation of sexual awareness than boys.<sup>20</sup> Children are frequently intimidated about their bodies by over-anxious parents who mistakenly censure what is in fact a healthy and natural phenomenon, namely the child's desire to explore and come to know his own body. Sa'dawi's openness about her own childhood fears draws sensitive readers towards her, invites the resurrection of their own fears, and creates an intimate bond between them. It is this personal touch which accounts for Sa'dawi's popularity. Her books have the power to evoke a cathartic effect in her readers, particularly when they identify her experience with their own.

"This fear developed in me until it reached a peak on the day that I realized there was a delicate membrane that was somewhere near the opening, between my legs, and that I mustn't jump high down the steps otherwise I would be likely to tear it, which would inflict on me and my whole family a great disaster."<sup>21</sup>

One common result of this environment of taboo with its pretence at ignorance of anything remotely connected with sexuality (particularly female sexuality), is that the onset of menstruation causes disproportionate alarm, as Sa'dawi herself discovered.<sup>22</sup> A mother may also unconsciously reinforce society's negative attitude towards female reproductive processes by urging her daughter for example to wash herself well of the 'bad blood' of menstruation which only instills in the girl a feeling of self-disgust at her body. By the age of ten or eleven, the physical restrictions on the girl will be obvious to her. So effective is the socialization process in Egypt's Islamic society that she will also have internalized a feeling of shame, hostility and hatred towards her body and sexuality.<sup>23</sup> It is not easy for girls to resist such conditioning, even if they are as strong willed as Sa'dawi. A fragment from her childhood diaries (from when she was ten years old), speaks of her resentment against her fate as a female:

"No sooner had I escaped to my little world with its coloured books and pencils than my mother would haul me to the kitchen and say, 'Your destiny is marriage. You must learn to cook. Your destiny is marriage! Marriage!' That horrid word my mother would repeat daily, until I detested it, and couldn't hear it without picturing before me a man with a big belly and inside it a table of food. I associated the smell of the kitchen, in my mind, with the smell of a husband. I hated the word 'husband' and hated the smell of food."<sup>24</sup>

Despite references to her parents as being unusually broad-minded for their times, it would appear that Sa'dawi still faced a struggle to be able to develop her mind.

"In my childhood I was one of those girls who fought and resisted. I refused to serve in the house and help in the kitchen and insisted on going to school. I refused to wear my hair long tied in plaits and ribbons. I could never understand why my mother was so concerned about my clothes and dresses and would buy lots of them for me, at the same time as refusing to buy me books to read. I always did better than my (elder) brother at school but no one congratulated me nor showed delight, but when I failed even once to do the cooking well, everyone found fault with me."<sup>25</sup>

Egyptian society is not geared towards accepting talented women, Sa'dawi believes. If a woman excels, she is considered to be unfeminine.<sup>26</sup> Success and talent are definitely viewed as masculine attributes. Social pressures can be so great that men and women are strongly coerced into conforming to society's ideal. When this ideal is polarized, as it is in the Arab world, with men commonly held to be active, women passive, the result as Sa'dawi sees it is an imbalance of personality. This is the immaturity to which she constantly refers as underlying psycho-sexual problems. She uses Margaret Mead, Simone de Beauvoir and other less well-known thinkers to give authority to her argument that passivity is not an inherent female trait, but the result of conditioning. That this has been largely ignored before is due, says Sa'dawi, to the Freudians' preoccupation with the individual's psyche and their unawareness of environment as a determinant of social behaviour. Sa'dawi is always able to spot a conflict between the person's real self and the image he or she tries to adopt to gain social acceptance.<sup>28</sup> Girls are encouraged to pay

attention to their appearance rather than to developing their intellectual capacities, since society prizes their beauty above their brains.<sup>29</sup> The dilemma that Arab girls face is that society demands that they groom themselves for marriage, that they make themselves alluring to 'catch' a husband, but they are not allowed to use their power of allurements; they are condemned if they do. At the same stage in life, boys are being encouraged to think of their roles in society and preparing themselves for a profession.<sup>30</sup> Society has decreed that the girl's 'career' is marriage. College and a little work experience are seen as a useful way of biding one's time until a proposal is made, or waiting until one's fiance has finished his studies.

The reader may feel a certain bewilderment at Sa'dawi's ideas on the subject of sexual desire. Her insistence on the healthiness of sexual desire, especially in women, appears to place upon her female readers the additional stress of finding a suitable outlet purely for the exercise of this dimension of their lives. She believes that sexual energy is sui generis, of a unique kind which if not used 'correctly' will be deflected into sexual perversion. She hotly denies that it might be sublimated into positive creative acts or artistic endeavour, without giving any convincing argument to support her thesis. Sa'dawi never addresses the crux of the problem, that if sexual energy can be diverted into a perversion, if not exercised in a heterosexual relationship, why should it not equally well be diverted into a constructive act?

"Nature has not differentiated between men and women, they both have a sexual desire and energy which must be expended in the right direction..."



"If the individual is exposed to external forces in his life that stifle this energy, then it is not lost or repressed by which we mean suppressed, but is diverted and expended in another direction other than its correct one."<sup>31</sup>

and

".. sexual energy in the individual is strong. It is not lost or destroyed, but it must have a way of being expended so that it can return and be regenerated anew. If it finds the normal route blocked, it is deflected in another direction. If the individual doesn't find the opposite sex, he inclines towards his own sex, and if he doesn't find the same sex, if for example he is isolated from other people, he seeks to compensate himself by practising masturbation. In cases of dire deprivation, he may resort to animals..<sup>32</sup>

What is the poor Egyptian housewife who has perhaps lost her looks, the single-minded career girl, or the menopausal widow, supposed to make of this? Would the fact that they could not live up to Sa'dawi's ideals, besides not being able to fulfil society's, not result in further depression for such women? Would it not encourage them to see their sexuality as an area of frustration, even though it had previously not been problematic?

Sa'dawi refers to studies by psychologists such as Karen Horney which posit bisexuality as a normal human condition:<sup>34</sup> not only an anatomical bisexuality, in so far as each sex contains some measure of the hormone that predominates in the other, but also a mental and emotional bisexuality which suggests that men and women potentially have the same feelings and mental abilities. If we accept, however, that we are all to some degree bisexual, as Sa'dawi would have us believe by her reference to such studies, why should homosexuality be deemed by her a deviation? Surely it is just the logical outcome of the individual

exercising his bisexual nature? Perhaps she has not thought this idea through adequately, or perhaps she too is an unwitting victim of social conditioning that holds that heterosexual love is right, homosexual wrong. Nevertheless, it is very much to her credit that she shows sympathy for the homosexual and not condemnation.

Another unmentionable topic that Sa'dawi is not afraid to tackle, is the subject of masturbation. She would like the reader to believe that everyone does it at some stage in life<sup>35</sup> (which she does not define) and for this limited period (again unspecified) it is a normal and even beneficial practice. She mentions an interview with a Berlin professor of medicine who explained how he dealt with queries to his health magazine, on this subject, and from which it appears that masturbation in Germany is regarded as a part of healthy development and certainly nothing to feel guilty about. Such cross-cultural comparisons provide food for thought to an open-minded Egyptian reader. Sa'dawi is to be commended for broaching this taboo subject but not for the way in which she has handled it. By giving absolutely no guideline to the reader as to what constitutes an acceptable, and therefore normal, amount of masturbation, and by cautioning against what she describes vaguely as "an excess", Sa'dawi is perhaps causing even more confusion. The reader by now knows that it is not wrong or bad for him to masturbate, that it may even be part of healthy development, but because he has no idea how much he can safely practise he will still be prey to as much guilt and fear. On the subject of teenage crushes on an older member of the same sex, Sa'dawi is similarly noncommittal stating that they are permissible providing they do not involve a physical relationship or extend any further than "temporarily".

To Sa'dawi, female sexuality would appear to offer a fruitful field of research in her own society. While women in advanced Western countries have been able to undertake independent studies into their own sexuality and sex-related problems,<sup>36</sup> such topics have been largely neglected in the Arab world in favour of extensive theorizing on the nature of women's 'role' in the Muslim family, and unreliable statistics on the number of women engaged in the work force. Sa'dawi adds sardonically that it is men's sexuality that has been researched to serve their own interests and that

".. the importance of women in the eyes of society, rests on their childbearing function, and since the frigidity of a woman does not prevent her having children, society shows no concern about her frigidity.."37

Any attempt to suggest female sexuality as a serious study for university research in Egypt is destined to meet with rejection from the authorities as Sa'dawi herself points out in Al-Mar'a wa'l-Şirā' al-Nafsī. Given that Sa'dawi perceives most of her fellow countrywomen to be sexually deprived, and that she feels this to be a social injustice, one can more readily understand her insistence on women actively exercising their sexuality. To admit that it could be channelled into other non-sexual activities, would not serve her purpose here which seems to be to wake up Egyptian women to the fact that they have been deprived, which is itself a necessary precursor to any movement towards greater sexual equality.

In the chapter 'Nature is innocent', Sa'dawi puts her case persuasively, with a long list of examples, that human characteristics

are not predetermined by nature. One is taken aback rather, by the sheer weight of evidence apparently favouring the superiority of the female over the male, whether it is the former's advantage from the point of view of longevity, genetic stability, physical constitution or immunity to certain diseases. Men can no longer even boast of their superior muscle power, for according to Sa'dawi, this is a strength that is developed through one's occupation, and is in any case largely irrelevant in today's advanced technological society.<sup>38</sup> Besides, the Egyptian peasant woman is likely to have far more physical stamina than the educated male city office worker. Sa'dawi's evidence is presented in the style of popular psychology. This is not a scholarly book, nor is there any particular need for it to be: it was not intended for scholars but for the uneducated or under-educated. Thus the more advanced Arab reader or pedantic Western reader searching for incontrovertible data must be patient with the numerous phrases which beg the question: "it is well-known that.., science has proved that.." and "according to psychologists..", which crop up frequently. Even when Sa'dawi refers to another author or quotes directly from his or her work, the reader is not given the precise source. At times a little more information would be helpful. For example, Sa'dawi states that more men are treated in mental hospitals than women,<sup>39</sup> and that women, even those entering work (and presumably still fulfilling their customary domestic duties) do not show a significant increase in mental problems relative to men's. Which society is she talking about here, though? Her study into women and psychological stress in Egypt carried out between 1973 and 1974 only two years after the publication of this book, was inspired by the significantly greater number of women receiving psychiatric treatment than men.

An interesting example of the way in which Sa'dawi forestalls criticism from those hostile to her ideas, or who are reluctant to relinquish their chauvinist views, is her treatment of the question as to whether men are intellectually and artistically superior to women.

"As far as talent, genius and creative ability are concerned, there are no studies which prove that men are more gifted than women. That the number of brilliant men exceeds that of women is due to the social circumstances in which women live and which prevent their excelling."<sup>40</sup>

Sa'dawi is the first in her society to have publicly denounced Freudian theory on women's sexuality. The brief outline which she gives of Freud's<sup>41</sup> convoluted castration theory only emphasizes its irrational and highly fanciful nature. The amount of space and effort Sa'dawi has devoted to refuting Freud is an indication of the dominance which she feels his early ideas still held over Egyptian psychiatry at the beginning of the 1970s. Without doubt, Sa'dawi must have gone to considerable efforts to avail herself of the literature from which she draws her arguments, such as Margaret Mead, Masters and Johnson, Karen Horney, Germaine Greer<sup>42</sup> etc., and others who have put forward a feminist theory to challenge the social and scientific tenets that served to bolster up patriarchal society. More recently her travels abroad have enabled her to obtain the latest Western publications on this subject. It is also a reflection on the intellectual inadequacies of her society and the state of its psychiatric profession<sup>43</sup> that not once does she cite an Arab author, scientist, doctor or researcher who has contributed to a feminist critique of her society or its attitudes to women, particularly in the field of medicine or psychology. Very rarely does she cite original research done

by Arabs in any field.<sup>44</sup> All her sources are Western and would betoken a cultural and intellectual lag in which the more advanced and recent findings of science in the West had not yet been adequately understood by, or translated to the East, that is until Sa'dawi decided to publicize them in a very diluted form.

Sa'dawi briefly mentions the early prehistoric matriarchal society as described by Engels,<sup>45</sup> before drawing attention to the economic and exploitative reasons behind monogamy and chastity for women. The idea that moral values are dictated by economic necessity is hard to come to terms with even in the West, but in an Islamic country, where the state has a monopoly over social values and has vested interests in preserving an atomistic view of society, and where there is also popular reliance on predestination, how much harder must it be for such ideas as Sa'dawi propounds to gain credence? Among the examples of economic necessity dictating social standards to which she refers are: that even 'illegitimate' children may be socially acceptable,<sup>46</sup> when the state is in need of a population increase, as has happened in Sweden; that women will be allowed to work outside the home in times of war or increased industrialization; that sexual freedom may be tolerated to encourage people to spend their energy in seeking personal pleasure in the hope that it will forestall their banding together and rebelling against state policies;<sup>47</sup> and that people are encouraged to buy things that they do not need, to maintain the consumer society. It is capitalist society which she holds up as the culprit here: her simplistic arguments having the anti-capitalist tone and jargon of a socialist primer at times.

It is interesting to see how Sa'dawi deals with the subject of sex before, or indeed outside of, marriage.<sup>48</sup> At no point does she give her own opinion or state that it ought to be permissible, the opinion one would expect a freedom-loving socialist to hold. To have sanctioned extra-marital sex would almost certainly have been dangerous to herself and would have led to even greater disapproval from the censors. Considering the recent emphasis on Islamic standards and the strength of the fundamentalists today in Egypt, it is arguable that had she expressed such opinions she would face even greater danger now than when she wrote *Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins*. She might have found herself facing a charge of immorality in retrospect, if she had appeared to be encouraging sex outside of marriage. It is as well to remember that Egypt's main source of law is the Islamic shari'a, which prescribes adultery to be a punishable offence. Yet the perceptive reader who can follow her logic and associate between the ideas she juxtaposes, will realize that if equality is ever to be realized in Egypt in the way that Sa'dawi dreams, it will have to involve sexual equality. She mentions how increased equality in the political and economic spheres in the Scandanavian countries has produced a concomitant relaxation of morals, greater sexual equality, a society where some 98% of young people have sex outside marriage, and a gradual rejection of the institution of marriage as redundant. There is nothing to suggest that what has happened in Sweden and Denmark would not happen in Egypt.<sup>49</sup> The question of sex outside marriage is also made more delicate in Egypt because of the generally inconsistent attitudes of the authorities and the public towards birth control. Contraception is available only to married women and is usually used with the intention of 'family spacing', and only when the mother has two or three children already (except of course where she might suffer a severe risk to her

health from another pregnancy). To suggest that it be made available to unmarried women would be to sanction pre-marital sex: Sa'dawi makes no comment on this point. Where she does mention birth control<sup>50</sup> she points out that societies the world over tend to expect women to take the entire responsibility for it regardless of its consequences for their health.

Sa'dawi is noticeably opposed to the traditional view of marriage in Egypt, which holds that a wife becomes her husband's property, that she should be submissive, subservient and responsible for all childcare and domestic duties. Sa'dawi perceives women's subordination to be akin to racial and class suppression.

"Just as the black man realizes that the colour which Nature has dyed his face is no justification for his being a slave to the white man, so does the woman realize that the burden which Nature has assigned to her as her special task is not a justification for her being a slave to the man or his subordinate or possession."<sup>51</sup>

Too much importance is attached to the form of marriage, says Sa'dawi, rather than the quality of the personal relationship. To be socially acceptable in Egypt one must have a spouse.<sup>52</sup> The marriage ceremony in Egypt epitomizes the inequality between husband and wife: it is the husband and the bride's guardian who sign, not the young woman herself. The husband pays the dowry and 'buys' himself a wife in what Sa'dawi quite rightly sees as a commercial transaction like buying a flat.<sup>53</sup> Sa'dawi's opinion is firmly based on the tragedy she has witnessed of the traditional marriage system which is so easily abused.



"A young woman aged about thirty came to me at the clinic suffering from pains and swelling of the womb. I asked her about her life and she told me that her father was employed in one of the government departments and that a fifty-five year-old widow, a rich cloth merchant who owned a plot of land, had come to ask him for her hand. Her father had shown no hesitation in marrying his daughter to the man even though she had only been eighteen at the time. She had lived as a wife for twelve years with an old man with whom she had nothing in common. She had no children from him either. Their sexual relationship caused her mental stress because she was disgusted by it and this eventually led to physical symptoms of pain in the womb and nausea. The wife said to me in distress, 'I used to feel every night, Doctor, as if I was selling my body like a prostitute to this old man who was like a stranger to me, just in return for the few pounds he gave to my father.

Can one call the relationship between this husband and wife an honourable one? Is it honourable that a father sell his daughter in marriage? Is it something respectable that an old man should be able to buy a girl who is young enough to be his granddaughter, as a wife for himself? Is it respectable for a young woman to live in such a marriage all these years against her wishes, against her human feelings, forbidden any enjoyment, any rights, even that of motherhood?

So it is not the marriage contract which makes the relationship between a man and woman respectable, and it is not sufficient for a person to have signed a marriage contract to become respectable."<sup>54</sup>

The full force of this statement can be felt by the reader who realizes that this is being said about an institution which is held in Islamic society as a sacred duty! Sa'dawi stipulates that to be respectable, a marriage (and supposedly any other sexual relationship between man and woman) should be based on love, affection, freedom of choice and action; there should be no trace of servitude or dominance.<sup>55</sup> When ulterior motives govern the choice of bride and groom and determine their behaviour within marriage, along traditional lines, Sa'dawi feels that the

respectability of the union has been lost. She goes on to draw a comparison between the sexual exploitation of the wife within marriage and that of the prostitute by her client.

"If one defines a prostitute as a woman who agrees to a sexual relationship with a man for reasons of self interest or in return for remuneration, then this definition must apply to any woman who agrees to a sexual relationship with a man for such reasons. And because of this, there is no difference between the marital relationship, which is based essentially on financial self-interest, and prostitution. Perhaps there may be a difference in form, in so far as the signing of the formal marriage contract is concerned and the pay which the wife receives is paid in a different way from that which the prostitute receives, but the meaning is virtually the same, since there is a lack of real love in both relationships, without this love they both become dishonourable."<sup>56</sup>

Sa'dawi believes that with the increased equality between men and women which she envisages under a truly socialist Egypt, will come a decrease in the number of prostitutes, on the simple logic that given a job, a training and a wage, women will have other ways of supporting themselves. Although she makes it clear, with reference to her travels in socialist countries such as the USSR and East Germany, that even in these states, women still lack many facilities which would ease their load, and that men's attitudes to supporting their wives with the housework and childcare are slow to change, she unequivocally advocates socialism. She sees capitalist society as one that exploits women and dehumanizes them, while socialism in theory recognizes each of its workers of both sexes as possessing a body, mind and soul.<sup>57</sup> In a capitalist society, Sa'dawi tells her readers, whenever female labour is no longer required, women are subjected to powerful propaganda to persuade them back into the home. For example, they may be threatened that

psychological harm will come to them or their children if either is 'deprived' of the constant presence of the other.<sup>58</sup> No mother, according to Sa'dawi, should feel guilty about having ambitions to work outside the home, nor about enjoying her job. By setting out the argument in this way, and allowing women to see that behind their emotions, guilt feelings and fears, there may well be a calculated propaganda purpose, Sa'dawi can begin to liberate them from their own reservations about going out to work.

It is easy to get the impression from reading Sa'dawi (and other feminist writers) that it is men and patriarchal society which are standing in the way of women's self-development, participation in a wider social life and a profession, but it is important to remember that women frequently erect mental obstacles for themselves to prevent their taking an independent initiative the prospect of which fills them with alarm. Other women, relatives and friends can, by their censure or plain lack of support for a working mother, also pose a formidable deterrent for a young woman wanting to work. Sa'dawi is well aware of the need to change women's attitudes about themselves, and that the best way to achieve this is to explain how certain typical situations in which women find themselves have developed, and why women feel as they do about their position in society.

"The intelligent woman will have become aware of the methods of an exploitative society, and will have begun not to feel any hesitation, embarrassment or guilt when she chooses for herself to go out to work. She will have realized that this work is her life and her survival as a human being and her only way of fulfilling herself, just as she will have perceived the meaning of true motherhood and its responsibilities."<sup>59</sup>

The current state of the marriage laws in Egypt is offensive to Sa'dawi. She singles out a clause from the present statutes as an example of the insecurity of the wife's position and how she is regarded solely in terms of her function:

"No maintenance is due to a wife if she refuses to yield herself and is not within her rights when so doing, or if she is forced to do so for some reason which is not the fault of the husband. She is likewise not entitled to receive maintenance if she is imprisoned even if unjustly, or if she is put in detention or raped or changes her religion or is prevented from living with her husband by her parents, or in any situation where the husband might be prevented from utilizing her as a wife."<sup>60</sup>

The phrase "utilizing her.." legitimizes man's use of his wife and his possession of her. The fact that she has to "yield herself" legitimizes his domination of her. One result of the stress which Egyptian society places on marriage is that women frequently become preoccupied with attaining this spurious social acceptability.<sup>61</sup> A certain degree of artifice, dishonesty or falling short of one's ideals is usually required in dealing with a prospective husband, according to Sa'dawi. She is full of condemnation for the young man who seduces a girl by promising marriage only to reject her once she has given herself to him, and for the man who will not tolerate a non-virgin for a wife. Sa'dawi's advice to the girl who has experienced such treatment from men is not to lie about not being a virgin, just in order to get married, but to wait for a husband who is mature enough not to have reservations about her past and who respects her honesty and character.<sup>62</sup>

If there is one phrase from this book which must stick in the minds of her readers it is Sa'dawi's outburst:

"The home is the woman's grave. It is the place of her subordination, degradation and enslavement. (Staying at) home means that she is deprived of experience of life which would mature her and allow her to fulfil herself as a human being. Just as it means too, that she doesn't work and receive a wage and thus lives dependent on the man."<sup>63</sup>

Sa'dawi was the first person to draw attention to the harmful consequences of female circumcision in Egypt. This practice, which is believed to reduce sexual desire and ensure chastity, is still found today among the less educated and rural Egyptians.<sup>64</sup> As a newly-qualified doctor, Sa'dawi was shocked at the sight of the extensive circumcision performed on Sudanese women.<sup>65</sup> She was also called on many occasions to save the life of a young girl after the dāya had made a mess of the operation. Sa'dawi asks rhetorically:

"Isn't this operation similar in its purpose and essential meaning to that of castrating the male slave? Isn't this proof of the man's owning the woman just as he owned the slave? Possessing a slave is forbidden by law, but as for women, the overwhelming majority of them are slaves to the traditions of marriage, divorce and obedience."<sup>66</sup>

In spite of the fact that she sees circumcision very much as an imposition by men as masters on women as their slaves, Sa'dawi does not shed any light on the complex problem of why women have been such willing instruments in the oppression of their own sex.

After commenting on the lack of consistency in Egyptian social attitudes towards women's and men's honour and respectability, Sa'dawi proceeds to relate the issue to a wider context. If the demand for moral rectitude, she argues, were to be genuinely upheld throughout all society, perhaps the individual would face less of a dilemma. In reality though there is a contradiction between what society demands and permits. If it is keen that chastity is desirable then, argues Sa'dawi, it should not condone the exploitation of women as objects of desire in advertizing or permit nudity in films, etc.. The fact that it allows images of immorality which conflict with its moral tenets, is to Sa'dawi convincing evidence that economic interests determine moral values.<sup>67</sup> The fact that women bear the brunt of such double standards is due to men's monopoly of power within society, and proof of women's debasement to the level of a commodity. It is not only in the media or the commercial world that women are reflected as being desirable and acceptable as long as they are young and attractive, literature, art and poetry, those bearers of culture on a supposedly higher level, as well as popular songs, also reinforce this message.<sup>68</sup>

Femininity is variously defined according to each different culture as the particular set of values a society demands from its women to enable them to perform the role it requires of them. Hence in patriarchal capitalist societies, femininity has come to represent passivity, subservience, innocence of anything sexual, weakness and submission; all qualities which accord with a wife's 'role' of serving husband and children.<sup>69</sup> The concept of beauty becomes central to a woman's confidence in her femininity. Sa'dawi hastens to point out that she is not

opposed to women striving for beauty unless that beauty is strictly reduced to a set of fashionable statistics. She gives her own wider definition of beauty making it a virtue everyone should strive for.

"Beauty will not then be something imposed on women alone; but every human being, man, woman, child and older generations can be beautiful according to this comprehensive definition of beauty (beauty of the body, mind and soul). Beauty of the soul is that beauty which radiates from a healthy soul that is without complexes. It is an expression of truth and love in the eyes. It is the vitality of the soul, its gaiety and zest for life. Beauty of the mind is that beauty which emanates from those advanced thoughts which day by day further the progress, love, brotherhood, justice and equality of human beings."<sup>70</sup>

If men and women were to recognize similar humanistic ideals in this way, there would be no reason for a masculinity or femininity comprising of mutually exclusive traits.

After discussing the relationship between the sexes, Sa'dawi tries to place it within the context of society with her comments on the changing nature of the family. She finds much to praise in the communal style of family life and describes its advantages over the nuclear family. (This collective society is not to be confused with the extended family.) It is not clear in which countries these communes to which Sa'dawi refers are to be found, nor what problems the individuals face in adapting to such a life. Practical considerations are likewise not discussed in favour of an idealizing general theory on what any advocate of the communal system would wish to see as its merits.<sup>71</sup> There appears for example to be equality in everything within this utopian classless

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society: men and women have equal rights, there are nurseries staffed by male and female experts in childcare, there is no discrimination in the allocation of jobs, and women retain their names on marriage and are freed from the responsibility of childrearing. It is a pity that Sa'dawi does not mention the researchers by name to whose conclusions on this communal type of life she refers. These social scientists have apparently discovered that the following problems are solved by this system: that parents are freed from the responsibility of rearing children, that relations between parents and children become more relaxed since they are not built on dependence, anxiety, domination and possessiveness, that women when liberated from housework and preoccupation with children, can devote themselves to a career, while children no longer suffer lonely isolation at home and begin to show more mature psychological development. Sa'dawi appears to rely heavily on socialist dogma in these passages, sometimes arguing from false premises or giving inadequate arguments as a result, for example:

"The research of scientists in advanced industrialized societies has shown that more extensive industrial development has increased the isolation of the family in its present form, and that problems have multiplied inside the family for all, whether they are fathers, mothers or children, to such a point that it has placed the family in a position that conflicts with the interests of society and hinders its progress."<sup>72</sup>

What the reader can deduce from Sa'dawi's discussion of the commune is that she would favour this type of social life rather than the nuclear family, which has itself developed out of the patriarchal model. She does not elaborate on the obligations and personal restrictions that



inevitably form part of communal life, nor say anything to favour the intricate network of support, duties and rights that characterizes the extended family (which in some ways overlaps with those of communal life), which still has such influence over social relationships in Egypt today. A socialist system alone would appear to Sa'dawi to afford women the necessary domestic support to enable them to take advantage of equal opportunities with men. This social system would be incompatible with the Islamic-Arab image and tradition of family life. The Islamic concept of the family might be summarized as follows:

"The family is perceived as being the basic unit of Muslim society. Its soundness derives from strict observance of shari'a values and regulation. Authority and production flow from the male head of a household down to females and the young; respect and obedience flow in the opposite direction. In short, the Muslim family is built around obedience, complementarity, protection and respect - not around equality, competition and self-reliance."<sup>73</sup>

As mentioned above, Sa'dawi has a gift for making the complex readily understood, by reducing it to its essentials and showing the causes and consequences of various social phenomena in a logical argument. At times, however, this desire to simplify and reduce everything into sets of conflicting tendencies irritates the more enlightened reader whilst it encourages the less aware to see extremely complicated patterns of human behaviour as exaggeratedly clear-cut issues of right and wrong. The many shades of normality and acceptability are thus ignored in favour of an unrealistic and inadequately-defined ideal. An example of the above occurs when Sa'dawi describes the consequences of a mother's excessive preoccupation with her child.<sup>74</sup> Such an excess, she says, leads to sexual deviation in the child, but by not giving any indication as to

what the symptoms of such an excess of maternal feeling might be, she is likely to arouse the fears of over-anxious mothers who might wonder if their own natural love for their offspring is going to threaten their children's personal development.

There is no doubt that Sa'dawi is uncompromising. Her demands for equality, love, respectability and sincerity are absolute. She claims a monopoly of the truth. Such a stance which dominates her material, fact or fiction, comes as a contrast to that of another independent female researcher, a contemporary of Sa'dawi's, Fatima Mernissi.<sup>75</sup> Mernissi's observations on the interrelationships between men and women in Arab society, seen from a purely sociological viewpoint, are of great value. Mernissi sets out her aims as follows:

"This more modest approach might seem to some to be a more healthy one. It is certainly less judgemental."

"My modest aim in this research is not to irritate the reader by claiming to have uncovered the truth about the new male-female dynamic that has emerged in modern Moroccan society. I leave truth to those who seek certainty. My own feeling is that we move forward faster and live better when we seek doubt. If I manage to induce readers to doubt their prejudices and stereotypes about relations between the sexes, then I will have succeeded beyond my hopes."<sup>76</sup>

and

"Moreover, as a researcher, whether in the domain of theory or in the analysis of particular material, I claim the inalienable right to make mistakes. Just as readers have the right to disagree, to draw different conclusions. The objective is to arouse discussion about our behaviour toward the other sex, and about the political implications of that behaviour. By 'political' I do not mean the democratic infrastructure (how parliaments, parties, and trade unions, for example, allow for the spread of democracy); I have in mind rather the relations we establish with the people closest to

us, with whom we share the greatest interests and weave the most intense and most intimate human relations possible - in other words, the people with whom we share domestic space."//

One wonders whether Sa'dawi's concept of freedom would allow her to recognize the freedom of those who choose to disagree with her, as being equally legitimate?

For a book entitled 'Women and sex' there is a surprising amount of sociology and socialism in its pages which is disappointing for a reader hoping for something more provocative. 'Women and sexism' would perhaps be a more accurate title considering the book's contents. Sa'dawi's choice of the word jins indicates the absence of an equivalent term and concept in Arab society for sexism\* and also reflects the wider application which Sa'dawi gives to the term 'sex'. She can detect a sexual element, by which I mean an element that is related to the fact that there are two different sexes, in male-female interaction in all spheres of social life, besides literature, the arts, government, religion, politics and the historical struggle.

After criticizing the institution of marriage for creating a set of conditions which are hostile to the development of true love, honesty and equality between men and women, Sa'dawi proceeds to explain what she feels love should really be. In the West we are used to categorizing love according to its widely different aspects in the whole range of

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\*"Al-Mar'a wa'l-Tamyīz al-Jinsī" (sexual discrimination) could perhaps have expressed the idea of sexism more accurately, although this term has not gained currency in Arabic in the same way as "Al-Tamyīz al-'Unṣurī" for 'racial discrimination'.

human relationships which are characterized by some form of the emotion. Arabic does not so readily make clear distinctions between these various types of love and lacks the distinction in English between 'like' and 'love'. Sa'dawi tends to use the term hubb somewhat ambiguously to represent an exclusive male-female emotional relationship which may or may not include sex. It is interesting to compare the idea of love in East and West as an aid to understanding Sa'dawi's philosophy. To Erich Fromm<sup>78</sup> who saw love as "the only sane and satisfactory answer to the problem of human existence", there were basically five different orientations of love: brotherly, motherly, erotic, self-love and love of God, each one possessing its own special circumstances and characteristics. C.S. Lewis<sup>79</sup> in The four loves, determined affection, friendship, eros and charity as four aspects of love which while being distinct, could blend or be transformed one into another. These are of course theories about love grounded on the Christian philosophical tradition, in the light of modern psychology, but what of love in Arab-Islamic tradition seen in the same light? What studies there are seem to concentrate on the question of whether Islam has a positive or negative approach to sexuality and how this affects the male-female relationship rather than analyzing the quality of the emotional dimension and its connection to the sexual.

Both Fatima Mernissi and Fatna A. Sabbah<sup>80</sup> see Islamic doctrine as inimical to the heterosexual relationship itself. They recognize too a division between the sexual and emotional sides of loving and the relegation of woman to the status of object. Mernissi says that in Islam:

"Heterosexual involvement, real love between husband and wife, is the danger that must be overcome."<sup>81</sup>

and goes on to give as the reason for this that,

"The Muslim god is known for His jealousy, and He is especially jealous of anything that might interfere with the believer's devotion to him. The conjugal unit is a real danger and is consequently weakened by two legal devices: polygamy and repudiation. Both institutions are based on psychological premisses that reveal an astonishing awareness of the couple's psychology and its weaknesses."<sup>82</sup>

and

"The relation in a traditional family is a master-slave relation where love is excluded and condemned as a weakness on the part of men. The separation between love and sex is clearly illustrated by another model of male-female relatedness, this time taken not from institutions, but from literature: the model of Udrite love,... modern Muslim societies have to face the fact that the traditional family mutilates women by depriving them of their humanity. What modern Muslim families ought to strive toward is a family based on the unfragmented wholeness of the woman."<sup>83</sup>

Fatna A. Sabbah has reached the following conclusions:

"This animosity of the Muslim God toward the wife and child as a potential source of pleasure and thus of affective and emotional investment for the believer ultimately manifests itself in a phenomenon already mentioned: the reification of the wife and child and their reduction to the status of 'wealth', deprived of will, just like horses, gold or other material objects."<sup>84</sup>

and

"The logic of sacred reality is that everything that brings pleasure on earth belongs to God."

"Homosexual union, which is limited to orgasm, although forbidden by the Muslim order, is far from constituting a worry as major to the system as heterosexuality."

"The sacred can be interpreted ultimately as a homosexual experience. It is the attempt of the male principle at self-fertilization, if one regards

the monotheistic God as a projection of earthly man. The sacred is, among other things, the fertilization of earthly man by the male principle erected into a divine (that is, abstract) body. It is this that produces the fundamental conflict between heterosexual union and the sacred, which in Islam is focalized around the conflict between reason and desire. Since it cannot prevent heterosexual union on earth without destroying the human race, the sacred will try to drain it of its human dimension, the affective dimension. Islam integrates sexuality by lopping off its human dimension, desire."<sup>85</sup>

Whatever Sa'dawi's views on the relationship between Islam and sexuality, the social order and male-female relationships, it may be helpful to see her ideas of love here as embodying elements from both Eastern and Western tradition. Her insistence on the criteria for love being mutual equality, the ability to exercise free will, and personal responsibility for one's actions<sup>86</sup> besides an activity which has mental and spiritual dimensions in addition to the physical, comes close to Fromm's ideal. He described the practice of love as, "an inner activity, the productive use of one's powers,"<sup>87</sup> and

"The capacity to love demands a state of intensity, awakens, enhanced vitality, which can only be the result of a productive and active orientation in many other spheres of life."<sup>88</sup>

On the other hand, Sa'dawi's insistence on the importance of the sexual dimension of love and the power of fulfilled sexuality to create the highest culture, are definitely a legacy from those who have chosen to interpret Islam as a religion with a positive attitude towards sexuality, as opposed to Christianity which is believed by various Muslim apologists to rate celibacy and the subjugation of man's sexual nature more highly

than any physical involvement. Mernissi is one of those who sees positive aspects in the Islamic view of sex:

"Islam's basically positive attitude toward sexuality is more conducive to healthy perspectives of a self-realizing sexuality, harmoniously integrated in social life, than the West's basically negative attitude toward sexuality."<sup>89</sup>

and

"The Muslim theory of sublimation is entirely different from the Western Christian tradition as represented by Freudian psychoanalytic theory. Freud viewed civilization as a war against sexuality. Civilization is sexual energy 'turned aside from its sexual goal and diverted towards other ends, no longer sexual and socially more valuable.' The Muslim theory views civilization as the outcome of satisfied sexual energy. Work is the result not of sexual frustration but of a contented and harmoniously lived sexuality."<sup>90</sup>

Sa'dawi prefers to see the problem as society's relegation of women to the level of a body deprived of mind and spirit.<sup>91</sup> Since man is acknowledged as having all three, there cannot be equality in his relationship with a woman until she enjoys the same status. Without the mental and spiritual dimension of love, a sexual relationship is no more than a bestial act. When she states that sexual intercourse has a purpose besides procreation, in that it is a drive towards higher things, spiritual growth, the exercise of freedom and striving for perfection, Sa'dawi is raising it to a level higher than that intended by even the most positive injunctions of Islam. Certain other preconditions needed to satisfy Sa'dawi's standards are not easily reconcilable with Islamic ideals, such as the subordinate, domestic position which characterizes the Muslim wife in religious teachings. One of Sa'dawi's conditions for

a heterosexual relationship is equality. She believes that if the husband is having sex with his wife while exploiting her, for the sex itself, or for her role as housekeeper and mother, this invalidates the act because the equality necessary for mutual interaction is absent. This is the same from the woman's point of view; if she is motivated to have sex merely to ensure her maintenance, she is acting from an inferior position.

"As long as a person is driven to have sex by the desire to eat, drink or have children, then love can't arise. Love can't develop when a person seeks protection or someone to take over his responsibilities. Love isn't an escape from the problems of life, nor is it a desire for a refuge, a protection or social security. Love is not an exchange made for profit, nor a search for comfort in life or a cozy conformity with it. Love is not an escape from loneliness, boredom or failure."<sup>92</sup>

Love is therefore the highest human activity, according to Sa'dawi, in which the spiritual, mental and physical should all be fused in an uplifting, consciously willed experience. It is not a blind, involuntary attraction, hence it is not the Western romantic phenomenon of 'falling in love'.<sup>93</sup> Sa'dawi does not discuss, though, what kind of selection or attraction should bring the couple together initially. The logical outcome of everyone's having the capacity to love in this active, voluntary way, without regard for any self-interest, hope of gain or security, must be that we will all be equally lovable, and thus one partner will be just as good as another.

One idea which stands out as having the hallmark of Sa'dawi's own originality, probably because of its medical point of view, is her theory



that the intensity of the physical attraction of falling in love is a compensation for the loss of the mental and spiritual spheres of attraction, based on the analogy that in anatomy the loss of one organ stimulates the others to greater sensitivity as a form of compensation. She goes on to say that since men have made the rules<sup>94</sup> and had the power to impose them on women, the latter have had a greater measure of repression. It may be that a mature man wishes for, and is capable of, the total active commitment Sa'dawi describes, but may find women themselves to be ill-equipped for such a relationship. Sa'dawi herself commented that a young Saudi husband who had read her book and was enthusiastic about its contents, had said to her, "If only I could get my wife to read it!" The barriers raised by social conditioning are greater and more difficult for women to surmount than for men. It is largely fear that represses women into submission and obedience. Sa'dawi traces how fear develops into frigidity and passivity. A frigidity and passivity so prevalent in the Arab world that it has been assumed to be the normal female character. Women have thus become conditioned to awaiting and reacting to the man's action. A short quote on this subject will demonstrate the simplicity of Sa'dawi's didactic style, the clarity of her thought and her concern for the whole person.

"Activity is a precondition of psychological and intellectual development, a person's maturity and independence. One who does not act does not learn, one who does not learn does not mature, and one who does not mature does not become independent."<sup>95</sup>

Sa'dawi defines independence as one's ability to take decisions and behave responsibly. She believes that her society's curbs on women impede their psychological growth.

Although it is commonly put forward by those who support the status quo that the protection and guardianship of a husband or male relative is an advantage to the woman, Sa'dawi equates the woman's being relieved of her personal responsibilities to her being deprived of the necessary conditions to grow as a human being. These concepts of personal development through the individual's action and the creating of social situations which encourage this are relatively new to the average Arab reader for whom Sa'dawi writes. They are definitely ideas drawn from Western psychology. Sa'dawi would appear either to have ignored the complex nature of the Egyptian family, which is after all the matrix in which the individual first develops, or to be oblivious to any possible advantages it may hold over the social patterns elsewhere.

It is also interesting to see what Andrea Rugh, a very perceptive social scientist has observed of Egyptian social life. She observes Easterners and Westerners moving with very different ideas of social space:<sup>96</sup> basically this is reducible she feels to an unconscious sense of corporateness in Egyptian society, and of individuality, in Western society.

"Only by some kind of exchange, material or verbal is the Egyptian able to place himself in contact with others and assess what is the critical aspect for him - the content of his social relationship with others. As an individual he is insignificant; as a social being he has significance."<sup>96</sup>

She stresses that Egyptians "abstractly perceive themselves most of the time as members of groups rather than as independent entities." Rugh

also observes that

"Individualism has little positive value in Egyptian society, and often is equated with a number of negative outcomes. As one student later commented: 'Individualism leads to sexual license and social chaos since everyone is seeking his own ends.'"<sup>97</sup>

Rugh suggests that the differences in social attitudes derives from the fact that Islam is seen as valuing obligations directed towards the collective good, while the West is seen to value rights and freedom of the individual.

"One implication of belief in the value of corporate good is an inability in certain contexts for people to develop an individual sense of identity - an activity that Americans have been deeply preoccupied with in the last decades. Egyptians tend to see themselves in relation to others, as members of groups, or in the context of their structural roles. They rarely think of themselves as individuals with unique potentials to develop or unique needs to satisfy."<sup>98</sup>

Compared to this Sa'dawi's concept of personal development,

"Psychological and intellectual development is that movement towards more independence of character, the ability to make choices, personal freedom and responsibility,"<sup>99</sup>

would appear to be a Westernized view of individuality which is at odds with the ethos of the Egyptian family. Independence is not an admired trait in the Arab world.

From what Rugh says of the nature of the inequality within the Egyptian family, Sa'dawi's demand for equality begins to take on a different light. Her concept of equality appears directly at variance with the essence of social relationships as it has developed traditionally, and upon which Egyptians pride themselves. The reader may also begin to wonder if the traditional system as described by Rugh, when it is working properly has not many advantages to recommend it to both sexes.

"Every individual sits at the center of a complex web of relations pregnant with inherent possibilities. People are not equally defined within families or within the society as a whole. The Western attempt in theory to reduce everyone to the same common denominator regardless of income level, educational attainment, race, creed, sex, or any other factor is not seen as valid in the Egyptian context. People play complementary roles toward one another, each important in his own way but of necessity impossible to reduce to a single denominator. The fact that personal exchanges are unequal, that they are open to manipulation, that relationships are subject to redefinition, and that obligations to a person on one side or rights received on the other may not be honored keeps the system from being overly rigid."<sup>100</sup>

Rugh can afford to be impartial and objective: Sa'dawi however, is too close to the deficiencies of the Egyptian family system to have leisure to describe its good points. She is out to expose its weaknesses and eradicate them, motivated by anger, frustration and a devotion to her native people. Sa'dawi's sociology is not that of the independent researcher, nor is it of a type familiar to Western readers, but a mixture of socialist theory and sweeping generalization, together with dollops of feminist and political rhetoric and slogan. She is at her best when describing the individual cases she has come across, when she gives her own particular insight into a problem or phenomenon, and when she is

dismantling by logical argument, the hypocrisy which pervades Egyptian society. It is very easy to be swept along by the high-sounding phrases which Sa'dawi shows no hesitation in using: for example, "Respectability is sincerity of body, mind and soul."<sup>101</sup> and where she insists that love can only exist where the individuals are fully mature, completely equal, not receiving any form of personal gain from their union and motivated by free choice in a total mental, physical and spiritual experience. She says nothing of commitment, nor of the loving and happy marriages that have worked with each partner fulfilling his or her traditional role, where friendship, loyalty, mutual support, tolerance and respect for each other's different qualities are the guiding principles. Where does the dividing line come between the self-sacrifice of which Sa'dawi disapproves<sup>102</sup> and true generosity of spirit? One would have a very false impression of Egyptian life if one were to take too literally some of Sa'dawi's pronouncements, or take them out of context, as, for example, her statements that "Men have learned to be selfish. They have grown accustomed only to take,"<sup>103</sup> and that "Women have through the pressures of society and repression lost their selves and lost confidence in themselves."<sup>104</sup> and also,

"The marriage which lasts and which we call a successful marriage, has not succeeded because of love but rather because of habit. The husband is like an addict whose addiction drives him every day to his wife. He may hate her or be bored with her, he may wish deep down to be rid of her but his feet lead him every day to his home out of habit."<sup>105</sup>

For Sa'dawi any life that is without love is a deficient life. Love is also, she tells the reader, self-fulfilment, without which the individual can achieve none of his creative potential. But which kind of love,

and whether this has to involve the wonderful heterosexual love she holds up as the ideal, we cannot know. Her standards appear to be unrealistically high. Few people are so well-integrated as to respond consistently at such a peak. The vicissitudes of life take their toll on even the most mature of individuals. As an ideal view of sexual love it is worth stating, but it needs qualification as being the ideal and that even to fall far short of such a standard can be a rewarding experience.

Sa'dawi is adamant that sufficient experience of life to make one mature cannot be gained by the woman who does not go out to work. This is of course arguable: might not the mother who has an active social life, a wide circle of contacts, intellectual interests and creative hobbies be a more mature and well-balanced individual than a full-time secretary, shop assistant, or for that matter, struggling artist or exhausted doctor? Sa'dawi has not mentioned that this might be so, and would probably argue that the former is too much of a Western, middle-class phenomenon even to be conceivable in Egypt today.

"The mature personality alone can aspire to freedom and strive for it without fearing it but freedom scares the immature, dependant person and because of his fear, he prefers slavery and the security of social conformity." 106

It is not clear exactly what Sa'dawi has in mind by the word 'freedom' (in Arabic hurriya). Is it just to be understood here as a state of being able to choose one's own actions, which might as easily be directed towards destructive as constructive ends? Or is it a state of being

free of any obligations or constraints, both of which would tend towards anarchy? The term 'freedom' is a heavily emotive one in Western countries which like to stress democratic freedoms and the rights of the individual. Even though this concept of personal freedom is relatively new to the Arab psychology, the term hurriya is still highly emotive, but connotes rather more of a national freedom from colonial occupation. With Sa'dawi's emphasis on personal independence, freedom, individual growth and equality, she is expounding and trying to instil traditionally Western libertarian values into her society. These are the same values that have developed alongside the spirit of free enterprise and capitalism, while the socialism she so admires in theory, is not directed towards the pursuit of the individual's goals. This selectivity in her ideals which appears to mix patterns of secular socialist thought and democratic capitalist values, proves how eclectic she is in practice. It is also indicative of a certain intellectual inconsistency and hastiness in coming to conclusions at times.

Sa'dawi also sets out to combat the widespread ignorance in her community, an ignorance not simply due to a lack of available information but of the circulation of false inaccurate ideas.

"How ignorant that woman is who imagines that her blood during her period is contaminating, and how ignorant is she who imagines that the cutting out of her clitoris was necessary to keep her pure and virtuous."<sup>107</sup>

Men are roundly condemned at this point for causing this ignorance.

"The ignorance that has been imposed on women has naturally been imposed on men too, because it is men who have created these rumours and misinformation about women, it is they who have circulated it in the interests of their own domination and control."<sup>108</sup>

Having gained a good idea of what Sa'dawi disapproves of in Egyptian society, and the new standards she would prefer to see incorporated, let us turn to see what she advises her readers to do to improve their society. In order to regain their lost rights, Sa'dawi believes women must go out to work. This work must not be simply another form of slavery to a man, nor should the burden of domestic responsibility fall solely to the woman.<sup>109</sup> Sa'dawi does not address the question as to whether women, by entering and having to compete in a man's world will not simply become surrogate males and supporters of the Establishment. Sa'dawi does not appear to share the view held by some feminists that women possess certain admirable qualities developed as a result of their historical conditioning, or as inherent traits, which are usually referred to as feminine, for example, gentleness, patience, diplomacy etc., which they would need to exercise if they ever reached positions of authority in order for them to change the status quo and avoid the mistakes which men have made over the past centuries. Sa'dawi rather disappointingly does not enter this argument, nor does she attempt to explain why female doctors in Egypt, far from supporting their women patients, are often more reactionary in their attitudes than men.<sup>110</sup> This problem of whether women should emulate men once they have entered the male-dominated professions, or whether it is only the surrogate-male type of woman who will ever succeed to such positions, is very complex and warrants a book to itself, but it needs to be addressed by anyone who urges others to



enter a man's world as Sa'dawi so clearly does, because on women's ability to perform a unique contribution to, and to change, the value systems of the social, educational and governing institutions will depend the dissolution of the patriarchal establishment which Sa'dawi so earnestly desires.

Sa'dawi sees a long hard struggle ahead for women and she cautions them to be wise to the tactics used to deprive them of their rights in the past, and the propaganda directed at keeping them subordinate as it operates today.<sup>111</sup> In explaining these points to her readers she also indirectly answers the question, if women's lot is so bad, why do they not all rebel? Women, Sa'dawi states, have so interiorized an image of their own subordinate status and accepted the limitations society has imposed upon them that they are unconscious of the falsity of such reasoning as that used by the new Freudians for example, that when a woman does not conform to society, it is due to a psychological defect within her, rather than a fault in society.

Religion, Sa'dawi tells the reader, remains one of the most powerful weapons used against women's rebellion. To illustrate this she turns her attention to the campaigns for moral rearmament which she observed in America and how they attacked birth control pills as the source of immorality and the cause of the venereal disease epidemic.<sup>112</sup> Sa'dawi argues that ignorance of sexual matters is what really lies behind the spread of sexually transmitted disease and that it can be just as prevalent in a society which prohibits contraceptives. Whilst this can be seen as an oblique criticism of those Arab-Islamic societies which have banned

contraception on religious grounds, a more pertinent example might have been to illustrate the use of religion as a weapon with reference to her own country's policies.<sup>113</sup> Although it is understandable that Sa'dawi declines to criticize any abuse of Islam in Egypt, to resort to criticisms of the West as a substitute is only to fuel the anti-Western prejudices of her readers. Here is Sa'dawi drawing attention to the hypocrisy of the United States' attitude towards domestic and foreign policy, and its call for a return to 'religious' values.

"If the association for moral rearmament in America for example, was a truly moral association or was based on true religious principles, why does it not call, in the name of religion and morality, for an end to the war in Vietnam, or for the equality between black and white?

In fighting the rebellion in the mind of the individual, why does it confine its call to urging a return to prayer or the teachings of the Church or obedience to God? Why does it try to convince people that the moral collapse which threatens the world is only caused by the rebelliousness of the individual and his lack of satisfaction with what the Lord has given him? Perhaps they imagine that the 'Lord' here is capitalist society!"<sup>114</sup>

Sa'dawi advocates the use of birth control. The fact that it has freed sex from being simply a procreative act and brought it under human control can only be beneficial to society.

"The use of birth control in most countries now raises sexual activity from being a biological function to the level of being a mature human act. It enables that haphazard reproductive activity which dominated human beings to be replaced by another activity, a humane one which the individual controls by his willpower and conscious choice. This is the real meaning of the word 'sex'."<sup>115</sup>

The defensive nature of Sa'dawi's writing is exemplified in her treatment of the subject of birth control. She attacks the condemnation itself, and lays the blame for it on capitalist society.

"Condemning birth control pills or condemning freedom whether it is sexual freedom or not, or condemning the rebellions of young people and women, is only a cover-up of the real culprit, which is none other than the capitalist system, which does not treat people equally. Capitalist society values machines more than human beings, discriminates between men and women, between employer and employee and between black and white. It is a society which kills millions in a war of greed and exploitation, which wreaks vengeance on the children for the sins of their parents, which has more respect for a contract written on a piece of paper than it has for the feelings and wishes of the individual. It is a society which condones deception in the bedroom as much as in the boardroom."<sup>116</sup>

Sa'dawi wants women in Egypt to change their attitudes radically, to become far more involved in serving their own society. She sets a hard task for women to achieve, they must,

".. continue their struggle for freedom and responsibility, they must realize that their foremost duty in life is not having babies nor domestic service, but sharing in changing society for the better and striving for the progress of mankind."<sup>117</sup>

In the final chapter devoted to how to change society, Sa'dawi places women's liberation in a wider context. Equality will not be realizable, she says, until society is liberated from the capitalist system along with its values, ethics and customs. There ought to be complete equality in the education of children in school and in their home environment.<sup>118</sup> Children must learn equality from seeing their

parents sharing domestic responsibilities. Children need to be told what changes will happen to them in puberty and about sexual desire. Changes are due to the content and method of Egyptian education, with an emphasis on logic, discussion and the free exercise of the pupil's mind, rather than the blind obedience to the teacher and learning by rote which has been all that has been required so far. Ideally, there should be an end to all notions of servility in social and family relationships, Sa'dawi believes.<sup>119</sup> She sees the media as having a role to play in this, and recommends extensive changes aimed at putting an end to sex-role stereotyping.

"For example, whatever is specifically designated as 'women's' should be deleted from magazines and papers. Culture too should not be divided up according to the different sexes. That section which is called the 'Women's Corner' and which gives her advice on keeping her skin soft, her hair abundant, her eyelashes long, etc., ought to be abolished. That doesn't mean that the papers should cut out the subject of beauty and how to make oneself beautiful altogether. But what is needed is rather for these newspapers and magazines to spread a comprehensive meaning of beauty, as beauty of the body, soul and mind. They ought to provide men and women with all the information which they need to help them make their whole selves attractive; their bodies, minds and souls. It goes without saying that beautifying the body requires various methods and preparations, but the idea of beauty will not be confined to these. Likewise it will not be directed only at women but at all people."<sup>120</sup>

Sa'dawi does not see the women's liberation movement as it exists in Egypt as making an effective contribution towards improving society's image of women. She criticizes its members for being concerned only about legal changes that might improve women's status on paper.<sup>121</sup> While this is of course necessary, only daily practice at putting the spirit of equality into everyday life will succeed in changing social attitudes.

This must be done by those social institutions responsible for implementing any changes in the law that are designed to benefit women.<sup>122</sup> Her criticisms of the Arab women's movement appear to indicate Sa'dawi's independent stand and her greater understanding of the problem of women's liberation.

Sa'dawi's suggestion that an Egyptian woman should not see her main duty in life as catering for her husband, home and family, is positively revolutionary for her country considering the historical segregation between men and women (it was a revolutionary concept even for Western women in the early 1970s, who already enjoyed far more opportunities than Arab women). According to Naila Minai, a fellow Egyptian feminist, "When Women and Sex was published in 1972, Dr. Saadawi's message was a bold one even by American standards."<sup>123</sup> Perhaps the most revolutionary suggestion made by Sa'dawi is her insistence that a woman should speak up for her right to enjoy sex, that it is up to her to communicate with the man so that together they will get the maximum pleasure out of it. Women must feel responsible for their sex lives, she stresses.

"The traditional husband may not approve of this kind of frankness from his wife and consider it a lack of respectability on her part, but the way to deal with this is not for the woman to hide the truth on account of pleasing her conventional husband, but for him to change and realize that his wife's right to enjoy sexual pleasure is exactly the same as his, and that respectability does not mean hiding desires and true feelings but rather in expressing these feelings truthfully."

"I believe that the failure of sexual relations between men and women is not due to their ignorance of sexual technique, but because of a greater ignorance: the man's ignorance of the woman as a human being like himself and equal to him in all

obligations and rights in life, including sex. It is also woman's ignorance of herself and of her value as a human being exactly equal to the man in all rights and obligations, sexual and non-sexual."<sup>124</sup>

It is on the subject of going out to work that Sa'dawi's uncompromising attitudes run the risk of alienating some of her less confident readers. She threatens the full-time mother who stays at home, with immaturity, and considers her an impediment to the healthy psychological development of her children. The mother who does not go out to work in Sa'dawi's opinion should feel guilty about it!<sup>125</sup> What about those women who freely choose to stay at home to care for their families, who feel fulfilled in this role and happy in their marriages? Does Sa'dawi not accept that they should be free to choose their lifestyle, even though it differs from her idea as to what a woman's 'role' should be? It appears at times as if Sa'dawi is coming dangerously close to depriving women of the pleasures of the home and family by encouraging them to devalue its importance, and by classifying the careers of nursing and secretary<sup>126</sup> as minor positions for those who do not understand the real meaning and purpose of 'work' and who lack the self-confidence to enter more 'important' fields. She even tries to lure women into work with the promise that they will be happier, a supposition which she bases on some limited studies into the subject carried out in America.<sup>127</sup> Such a generalized finding ought not to be made unless all the variables are discussed and unless the society is directly comparable to the one which the author addresses. Those American women who were found to be happier at work were after all living and working in a capitalist society, Sa'dawi's archenemy. One has to understand these rash outbursts as

Sa'dawi's tremendous commitment to urging her fellow countrywomen to make the most of their potential, which is a truly honourable goal. Her last word to wives is that if a husband stands in the way of their personal ambition then they should consider their careers more important.

"Husbands' jealousy and selfishness and fear of their wives excelling does not mean at all that such wives should remain obscure merely to please those husbands. It would be more appropriate for such husbands to change, and change their old-fashioned attitude to their wives."<sup>128</sup>

In the final outcome, Sa'dawi advises that if the husband refuses to tolerate his wife's success and give up his backward (i.e. traditional) chauvinist opinions, then:

"The wife must not sacrifice her talent for the sake of such a husband, otherwise she will have wronged herself and society which is in need of her gifts in order to change for the better."<sup>129</sup>

Furthermore, Sa'dawi states that:

"Failure in marriage is less harmful to the woman than failure in her whole life and her losing sight of herself within the walls of her home."<sup>130</sup>

In Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins Sa'dawi has clarified women's place in society. Women need to be in the workplace, they need influence in society, need their domestic role to be lightened by the state and need to be adequately represented in government, but where they should start and how progress

might be made is not the subject of Sa'dawi's debate here. In view of the fact that it is men who will have to be urged into conceding greater citizen rights and opportunities to women, and that many men, even in Egypt, are sympathetic to the woman's cause, it might be worth considering what pressures could usefully be put on influential men until such time as women actually gain access to and experience of the public and professional domains.

As an introduction to the problems facing women in Egyptian society as seen from the personal and professional standpoints, Sa'dawi's book is an excellent starting point for all Arab women who have ever questioned the traditional role expected of them. Whilst there are certain inconsistencies and instances where more thought on the author's part would have been desirable, Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins contains that vitality, that enthusiasm, that commitment to a higher cause which is so necessary to mobilize the half-hearted, to encourage the unconfident and further strengthen the purpose of the strong.

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## References to Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins

- 1) Qasim Amin (1865-1908) the Egyptian reformer, published his work on the emancipation of women Tahrīr al-Mar'a in 1899. It aroused a storm of protest and many books and pamphlets were subsequently written attacking his ideas. In way of reply, Amin published a second work in 1900 on the 'new woman' Al-Mar'a al-Jadīda. These two books are still looked upon as the seminal works of feminism in the Arab world and can still arouse considerable hostility among conservative and religious elements.
- 2) The sharī'a is the body of traditional Muslim law. For Egypt this is based on the principles expounded by the Hanafi school which originated around the 8th-9th centuries. Hanafi law is the strictest regarding the position of women and personal status.
- 3) In order to stem the mounting criticism of his policies by Muslim fundamentalists, Sadat had the sharī'a officially reinstated as the primary source of Egyptian legislation in the late 1970s. Tentative reforms to marital law were introduced in 1979, known as "Jihan's Law", named after Sadat's wife who personally championed them. Its most important provisions allowed a woman to petition for divorce if her husband took another wife or she discovered that he was already married, and gave her the right to stay in the marital home while the children were legally in her care. These controversial reforms were finally eliminated from Egyptian law in May 1985, when an official judgement was issued restoring full Islamic rights to

husbands over their wives. This means that Egyptian men can once more take up to four wives without having to tell any of them of the existence of the others and can divorce them again at will. Divorced wives have also lost their rights to the family home.

- 4) Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins, pp. 12-14.
- 5) Ibid., p. 14.
- 6) Ibid., p. 15.
- 7) Ibid., p. 5.
- 8) Ibid., pp. 22-23. William Masters and Virginia Johnson were an important husband and wife team of doctors and sexologists. Their extensive research on American attitudes to sexuality and sexual behaviour and their book Human sexual response 1966, laid the foundation for all subsequent research on the subject.

Mary Jane Sherfey, 1933- an American psychiatrist who was inspired by the work of Masters and Johnson. Her most famous work is A theory on female sexuality, 1966.

- 9) Female circumcision has been known in Egypt since Pharaonic times. It has been common in many African countries such as the Sudan, Somaliland, Ethiopia, Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria and Guinea and has also been found in Asian countries such as Sri Lanka and Indonesia and

in parts of Latin America. When Sa'dawi was young almost all girls were circumcised, but more recently the practice has become less popular especially in urban areas of Egypt and amongst the educated due to the spread of education and international outcry against the operation.

- 10) Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins, p. 29.
- 11) Ibid., pp. 30-31.
- 12) Ibid., p. 34. Juliette Minces, a French researcher who has made a special study of women in Egypt and Algeria, gives further insight into the tricky problem of chastity within marriage with her comment:

".. the manipulation of sexuality is one of the most frequently used weapons of femininity. Nonetheless, it is still true that when a young girl is led to the bridegroom's bedroom, the only prenuptial advice her mother gives her is usually to be docile and above all don't move, or your husband will think you have been with another man."

Juliette Minces, House of obedience, Zed Press, London, 1982, p. 21.

- 13) The dāya is the village midwife. She is traditionally involved in all aspects of and ceremonies connected with birth, death and sexuality. She would typically use herbal remedies, spiritualism and folk medicine in treating her patients. For an excellent description of her role see Maut al-Rajul p. 109.

- 14) For Sa'dawi's treatment of this subject in fiction see the passage on Fathiyya's defloration and marriage procession in Maut al-Rajul, pp. 50-51, and the short story "Kānat hiya al-Ad'af".
- 15) Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins, p. 37.
- 16) In Arabic, "Al-rajul lā ya'ībuh illā jaibuh".
- 17) Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins, p. 40.
- 18) Ibid., p. 41. See Imra'a 'inda Nuqtat al-Sifr where Sa'dawi transposes these ideas into fictional form, especially the passages concerning Firdaus's affair with Ibrahim, pp. 90-97. He goes on to make a successful marriage and enjoy an unblemished reputation, while she is left devastated with no prospect of being able to marry honourably.
- 19) Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins, p. 57.
- 20) Ibid., p. 43.
- 21) Ibid., pp. 45-6.
- 22) Ibid., p. 47.
- 23) Ibid., p. 49.

- 24) Ibid., p. 50.
- 25) Ibid., p. 57. See also HFE, pp. 8-10.
- 26) Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins, p. 58.
- 27) Margaret Mead, 1901-77, an American anthropologist whose original research into childrearing practices and sex-roles in primitive societies, during the 1930s-40s, introduced anthropology to the layperson in an understandable form.

Simone de Beauvoir 1908-1986, the French philosopher and author of Le deuxième sexe, 1949; a classic work for feminists.

- 28) The stress on pre-marital chastity for girls is linked to certain social conditions applicable at all strata of society, which help to account for the enduring conservatism of Egyptian marriage patterns and sex-role differentiation. An important consideration in Egyptian marriage is to find the best accumulation of potential social advantages within a partner. That this operates almost entirely within one's own socio-economic group is self-evident. It is very uncommon for an individual to leap suddenly to a higher social level through marriage. In order to maximize one's chances of marrying well, young people tend to conform to the norms of respectable public behaviour, by cooperating with the family rather than stressing any individual ambitions. One appreciates how the idea of conforming to society also becomes attractive to the young

person, particularly for the girl, when one considers that she depends on the family unit to help provide the resources to launch her into married life. Traditionally the bride's family provide household items and pay for the engagement party: the husband's provide the couple's accommodation and wedding party. There are, thus, powerful factors predisposing or persuading the young person in each generation in Egypt, to live up to traditional moral and social expectations.

29) Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins, p. 54.

30) Ibid., p. 55.

31) Ibid., p. 55.

32) Ibid., p. 66.

33) Karen Horney, a German-American psychoanalyst who developed new concepts of neuroses.

34) Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins, p. 68.

35) Ibid., p. 62.

36) Ibid., p. 65.

37) Ibid., p. 64.

- 38) Ibid., p. 74.
- 39) Ibid., p. 75.
- 40) Ibid., p. 78.
- 41) Sigmund Freud (1865-1939), Austrian psychiatrist and founder of psychoanalysis.
- 42) Germaine Greer 1939-, Australian writer and academic, author of The female eunuch, 1970, one of the most important works for feminists.
- 43) Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins, pp. 74-80.
- 44) One rare instance when Sa'dawi does refer to native Egyptian research, is her reference to the study of Dr Sayyid Awis, an advisor at the National Centre for Social Research, (no date is given for this study) on the obstacles which prevent effective implementation of family planning. It too demonstrates an awareness of the oppressive traditions of the patriarchal family in Egypt and how they are related to the inferior position of women, Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins, p. 111.
- 45) Friedrich Engels (1820-95), German socialist and political philosopher. Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins, pp. 83-6.
- 46) Ibid., p. 86.

- 47) Ibid., p. 89.
- 48) Ibid., p. 91.
- 49) Ibid., p. 91.
- 50) Ibid., p. 120.
- 51) Ibid., p. 95.
- 52) Whilst it is acceptable for a man to live an independent life, for a woman to live alone and unmarried in Egypt is still considered something of a perversion, if not actually dangerous, unless she commands great wealth or fame as a celebrity, in which case she is not subject to the same moral condemnation from her society.
- 53) This is found as a theme in her novels Mudhakkirāt Tabība and Imra'atān fī Imra'a.
- 54) Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins, p. 99.
- 55) Ibid., p. 100.
- 56) Ibid., p. 101. This argument is found in fictional form in Imra'a 'inda Nuqtat al-Sifr, e.g. pp. 96-103.
- 57) Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins, p. 102.



- 58) Ibid., p. 105.
- 59) Ibid., p. 106.
- 60) Ibid., p. 110. This is Article 67 of the Common Law on Marriage.
- 61) Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins, p. 116.
- 62) Ibid., p. 117.
- 63) Ibid., p. 107.
- 64) Ibid., p. 114.
- 65) Ibid., p. 115.
- 66) Ibid., p. 116.
- 67) Ibid., p. 121.
- 68) Ibid., p. 124.
- 69) Ibid., p. 125.
- 70) Ibid., p. 125.
- 71) Ibid., p. 131.

- 72) Ibid., p. 132.
- 73) S. Ibrahim, "Anatomy of Egypt's Militant Islamic Groups", MESA Conference Paper, Washington, Nov. 1980, quoted in Andrea B. Rugh, Family in contemporary Egypt, Syracuse University Press, 1984, p. 37.
- 74) Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins, p. 135.
- 75) Fatima Mernissi is a Moroccan sociologist.
- 76) Fatima Mernissi, Beyond the veil: male-female dynamics in modern Muslim society, Al-Saqi, London, revised ed., 1985, p. 94.  
Mernissi's fieldwork was conducted in 1971, which makes it contemporaneous with Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins.
- 77) Beyond the veil, p. 95.
- 78) I choose Fromm and Lewis as examples of the popular Western psychology which was much in demand in the 1960s. Erich Fromm, The art of loving, Unwin, Great Britain, 1976, (first published 1957).  
Erich Fromm (1900-80), German-born U.S. psychoanalyst and social philosopher who emphasized the cultural determinants of personality.
- 79) C.S. Lewis, The four loves, London, 1960.  
C.S. Lewis (1898-1963), an English scholar and religious thinker.

80) Fatna A. Sabbah is a pseudonym of Fatima Mernissi's. Since I learned this at a late stage in producing my thesis, and since the author expressly chose a pseudonym to avoid being identified over the particular work discussed here, I did not feel it necessary to rewrite this section to draw attention to the fact I am in fact comparing two books by the same author.

81) Beyond the veil, op. cit., p. 113.

82) Ibid., p. 115.

83) Ibid., p. 174.

84) Fatna A. Sabbah, Woman in the Muslim unconscious,  
(translated from the French, La femme dans l'inconscient musulman).

85) Ibid., p. 109.

86) Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins, p. 140.

87) The art of loving, op. cit., pp. 105-6.

88) Ibid., pp. 105-6.

89) Beyond the veil, p. 175.

- 90) Ibid., p. 44.
- 91) Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins, p. 140.
- 92) Ibid., p. 142.
- 93) Ibid., p. 144.
- 94) Ibid., pp. 145-9.
- 95) Ibid., p. 148.
- 96) Andrea B. Rugh, Family in contemporary Egypt, p. 37.
- 97) Ibid., p. 38.
- 98) Ibid., p. 34.
- 99) Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins, p. 51.
- 100) Family in contemporary Egypt, op. cit., p. 101.
- 101) Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins, p. 153.
- 102) Ibid., p. 151.
- 103) Ibid., p. 150.

- 104) Ibid., p. 151.
- 105) Ibid., pp. 152-3.
- 106) Ibid., p. 155.
- 107) Ibid., p. 155.
- 108) Ibid., p. 156.
- 109) Ibid., p. 157.
- 110) This is one of the observations the author also makes in her study of women and neuroses in Egypt, see below p. 393. For my own idea on this question see Ref. 29, p.404 below.
- 111) Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins, p. 158.
- 112) Ibid., pp. 161-3.
- 113) Sa'dawi gives examples of religion being misused in order to exploit the people, in various fictional works: see Maut al-Rajul, The fall of the Imam and her play Al-Insān.
- 114) Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins, p. 163.
- 115) Ibid., p. 164.

- 116) Ibid., p. 164.
- 117) Ibid., p. 165.
- 118) Ibid., p. 168.
- 119) Ibid., pp. 170-172.
- 120) Ibid., p. 181.
- 121) Ibid., p. 179.
- 122) Ibid., p. 180.
- 123) Naila Minai, Women in Islam: tradition and transition in the Middle East, John Murray, 1981, p. 156.
- 124) Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins, p. 183.
- 125) Ibid., p. 175.
- 126) Ibid., p. 176.
- 127) Ibid., p. 178.
- 128) Ibid., p. 177.
- 129) Ibid., p. 177.

130) Ibid., p. 186.

Al-Unthā hiya al-Asl (The female is the origin) forms a companion volume to Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins. Published in 1974, in Beirut, it is dedicated to Sherif Hetata, whom Sa'dawi had married some ten years previously. The title is borrowed from Lester Ward.<sup>1</sup> Sa'dawi's impulse to write a sequel to her first book on women and sex was borne of her sympathy for the many young girls and women whom she had come across, who appeared to suffer psychologically from the social system in Egypt, but it was also partly a quest for herself to help her to understand the relationship between physiology and psychology in a woman's life, which had been puzzling her for the previous eighteen years.<sup>2</sup> She wanted her study to be a scientific search for the truth about women in society.<sup>3</sup> At the outset Sa'dawi credits herself with what she considers the necessary attributes for one undertaking such research: the ability to think critically, self-confidence, courage and freedom from any domination by preconceived notions or inherited dogma. Such a study also requires an objectivity, a sincerity<sup>4</sup> and willingness to follow a new course.<sup>5</sup> It will be seen how Sa'dawi is not so much discovering new facts about women in her society, but rather continuing to interpret modern Western psychology and scientific theory on women, into Arabic, for her own people which she had begun in Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins. Such an undertaking is fraught with danger in Arab societies because it challenges the 'hallowed' traditions<sup>6</sup> upon which social cohesion and security rest. Knowing this, the



reader will be able to understand why so often Sa'dawi is writing in a defensive tone. In reading any of Sa'dawi's books it seems wise always to bear in mind that science and art are not clearly distinguished by the author, at her own admission:

"I don't believe in the differences that are set down between science and art. Both aim to reveal the Truth, and both demand an ability to create." 7

Such tenuous similarities, if indeed they be true, are probably what makes Sa'dawi feel entitled to place her own subjective notions on religion or women, for example, side by side with anatomical facts or proven scientific theory.

Sa'dawi continues her advice to women along the same lines as she began in Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins urging women to become aware of the conflicts to which they are susceptible and not to let marriage be of consuming importance in their lives.<sup>8</sup> To pursue a fulfilling career and develop an independent character will stand the woman, married or single, in better stead to deal with any marital problems if they should arise, and help her avoid the neuroses which stem from frustration. Sa'dawi's broad aims here are to prove that women are not inherently inferior to men in any way, and hence do not deserve the restrictions imposed upon them in her society. These restrictions, which are, she adds, for economic and social reasons, indicate a divisive and unjust patriarchal society. They have an adverse effect on children, and a habit of rebounding on men themselves, even though the latter would appear to enjoy more freedoms than women. She feels

that a more important goal than sexual liberation for women to aim at is intellectual liberation.

The first chapter begins with exactly that kind of blend of fact and fiction which Sa'dawi considers the 'Truth'. When Sa'dawi departs from the medical subject matter and women in Egyptian society today, which she has discussed so efficiently in Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins, the effect is less satisfactory. Her arguments are often incomplete and based on dubious premises. Sa'dawi lives up to the self-confidence and courage she has attributed to herself in being able to tackle a subject from an unorthodox standpoint, but she fails to show that critical, intellectual rigour which ought to be the priority of anyone writing on such topics as she proceeds to tackle in this study. Sa'dawi feels free to embroider what scanty evidence there is on pre-historic matriarchal history, in order to present the reader with a picture of 'natural' healthy civilization. What results is a hopelessly idealistic, somewhat romanticized view of a Golden Age in earliest times when men and women were apparently free to behave or make relationships as they chose. She seems to have been blinded to the anarchy, fear, superstition, ignorance and disease which must have characterized the lives of our short-lived predecessors, merely on the assumption that their lives were unrestricted personally and sexually, by any philosophical or religious taboos.

"In those ages, man was natural. That means that he lived his life as it was, and behaved spontaneously according to his desires, feelings and thought."

In these ancient matriarchal times, which Sa'dawi does not care to specify in terms of date or location, women were apparently valued more than men on account of their childbearing capacity.<sup>10</sup> The fact that female gods were worshipped, that queens ruled in ancient Egypt and that women were apparently regarded highly for their maternal functions, is no evidence that as a sex they were valued, or held power in their community. Patriarchal society exalts motherhood as a woman's 'true' function: Islamic theory does so even more. In spite of female heads of state, we have ample evidence today that, both in the West and in Third World countries, women still tend to enjoy fewer advantages, freedoms and opportunities than men.

The historian Gerda Lerner in her masterly study of women in prehistoric Mesopotamian civilization, The creation of patriarchy, traces the development of patriarchal cultures, casting doubt on Engels's theory of an historic overthrow of women by men, and discounting any romantic idea of a golden era of matriarchy in the Middle East. Lerner can, however, appreciate the psychological needs for women today to have such a vision of the past, much in the way that Sa'dawi presents her material to Egyptian readers. Lerner says that

"The case against the universality of prehistoric matriarchy seems quite clearly proven by the anthropological evidence. Yet the debate over matriarchy rages on, largely because advocates of the matriarchy theory have been vague enough in their definition of the term to include in it various other categories. Those who define matriarchy as a society where women dominate over men, a sort of inversion of patriarchy, cannot cite anthropological, ethnological, or historic evidence. They rest their case on evidence from

myth and religion. Others call matriarchy any kind of societal arrangement in which women hold power over any aspect of public life. Still others include any society in which women have relatively high status. The last definition is so vague as to be meaningless as a category. I think one can truly speak of matriarchy only when women hold power over men, not alongside them, when that power includes the public domain and foreign relations and when women make essential decisions not only for their kinfolk but for the community. In line with my earlier discussion, such power would have to include the power to define the values and explanatory systems of the society and the power to define and control the sexual behavior of men. It may be noted that I am defining matriarchy as the mirror image of patriarchy. Using that definition, I would conclude that no matriarchal society has ever existed." 11

From this statement we can clearly see the need for Sa'dawi to define the bases of her arguments, for she proceeds to exhort her readers to take pride in their ancient prehistoric heritage<sup>12</sup> on account of the equality it apparently fostered between the sexes during certain dynasties. Whilst such retrospective pride might seem to be the product of an original way of thinking, Sa'dawi is even here following the typical Arab style of argument, that of trying to sanction the future by reference to the past. Such an approach to ancient Egyptian history incidentally would certainly be unpopular in many official circles, since the Egyptian education and religious authorities like to stress that their country's history began with the advent of Islam.

In order to link the distant past with the more recent situation of women, Sa'dawi casually adopts the attitude that women were robbed of the rights they had supposedly enjoyed in bygone eras, namely that of naming their children, respectability, high status in society and

religion, the chance to work creatively and also inherit.<sup>13</sup> As a result Sa'dawi puts herself in the position of having to blame men directly and indirectly for these offences against her sex. When she decides to be more specific, it is Jewish men, those who formulated their religion and wrote its myths and history, whom she chiefly blames for laying the foundation of patriarchal civilization.<sup>14</sup> This, she says, was followed much later by the campaigns by the Christian clergy during the Middle Ages against those witches who practised various forms of folk medicine.<sup>15</sup> Several pages are devoted to this power struggle which was enacted on European soil. What made Sa'dawi choose to concentrate on what for her and her readers is foreign religious history, rather than on any parallel episode in the passage of Egyptian or Arab-Islamic history, is a matter of speculation. To have used her own country's history as an example would have provided a continuity between the ancient Egyptian civilizations she has previously described and the present state of her society, besides being of much more benefit in helping both Sa'dawi and her readers to understand their present. The only continuity she mentions here is that between the hostile attitudes of men towards intelligent skilled women in the Middle Ages, and male prejudice against clever women manifested today in her society. The latter is, for her, a legacy of the former just as much as 'modern' psychiatric treatments, (e.g. electric shock and drug therapy used on women who cannot adapt to society) are a legacy of the crude tests used in the 15th century to identify witches.<sup>16</sup> The detail in which Sa'dawi deals with the medieval tortures for women suspected of witchcraft, suggests a morbid fascination on her part and actually diverts the reader's

attention from the subject of women's liberation in Egypt. What is of more immediate concern to the reader is the typical treatment reserved for women in Egyptian mental hospitals, which Sa'dawi explores more fully in Al-Mar'a wa'l-Sirā' al-Nafsī.<sup>17</sup>

It is doubtful whether Sa'dawi at the time of writing had more than a cursory acquaintance with the works of the pioneering feminists whose names she mentions;<sup>18</sup> Kate Millet, Betty Friedan, Simone de Beauvoir etc. Karen Horney is the source from which she quotes most often on subjects relating to female sexuality, while from Margaret Mead and de Beauvoir there are a few passing references. There is little, if any, indication that Sa'dawi has absorbed the arguments of Millet, Friedan or de Beauvoir else they would be allocated more space in her own discussions or have moulded her own thoughts.<sup>19</sup> As far as the male pioneers in modern psychology whom she mentions, her references go little further than quotations translated directly into Arabic, or sketchy paraphrases. There is nothing in the way of a follow-up discussion or debate on what has been referred to. Sa'dawi tends to use quotes as if they were indisputable proof of the veracity or falsity of an author's intellectual position which, in the case of the former, is there only to corroborate her own ideas, or to express those ideas which she does not feel at liberty enough to profess. She is happy to quote fragments of Goethe, Sartre, Kierkegaard and Heidegger to impress upon her readers her acquaintance with European philosophy.<sup>20</sup>

Probably one of the biggest services Sa'dawi does for her readers is to draw attention to the changing nature of moral values and 'scientific' ideas, from one era to the next.<sup>21</sup> This theme runs through all her factual works, and it is in providing illustrations of this change in thought that her historical references are relevant. This is, however, an approach that is essentially orientated towards the past. Egyptian readers will be more used to having history drawn into the debate in order to justify the present rather than explain or criticize it. What would perhaps be more relevant to the present and the immediate future is a comparison with other cultures today, to show how their moral values and scientific ideas result in a different lifestyle and whether Egyptians themselves could profit from adapting their own ideas accordingly. One of the familiar arguments directed at Arab Egyptian women who challenge the traditional idea that they are weaker or inferior to men and that their job is motherhood and serving the husband, is that 'Nature' has decreed this role for them. Most of Sa'dawi's readers would to some degree believe in an intrinsic female or male nature, as a set of abilities or latent instincts that unfold 'naturally' in the 'normal' human being.<sup>22</sup> When such assumptions are radically challenged, as they must be in the mind of any intelligent reader of Sa'dawi, the result will be either an expansion of the mind and the beginnings of a new understanding of the world, or a feeling of fear and insecurity. These emotions account for the extreme reactions Sa'dawi provoked in the middle '70s: a hostile condemnation mostly from the conservative quarter, as opposed to a devotion, almost to the point of a cult following among the young.

While it is apparent that in Al-Unthā hiya al-Asl Sa'dawi is elaborating on the themes explored in her previous book, there is now evidence of an attempt at greater depth of research and of a better understanding in her own mind of the repercussions upon family life of the traditional restrictions on women. Sa'dawi is more concerned with the psychological consequences of the differences between the sexes, especially in so far as they relate to parenthood. Thus in the third chapter, "The father's psychology and jealousy of the woman", she paints a dismal picture of how a man's resentful behaviour towards a woman, spoils their relationship. It was man's selfish desire for dominance, and a jealousy of women's maternal function, Sa'dawi suggests, that led to the creation of the family. She also seems to believe at this point that women are 'by nature' more developed in terms of psychology and humanitarian feeling, than men because the former have stronger biological bonds towards their children, while the latter tend to appreciate fatherhood when it is to their economic advantage.

(Certain).. "scientists say that right from the start men have had no more psychological or emotional grasp of the meaning of fatherhood than a male dog or cockerel. In fact, their sexual and biological desires have failed to open their eyes to the whole business of fatherhood. The primitive kind of father who dominated the primitive family in early times would get angry whenever his wife's attention was diverted away from him to feeding her child; he cared only that the woman should satisfy his need for food or sex. He would therefore consider the new child a creature imposed upon him, something that hindered its mother from responding to his demands, he would therefore harbour hatred towards the child and on occasions would kill him. History is familiar with periods when children were killed by their fathers because the latter had no economic need for them.



Perhaps this was the reason for that hatred which some civilized fathers in our world today hide, or show at times, to their children. The father only begins to realize the meaning of fatherhood in emotional and psychological terms, after the child has grown up and become economically useful to him. This means that the primitive father was not a 'father' in the true meaning of the word according to its psychological and humanitarian aspects, but rather lagged a long way behind the woman in terms of mentality and human feeling. And if there was one who was 'superior' or 'more advanced' than the other in the afore-mentioned terms, then it was the woman rather than the man.

Man was slow to develop psychologically as a father, being too preoccupied with himself and his own instinctive desires. Because of this, he disliked seeing the woman become a mother, preferring to see her only as someone to serve him, feed him and satisfy his sexual desires. The woman's maternal feelings however, developed from the beginning as a humane, emotional feeling which held out for a long time against the force and violence of the man towards his children and his selfish backward aggression towards the rest of the human race." 23

Apart from Sa'dawi's crude generalizations, there is implicit in several of her statements here that women have maternal feelings which develop in a particular way and that men do not share these emotions. This is surely tantamount to arguing that both sexes contain a basic nature! The underlying hostility of this passage vis-a-vis men, is typical of an aggressive feminist who has unquestioningly adopted Engels's theory on the historic defeat of women. Yet seen from a different angle, such a passage shows us how hard Sa'dawi is trying to understand the differences between the sexes in order to account for male aggression and to redress the view that women are inherently weaker in capacities because of their childbearing ability. One has always to bear in mind that Sa'dawi's access to feminist theory was

at the time of writing limited to some extent and that she was making the best use of those ideas which she had been able to discover. Unfortunately this passage also demonstrates some of the negative aspects of her style, especially over-simplification of very complex human impulses, and imprecision. For example, which age and which culture is she talking about when she refers loosely to 'primitive' or 'civilized' man?

Sa'dawi continues in this vein, stressing man's antagonism towards woman, all the while maintaining that women were in no way deserving of the treatment they received from men. This style of reasoning must inculcate in her female readers a sense of injustice at the way they have been treated and help to foster their own resentment against men today for what their forbears are alleged to have done. A certain amount of over-reaction and negative attitude to men is, as hinted above, only to be expected from one who is newly embracing feminist ideas, whether she is writing or reading about the subject. Lerner has this to say about the dangers of dividing men and women into the categories of 'oppressed' and 'oppressors':

"The word 'oppression' implies victimization; indeed, those who apply it to women frequently conceptualize women-as-a-group primarily as victims. This way of thinking of women is misleading and ahistorical. While all women have been victimized in certain aspects of their lives and some, at certain times, more than others, women are structured into society in such a way that they are both subjects and agents. As we discussed earlier, the 'dialectic of women's history', the complex pull of contradictory forces upon women, makes them simultaneously

marginal and central to historical events. Trying to describe their condition by the use of a term which obscures this complexity is counter-productive."<sup>24</sup>

Sa'dawi is also here trying to redress the balance between men and women by reversing the traditional argument accepted by Egyptian doctors, based on Freudian theory: it is no longer jealousy in the form of penis envy which is seen to be determining the woman's behaviour, but rather the man's; this time it is his envy of women as loving mothers.<sup>25</sup>

Chapter Four, entitled "The woman's biological and sexual nature" contains a substantial amount of scientific data. That Arabic has to borrow from Western science the technical terms relating to such biological phenomena, is evidenced by the sprinkling of words in Latin script. Sa'dawi is now going into more detail than ever before on the sexuality of women. The fact that Arabic has no corresponding terms for those in English relating to this subject, is further confirmation that this delicate field of female sexuality has not been recently researched in Sa'dawi's society. In her summary of the findings of Masters and Johnson, and Sherfey,<sup>26</sup> Sa'dawi adopts the style of a dispassionate lecturer to discuss what, for many readers, must have been embarrassing subjects because of the connection between sexuality, decorum and shame in the popular Arab imagination. She assumes the role of educator with ease, on the straightforward discussion of such subjects as the relative merits of vaginal as opposed to clitoral orgasm, the necessity for sexual foreplay, the physiological changes accompanying orgasm itself, causes of women's frigidity, their

natural propensity for more than one partner and their multi-orgasmic ability etc. The amount of attention devoted to the subject of frigidity, however, suggests the pressing nature of this problem within Egyptian society. Physical abnormalities, Sa'dawi suggests, are rare enough to be discounted in most cases: it is the social and psychological pressures, together with lack of necessary stimulation from a partner, which are more likely to be to blame.<sup>27</sup> By telling women that they are more sexually potent and responsive after the age of 30,<sup>28</sup> while their husbands are less so, to some degree, increasing the frustrations of the former. Sa'dawi is treating the subject of sexuality in its purely biological context here, probably because she is paraphrasing Sherfey's views, but by not relating it in any way to the Egyptian woman, Sa'dawi is taking it in isolation from the social and emotional factors, something which she has vowed not to do. She fails here to give her fellow countrywomen any more guidance as to how they might realize their sexual potential for multiple orgasms within their own lives, especially if they are unmarried, apart from adding that this apparent sexual insatiability of women's is incapable of being achieved in a monogamous relationship within a patriarchal society.<sup>29</sup> She leaves her readers with the destabilizing view of her American researchers that neither men nor women are naturally fitted for monogamy.<sup>30</sup> After giving a short passage on the curtailment of women's sexual freedom during the last 7,000 years (again from Sherfey),<sup>31</sup> Sa'dawi runs into a few inconsistencies when she asks if this continuous social pressure on women to be monogamous has weakened their natural potency? She appears to be ignoring the fact that sufficient women with an active sexuality were available for

Masters and Johnson, and Sherfey to make their studies, and that there have always been women who have experienced an unrestricted sex life outside the bounds of marriage; whether through choice, in the role of mistress or courtesan, or through financial compulsion, as a prostitute. Perhaps it is to exempt herself from any possible charges that she might be encouraging promiscuity by expounding on the research of Masters and Johnson, and Sherfey, that she decides to doubt publicly (or at least give her readers the impression that she does) that such conclusions on sexuality have any validity.

"It is in no way possible for anyone to proclaim that this new biological information about women is the truth, or that it is not. All that I intended by presenting these kinds of views is to say that the idea that the male sex is stronger than the female, or that the 'nature' of the woman is weaker than the man's, or that Nature made men to dominate and women to be subjugated, all need to be refuted scientifically and the true facts confirmed from the point of view of psychology, history and biology. The new biological facts bring to our attention that women's sexual and biological nature may be not only equal to that of men but even stronger." <sup>32</sup>

On the basis of Sa'dawi's self-advertisement in the introduction, as being uniquely qualified by virtue of her integrity, and critical capacity for searching out the truth and presenting it to the reader, the latter is predisposed to accept whatever he learns from Sa'dawi's pen as reliable. If Sa'dawi is now retracting by casting doubt on the validity of the research by Masters and Johnson, and Sherfey, why should the reader, whose access to such 'scientific' data is even more limited than Sa'dawi's, believe them to have any relevance to the prevailing attitudes, or his own views on sexual stereotypes?

Sa'dawi can frequently be found to be wooing the reader thus, only to leave him high and dry before compromising herself. Western readers who are accustomed to a relatively free and uncensored publishing industry, may well feel disappointed at Sa'dawi for failing to pronounce her views more frankly, and for being so universally non-committal. This is not the honesty, self-confidence and courage which she claimed for herself at the outset. Such an attitude as Sa'dawi appears to be taking, can become more palatable to the critical reader if he bears in mind that the Egyptian censors and publishers, can either delete sections or dictate how they should be rewritten right up to the last moment, even with books on non-controversial subjects. In spite of the fact that this book was published outside Egypt, in Beirut, one can detect throughout it, Sa'dawi's reluctance to commit herself.

In concluding this chapter, Sa'dawi digresses to announce her surprise at the extent of violence from the Egyptian husband against his wife, at every social level. Though not strictly relevant to the rest of the chapter, it again sheds light on Egyptian society for the Western reader. Sa'dawi's reasoning is, that the assumption that men are naturally stronger and more highly sexed than women, has been the basis for laws condoning the husband's physical abuse of his wife.

"During my research I was amazed to find quite a large number of educated Egyptian wives still subjected to a beating from their husbands for the slightest of reasons. As for those uneducated or peasant wives, then a beating from their husband was far more common. How often have I heard Egyptian husbands say, 'My wife won't obey

unless she's beaten.' Some men imagine that the woman, by her very nature enjoys being hit.." 33

Sa'dawi gives a great deal of information from endocrinology and embryology to support her central thesis that "the female is the origin": for example, that the embryo develops into a female unless activated by the male hormone.<sup>34</sup> The workings of the chromosomes, as described by Sa'dawi, are probably too complicated to sustain the averagely educated reader's concentration here. He may feel that to take the argument down to the cellular level, to try and prove whether one sex is superior to another or not, is perhaps to strain it too far. At the level of microbiology there are no value judgements that can be made: male and female, whether chromosomes, cells or species, simply function differently.<sup>35</sup>

Sa'dawi dates the recent impulse in the West to study women in society, from the First World War, which saw the entry of a significant number of women into positions previously held by men, and also the spread of socialist ideas. Again we see an idealized, romantic view of what 'freedoms' Sa'dawi imagined the women during and after the war, to have enjoyed. Few would agree with her that the lives of such women were so unproblematic.

"But women's going out to work, their sharing in productivity, and their economic independence, besides the spread of socialist ideas in the world made them take on new characteristics. Women became strong, positive, bold and zealous, capable of bearing the burdens of work outside and inside the home. A woman could smoke, drink, go to parties, choose her man for herself and decide her own course in life without fear. Most of these

women who went out to work and achieved a degree of freedom, independence and equality with men, proved their intellectual and psychological capacities. No one could have said about them that they were passive, weak, masochistic, or any of the other labels psychoanalytical theory has used to describe women."<sup>36</sup>

One only has to bear in mind the social stigma attached during the first sixty years of this century even in the West, to lesbianism, illegitimate children, spinsterhood etc., or the overwhelming obstacles preventing women from entering the professions, to know that Sa'dawi is indulging in some retrospective, sentimental wishful thinking on this subject. She proceeds to use this statement to launch her strongest criticism yet of Freud. His convoluted theory on how a girl becomes a woman and assumes motherhood is conveyed to the reader with a measure of Sa'dawi's derision.

Sa'dawi is obviously fulfilling a great need in her society here by trying to convince women of their sexual completeness and potential autonomy. Amongst the Egyptian 'educated' one would assume, from Sa'dawi's stress on this subject, that Freud's theory on woman as a castrated man, the Oedipus and Electra complexes, to dominate the prevailing stereotypes of men and women. Such 'academic' arguments would not normally be known or used by those of lower educational levels or the illiterate. It would be interesting for Western readers to know by what channels Freudian theory was and perhaps still is, disseminated to the public in Egypt, for it to have such a strong grasp on the ordinary psyche, as Sa'dawi suggests, and for it to be the object of such a forceful crusade. Sa'dawi feels that she has



proved the point that men reversed the facts about women's biology, sexuality and creative role, merely by stating that, and by her references to medieval history, early Judaism and Freudian theory. 'Men's attempts to reverse the facts about women is well-known in history and in the sciences.'<sup>37</sup> Sa'dawi's style of argument is unsatisfactory, however, because she fails to give even once, a clear example of who exactly authorized (or perhaps is still authorizing) the fabrication of evidence against women if in fact it has ever taken place. Freud himself admitted that he had not understood women fully and that his theories were speculation, a matter for which Sa'dawi gives him his due.<sup>38</sup> The link between the formulation of his theory and women's oppression specifically on account of his theory needs to be supplied. Who if anyone decided in Egypt that Freud's theories were to be regarded as the truth? Was it the political, or the orthodox religious leaders during the '50s and '60s, or even the forces of international imperialism that encouraged the spread of psychoanalytic theory, itself a foreign science to the Arabs? Or was it the Egyptian people themselves who, yearning for modernity in the form of Western science, found that Freudian theory most of all gratified the preconceptions they already held en masse as derived from their Islamic culture? If this were so, perhaps it could help to explain the persistency of such ideas and their deep-rootedness in Egyptian society, if Sa'dawi is to be believed? While she would have us imagine the Egyptian people the innocent party in a sly process of indoctrination instigated by Western capitalists, it is important to bear in mind that even though such ideas as Freud's on the psychology of the sexes may be disseminated, it demands a cultured field readily

prepared, for them to gain acceptance. Perhaps an underlying prurience in the Egyptian or Arab psyche was set into reverberation simply by the very discussion of sex and sexuality involved in Freud's theories which then led to their being embraced with such absorbing eagerness, despite the currents of socialist thought under Nasser that sought to involve women more in society?<sup>39</sup> As a possible example of this prurience one might reflect on the custom of female circumcision which was still widespread in Egypt in the 1930s and '40s, (when one assumes Freud's ideas were gaining ground) which concentrated the attention of men, women and girls at every level in society, on the fragment of sexually-responsive flesh, the clitoris. Even the obsession with virginity as an intact hymen, in Egypt, reached far greater degrees of severity, both in its rigid demands and in its penalties for failing to fulfil those conditions, than it ever did in Western society, over the past century. One could perhaps say that Egyptians already had a long history of being overly-preoccupied with female anatomy, even if they did not fully understand the function or intrinsic worth of the clitoris and hymen: the important part they excised; the unimportant, they prized. If Freud's views could hold sway over Western society with its relatively greater freedom from religious taboos on sexuality, and its absence of female circumcision, it is little wonder that in Egypt they found a stronger welcome.

Sa'dawi gives one curious reference to Ferenzi whose theory apparently postulated that,

".. the real meaning of the sex act for both sexes was only the male's desire to return to the mother's womb. He was enabled to attempt that by means of the male organ and the woman had no option but to submit to the man's aggression and find some compensation for that in having a child to care for."<sup>40</sup>

Although she gives no indication here that she subscribes to this view, Sa'dawi chooses to use the image of wanting to return to the womb, a surprising number of times in her fictional works, for example in Ughniyat al-Atfāl al-Dā'iriyya and "Al-Khayṭ". This image amounts to one of her motifs, as characteristic of her style as the defiant staring eyes of the young feminist. It appears as incongruously in the course of the fictional works, as it does in the context here, perhaps because Sa'dawi has not adequately absorbed its implications on the intellectual plane. One theory with which Sa'dawi is in full agreement, is that of Horney's which asserts that if girls or women envy men, it is not through penis envy, as postulated by Freud, but rather because of the social privileges denied to females but enjoyed by males.<sup>41</sup> This too has an echo in Sa'dawi's fiction: her young women 'heroines' show the traits that are typically encouraged in Egyptian boys, but not in girls, such as athleticism, involvement in political activity, a sense of potency, a forthright personality etc.

Sa'dawi insists on extending the concept of the individual's 'sexual' life from earliest childhood to old age, although the term is more usually understood to refer just to heterosexual intercourse.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps she is not entirely justified in this approach since, although breast-feeding, masturbation, childhood games, nocturnal emissions, dreams and sexual fantasies, all contain a sexual element, none of

them is accorded any social ritual in the sense that marriage is a 'rite of passage'. It therefore appears something of a false argument to include them with the more momentous act of intercourse as Sa'dawi does, almost as if they were on the same footing. She scorns those readers who imagine that intercourse marks the onset of sexual life, as being ostriches with their heads in the sand for ignoring the 'truth'.<sup>43</sup>

As before, Sa'dawi relies for her information on Western sources; the research done by Kinsey in the '50s in America, and Masters and Johnson in the following decade. One can tentatively gauge the cultural lag between the two societies, the Western and the Egyptian, by contrasting the circumstances of research into female sexuality. Kinsey's and Masters and Johnson's studies involved thousands of women, and were carried out some 20 years before Sa'dawi was able to conduct her own very limited survey into Egyptian women's sexual experiences.<sup>44</sup> The actual gap separating the two cultures cannot be calculated even now, because the moral and intellectual openness present in the West that permitted surveys on such a scale to be carried out, (and one is thinking here too, of the willingness and ability of women to discuss their intimate lives) does not yet exist on a public or personal level in Egypt even in the late '80s.<sup>45</sup> Once again we can detect Sa'dawi's underlying dilemma: the means to understand her own culture and to have her fellow citizens understand themselves and their sexuality in order to develop their society through greater awareness of their selves, has to be imported from the West. Even Kinsey's statistics that 50% of American women have sex before marriage are already

considerably out of date by the time Sa'dawi is writing in the early '70s.<sup>46</sup> Not only is there the humiliation of having to follow the example of one's arch-enemy, the focus of all popular internal discontent and resentment, namely the West, there is also the problem that such 'scientific' theories as Horney's will be under suspicion on account of Egyptian anti-Western propaganda which would dilute their effectiveness for Sa'dawi's intended purpose. In other words, we have to admit that what the Arabs choose to import in the way of foreign ideas or techniques, is governed by their existing attitudes as an Islamic culture: hence Freudian theory is given credence and takes firm hold while Horney's, Kinsey's and Masters and Johnson's findings, striking no response in the popular awareness, are likely to be rejected as further 'evidence' of Western 'immorality'. One can see this mirrored in the struggle Sa'dawi is having to get her readers to accept that in both sexes, masturbation, curiosity about the sexual organs, sexual dreams and enjoyment of sex are the healthy signs of development, rather than the distorted sado-masochistic extremes which have in Egypt been encouraged by the cults of virginity and male prowess.<sup>47</sup>

Sa'dawi's task is even harder on the subject of introducing a playful element into the sex act. She again adopts a defensive tone:

"Sexual play is natural for human beings, though some imagine it to be unnatural. They imagine the sex act, as it is usually known between men and women, to be the only natural form of sexual practice because it is that which leads to pregnancy and childbirth. As for sexual activity that doesn't lead to pregnancy or childbirth,

some people regard that as abnormal. This is a mistaken view of sexual activity in the life of a human being. Sex play is a normal pursuit found in all mammals, man included. It is the repression of the desire for such sexual play that is the unnatural thing.

Some people believe that this type of play is a new-fangled idea of the cultured or educated classes in search of sexual variety and various new types of sexual excitement. But anyone who looks at the lives of animals, especially mammals, will realize that this sexual playfulness, rather than being a novelty of the cultured or liberated individual, is a normal part of human and animal life." 48

The Western reader would probably be fascinated to know to whom exactly Sa'dawi is referring by the label al-tabaqa al-muthaqqafa,\* meaning those classes who have apparently become liberated enough to indulge in a little sexual adventuring. We might begin next to wonder what forms of activity Sa'dawi envisages under the title of 'sexual play'? Homosexuality, pre-marital or extra-marital sex, prostitution or sex shows, all can have a not unhealthy element of recreation to them. It is definitely a false premise to argue that evidence of 'sexual play' in the animal kingdom legitimizes some kind of equivalent for humans. Apart from the impossibility of determining the degree of 'pleasure' enjoyed by animals engaged in such activities, and trying to identify its equivalent in the lives of human beings, there is the obvious difference that animals neither marry nor have to subordinate their physical demands to mental and emotional pressures from society. None of these points seem to have worried Sa'dawi.

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\* The Arabic could equally well be translated 'educated' or 'cultured' classes.

Sa'dawi is understandably non-committal on the subject of pre-marital sex since this in her country's religion is a punishable offence.<sup>49</sup> She points out that men and women in Europe, America and Scandinavian countries enjoy greater freedoms of sexual relationships. Sa'dawi literally says that these societies "have permitted" (abāhat) such activity. Who has given permission she does not disclose, but the fact that she uses the word 'collapse' (inhiyār) in connection with Western morals, is an indication of her own underlying prejudice towards the West as in some way 'immoral'.

"European countries and America have all permitted the sexual relationship (outside marriage) to men and women after the collapse of Christian morality; Sweden and the other Scandinavian countries are in the lead in this respect."<sup>50</sup>

In Al-Unthā hiya al-Asl there is more in the way of specific practical advice to women on sexual matters than in Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins. In answer to some of their misconceptions, female readers are informed by Sa'dawi that, for example,<sup>51</sup> orgasm is a normal part of sexuality, that there is nothing to prevent the woman from being above the man during intercourse, that there is nothing shameful about taking off one's clothes before sex etc.<sup>52</sup> The fact that Sa'dawi frequently feels the need to use forceful language in a tone of denial such as, "there's no difference between..",<sup>53</sup> "there is nothing to prove that any differences exist..", "another common mistake is that.." and "the basic error of this view has been proved", betokens the presence of forces that have stated the contrary for too long. Sexuality, she states, is an essential part of being human:<sup>54</sup> it is

for love, pleasure and happiness, not only procreation. Whatever hinders the enjoyment of such is most likely to be as a result of social conditioning (al-irtibāt al-shartī,\* another borrowed concept).<sup>55</sup>

The attitude Sa'dawi is taking is very much one of stressing the interests of the individual in regard to his or her personal life. This, as mentioned before in the previous section on Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins is not the traditional orientation of Islamic thought. Even to suggest that Egyptian females have a less restricted upbringing and enjoy their sexuality more fully would seem to many to pose too much of a threat of destabilization to social structures, to be a practicable proposition. To forego the pleasures of a fulfilled sex life may seem to many female readers in Arab society an easier sacrifice to make than to upset the family's order by trying to practise in one's own life, and inculcate in one's children, an unembarrassed approach towards sexuality.<sup>56</sup> More harmful to women than an unfulfilling sex life, however, is the view that women are masochistic, and that some even need aggression to help them enjoy sex. Sa'dawi was surprised to find that a considerable number of educated wives in Egypt believed that a beating from their husbands was not out of the ordinary, and that some husbands almost boasted of the fact that they beat their wives into obedience.<sup>57</sup> Incidences of

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\* There is no standardized term for 'conditioning' in Arabic. The author's translation is not entirely satisfactory because the 'condition' expressed in the word shart connotes the sense of a 'provision' upon which a result depends rather than the acclimatization over a period of time of particular behavioural responses.



marital violence appeared more common the lower the degree of education. Sa'dawi always stresses the situation of man's dominance and woman's subservience within society, and especially where this is obvious in marriage, to sociological and historical factors common to patriarchal cultures in general. By illustrating the form of prejudices against women enshrined in scientific theory that women have suffered from and which have later been disproved, Sa'dawi is inviting her readers to take a critical look at their own society's standards. If she were to address such problems as sado-masochism within male-female relationships with specific reference to her own cultural background, it would be impossible to avoid any accusation from her critics that she was attacking their particular religious ordering of society. Since it is impossible to separate unequivocally what elements in a culture, whether Eastern or Western, which encourage sexist attitudes are determined solely by economic patterns, traditional cultural values or religious dogma, it is probably wisest for Sa'dawi to pursue the lines of reasoning which she does here.

Sa'dawi's strenuous avoidance of any suggestion that there might be anything indigenous in her culture that might have encouraged or still encourage a sado-masochistic element in Egyptian attitudes towards sex is understandable when one takes into account the political environment of her readers and critics. It then becomes easier to see why she has devoted so much effort to refuting such theories, for example, that women are masochistic and that men are physically superior and have a stronger sex-drive, in terms of arguments derived from Western psychology. She is of course right to illustrate these points

in such terms, for women in the West whose quest for equality precedes that of Middle Eastern women, are only themselves recently beginning to win the struggle to determine their own individuality and sexuality.

Sa'dawi is perhaps on safer ground in discussing the subject of anger and depression in the lives of Egyptian women, than trying to disprove sado-masochism within her society. Women are not only in danger of suffering from sexual unfulfilment, but also from depression arising from the repression of their anger. Sa'dawi detects women's bottled-up hatred for other women as rivals for the love of men, she also notices their anger against those forthright women who seek (like Sa'dawi herself) to improve women's lot by exposing their common oppression.<sup>58</sup> The reason for the latter is that the feminist contribution of increasing women's awareness of the injustices they suffer, accentuates the problem for those women who are unable to assert themselves, by bringing their problems even closer to bear. That women are constrained in Egyptian society to repress their anger is amply illustrated by an incident which Sa'dawi relates from her own youth.

"Once when I was a first year medical student (about seventeen years old) catching the bus as I usually did every day to go home, I was standing in the bus, when I felt a man rubbing himself against me from behind. So I turned round and glared at him to make him feel ashamed; but he didn't! So I told him in a voice loud enough for the others to hear, to stop that indecent behaviour; but even this didn't stop him. I then became so angry that I slapped him sharply on the face. At that moment I was reacting instinctively, as any person would who had been insulted. I imagined that my fellow passengers

(some of whom were men, some women) would be on my side against this man. But exactly the opposite happened. The man won the sympathy and support of the men. One of them said, 'Why do women come out of their homes if they don't like this sort of thing?' Another said, 'I've never in my life seen a woman hit a man. This is an insult to us all!' The men all glared at me with eyes full of hatred and anger. As for the women passengers (to my extreme surprise) they sided with the men and one of them said in a soft feminine voice, 'We're all standing in the bus like you, why do you have to be the only one who gets angry in this way?' And an old man who was clinging to one of the women passengers replied, 'Who said that she's like you? The one who slaps a man must be a man herself without doubt.'"<sup>59</sup>

When Sa'dawi related the incident to her mother, the latter advised her never to slap a man, telling her that it would have been far better to have walked home when she found her fellow passengers objectionable. Sa'dawi's brother, however, when he related an incident in which he had been slapped by a schoolmate, was cheered by his mother for returning the insult twofold.

The differences between the sexes in Egyptian society are very much stressed in the emotional sphere: anger is regarded as a masculine attribute, which tends to be expressed in acts of aggression by men directed against society.<sup>60</sup> Sa'dawi explains why women direct their anger inwardly rather than express it to their husband, father or another male figure, as being an indication of their 'slave mentality'.<sup>61</sup> Behind the simpering smile seen on the face of so many Arab wives, there would appear to be a heritage of emotional repression, sadness and anger.

".. women can't get angry, the reason for this is not that they don't naturally experience anger, but because when man subjugated woman, he didn't just deprive her of her honour and the right to name her children, he also wrested anger away from her. He made anger his prerogative and it became a sign of masculinity. As for femininity, that came to mean that a woman had to smile whatever happened to her. A woman's femininity, mild temper and meekness were under suspicion unless she smiled continuously. If she frowned or looked serious, then she wasn't classed as a woman." 62

The only cure for depression when it is caused by repressed hatred, Sa'dawi suggests, is for the woman to be separated from a husband whom she hates, or the lifestyle she dislikes, for a more congenial environment. 63 Such drastic measures can only be taken if the woman is sufficiently independent as Sa'dawi proceeds to explain. 64 She contrasts Freud's views on the mentality of women and how he failed to take into account what she refers to as the "most dictatorial regime" in history, 65 namely marriage, in trying to explain why women appeared to be less intelligent than men. Continuing her theme of the female as the 'original', she reminds the reader that the human brain develops first as female, in the womb, and will continue to develop thus, only changing into the male if acted on by the male hormones. If women are believed to be generally unintelligent, then the answer is to be found in social conditions. Her own hatred for her society's values and its traditional marriage is expressed in such strong anti-social language as:

"A woman's success in society means that she is good at washing the plates, mending socks, cooking and knowing how to keep her husband. Intellectual success, intelligence or academic excellence, are

all considered to detract from her femininity. So how can a woman develop her mental ability? How can she let her innate intelligence show through? The wife's intelligence violates the husband's masculinity. The woman must hide her intelligence in order to keep her married life from collapsing. This is how wives become stupid. Stupidity is synonymous with success in marriage."<sup>66</sup>

(Note the angry generalizations at the end.) Sa'dawi understands how the majority of men would find such wives preferable to the clever, independent type. But it is the latter, she confidently asserts, who will make the mature enlightened man a more rewarding partner.<sup>67</sup>

Women should thus not let themselves be persuaded that childbirth is the only 'creative' act open to them. She argues that if there is a noticeable dearth of female geniuses, inventors, artists and writers, it is due to the fact that women's voices have been bridled, as part of patriarchal society's plot to ensure their sexual subordination by compelling them to be preoccupied with 'time-wasting' tasks in the home.

Sa'dawi is unable to explain why some women have actually come to like their 'restricted' life in her society, and enjoy playing a traditional role.<sup>68</sup> It is a far more complicated question to answer in terms of mass psychology than to come to conclusions that depression is frequently caused by inhibited anger. It would be interesting to have some insight into what there is in the traditional Egyptian lifestyle that satisfies women enough to make them prize the values of submissiveness and virginity in their daughters and daughters-in-law. Sa'dawi would ideally like to see all women protesting against the

injustices and inequalities of the patriarchal class system which has evolved in Egypt, but due to the particular moral and educational climate in Egypt resulting from its situation as a developing socialist nation adhering to its Islamic culture, there exist noticeable rifts between women within the same class and within the same family. Sa'dawi can find no conclusion which satisfies the reader as to why women who supposedly share the same social oppressions do not automatically use their common feelings to achieve solidarity.<sup>69</sup>

"Women see other women as rivals and hate them. A mother loves her son more than her daughter, imagining that he will compensate her for the frustrations of her own life as a woman. As for her daughter, she is only a female like herself, in other words, she belongs to that same inferior sex. This feeling of the mother's is reflected on her daughter. The girl feels sorrow, sadness and disappointment in regard to her mother whose lot she imagines will be hers too."<sup>70</sup>

Nor can Sa'dawi shed any light on the phenomenon that it is one generation of women who restrict the next, other than the fact that wives do it to please their husbands. This is in spite of her vivid simile of the father as the prison director and the mother, as the one charged with carrying out the sentences on the prisoners.

"The father, however, usually leaves the task of restricting the daughter to her mother. He's playing here the role of the prison governor. He is the one who issues the order for detention or execution, but he won't dirty his hands with blood or by contact with iron chains. He leaves the business of carrying out the sentences to that inferior species of wretches who work as jailers or executioners." (i.e. wives)<sup>71</sup>

When we arrive at an understanding of the reasons for women oppressing their own sex from reading, for example, the scholarly work of Lerner, we can begin to envisage the problem from the Egyptian point of view. Only then can we start to appreciate some of the deeper issues which operate to thwart the efforts of those like Sa'dawi who seek to help women improve their lot. Lerner recognizes that women will continue to oppress their own sex, though she sees it more in terms of those of a higher social class oppressing those of a lower, until women at every level become aware of their social situation, their real history and the workings of patriarchal society. Lerner says:

"The system of patriarchy can function only with the cooperation of women. This cooperation is secured by a variety of means: gender indoctrination; educational deprivation; the denial to women of knowledge of their history; the dividing of women, one from the other, by defining 'respectability' and 'deviance' according to women's sexual activities; by restraints and outright coercion; by discrimination in access to economic resources and political power; and by awarding class privileges to conforming women."<sup>72</sup>

She also points out that:

"Women always shared the class privileges of men of their class as long as they were under 'the protection' of a man. For women, other than those of the lower classes, the 'reciprocal agreement' went like this: in exchange for your sexual, economic, political, and intellectual subordination to men you may share the power of men of your class to exploit men and women of the lower class. In class society it is difficult for people who themselves have some power, however limited and circumscribed, to see themselves also as deprived

and subordinated. Class and racial privileges serve to undercut the ability of women to see themselves as part of a coherent group, which, in fact, they are not, since women uniquely of all oppressed groups occur in all strata of the society." 73

Lerner also has reservations about the term 'oppression' of women.

"The word 'oppression' implies victimization; indeed, those who apply it to women frequently conceptualize women-as-a-group primarily as victims. This way of thinking is misleading and ahistorical. While all women have been victimized in certain aspects of their lives and some, at certain times, more than others, women are structured into society in such a way that they are both subjects and agents... The word 'oppression' focuses on a wrong; it is subjective in that it represents the consciousness of the subject group that they have been wronged. The word implies a power struggle, defeat resulting in the dominance of one group over the other. It may be that the historical experience of women includes 'oppression' of this kind, but it encompasses considerably more. Women, more than any other group, have collaborated in their own subordination through their acceptance of the sex-gender system. They have internalized the values that subordinate them to such an extent that they voluntarily pass them on to their children. Some women have been 'oppressed' in one aspect of their lives by fathers or husbands, while they themselves have held power over other women and men. Such complexities become invisible when the term 'oppression' is used to describe the condition of women as a group."74

These lengthy quotations from Lerner are necessary to help us understand Sa'dawi's work and to keep it in a realistic perspective. We can then see clearly the passion behind Sa'dawi's campaigns, clouding her ability at times to analyze objectively and preventing her from gaining even greater insight into the heart of the problem. Sa'dawi's reaction to her subjects is primarily an emotional one rather than a coolly



controlled intellectual one. The reader finds himself constantly aware of Sa'dawi's mental state whether it be her anger, her contempt, her annoyance, her pity, her frustration, even her grudges against Western capitalists. The passion in her writing of course has its role in sweeping along her like-minded readers by tapping those currents of frustration within them.

One difficulty which Sa'dawi faces is that of trying to convince Arab women, particularly those of middle-class, that going out to work is in their own interests. At the time of writing, women who worked outside the home suffered a double burden because of being expected to perform all domestic tasks besides their job, not to mention discrimination at the workplace itself. The Egyptian education system is not particularly geared to training either sex to find intellectually fulfilling careers which will develop the individual's character. It is little wonder that work is still regarded by many women as nothing more than a source of extra income, or a stopgap until marriage. Earl Sullivan, in his study Women in Egyptian public life has this to say about the growing trend towards female employment in Egypt:

"Virtually all growth in female employment is accounted for by education, with most employed women working as teachers, clerks, health workers, and government civil servants. It is difficult to find a good job in Egypt, but as university graduates enjoy guaranteed government employment, it can be expected that growing numbers of women will seek the degrees that lead to jobs. As of the early 1980s, female enrollment in university programs has stabilized at about 32% of the total, having remained at that level since 1979. Although women still constitute less than 15% of the formal labor force, the number of working women is

increasing as is their percentage contribution to the total labor force. It is difficult to exaggerate the significance of this development. Although by Western terms the progress achieved to date may be considered modest.." \* 75

Freud is often singled out for blame in Sa'dawi's works, just as he has been one of the main targets of feminist criticism in the West. In addition to his theories which lent support to patriarchal values, he was primarily concerned with the subconscious mind and sexuality, (the latter a source of even greater fascination to those in sexually-repressive societies like the Egyptian and other Middle Eastern societies). Sa'dawi appears, however, to be ignoring the fact that the idea of women as incomplete or mutilated was not introduced into the Middle East by Freud, but had been circulating in Western civilization at least since the time of Aristotle, and in the Muslim East since his works entered there in translation, if not before. When scholars in the 9th-10th centuries translated Greek texts into Arabic, under the patronage of Muslim leaders, they found Aristotle more appropriate to their taste than the more advanced humanistic thought of Plato. This might have been due to the fact that either they could not understand Plato's higher philosophical ideas, or that Aristotle reinforced their own ideas already derived from the Muslim sciences of theology and jurisprudence.<sup>76</sup> By whatever means such ideas of women as the weaker sex, fit only for domesticity, gained reinforcement in the form of philosophical and medical theories in the Muslim world, they soon became very definitely entrenched in its culture, despite the

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\* Sullivan is writing here of conditions some ten years after those Sa'dawi describes.

occasional hypothesis that women might have a more active nature. For example, in trying to account for the woman's potential to create fitna\* Al-Ghazzali credited them with an active sexuality and a form of ejaculation equivalent to that of men.<sup>77</sup> Those seeking to defend Islam's record on being non-sexually repressive for women, eagerly alight on and exaggerate such strains of thought in the important philosophers. Yet elsewhere we find Sa'dawi taking Al-Ghazzali to task for relegating women to a domestic role.<sup>78</sup>

Feminists and would-be reformers like Mernissi and Sa'dawi, who try to reinterpret their cultural heritage as being positive in relation towards the expression of female sexuality, consistently fail to differentiate between the philosophical or medical theories of Al-Ghazzali and Ibn Sina, for example, which were never embraced by the community at large, and which never formed an integral part of its mores, and those theories which were embraced and lent each society its distinct culture. While Western scholars might try to trace the historical flow of ideas from one civilization to another and their subsequent fusion into a new culture, this orientation and intellectual discipline has not been a feature of Middle Eastern scholarship. It thus makes the problem of analyzing historical and social influences and the forces which mould society, that much more difficult for those like Sa'dawi who might attempt to delve into history to sift the true from the false, the misguided from the authentic, in order to ease social pressures today.

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\* The same word 'fitna' is used for the seductive power of women's charm, and also for civil discord.

Of central importance to Al-Unthā hiya al-Asl is Sa'dawi's argument against patriarchy which we can detect has been derived from feminist and Socialist theory. By uncritically adopting such theories that stress the historical process that led to the development of patriarchy as starting with an overthrow of women by men and continuing as a struggle between two opposing camps, Sa'dawi is ignoring a crucial element in the situation of women as it evolved in accordance with the demands of patriarchal culture. In order to dismantle patriarchal society and reformulate its values into recognizing the female vision of life, Sa'dawi needs not only to attack the most glaring injustices towards women, practised under Egypt's sexist patriarchal culture, but also to examine what women have gained (and perhaps still gain) through complicity with the system. On one side, there are the factors which have made women unable to rebel, such as economic dependence on men, religious injunctions and taboos and prohibitive laws, while on the other, there are factors which have made women unwilling to rebel, which Sa'dawi does not consider here. To face these issues involves a high degree of self-criticism, which makes it unpalatable to many women. In short, it could be argued that women have enjoyed the spurious respectability bestowed on themselves by society for nothing more arduous than getting married, and performing the natural function of childbirth, an act which in itself requires no talent, training or particular qualification. They have enjoyed too the ability to climb the social ladder simply through marriage, without having to earn or acquire it through excellence, noble birth, wealth, industry or even deception. They have enjoyed men's flattering attentions to their natural beauty and have been valued

for their specifically female attributes as women, mothers and lovers without being under the stress of having to develop any further individual talents. Women have also been rewarded for fulfilling their male-governed society's expectations, whether it is for giving their virginity intact, or producing a male heir; two more 'accomplishments' which are largely beyond their control. In a society that discriminates heavily between respectable and unrespectable women, the former, who have acquired status so easily are encouraged to feel a smug self-satisfaction in regard to themselves and an unwarranted contempt for those who have 'fallen' into the latter category. Women have to face the possibility of some complacency, intolerance or even spitefulness, which they might have shown (and still be showing) to their own sex, in complying tacitly with the demands of the patriarchal system. In Sa'dawi's society, there are great pressures on the individual to marry. Indeed it is enjoined in Islamic culture as a virtue. Women also see themselves as benefitting from the traditional marriage because it affords them legitimacy, not only in social and moral terms, but also in religious.<sup>79</sup>

Sa'dawi is correct in seeing the laws of marriage as being oppressive the world over, for regarding women as objects and empowering men with most, if not all rights.<sup>80</sup> She searches in her culture's history for examples of alternatives to marriage and brings to the reader's attention the various forms of polyandry practised in pre-Islamic times and the kind of equality that existed between the sexes in ancient Egypt. Sa'dawi hopes to strengthen the case for women's sexual autonomy today by demonstrating that the present

patterns of monogamy and polygamy in Egypt have not always existed as society's solution to sexuality. This argument is not entirely satisfactory because it is likely that Sa'dawi's readers would not consider either their pre-Islamic or ancient Egyptian past as worthy of emulation today or as providing any justification for sexual equality in their contemporary society.

Sa'dawi challenges the existing concepts of motherhood and fatherhood as a way of trying to persuade women to abandon the familiar stereotypes of their role in society.<sup>81</sup> It is the cultural environment, says Sa'dawi, which dictates the respective roles of men and women. She illustrates this idea with reference to Margaret Mead whom she quotes as having observed strong 'maternal' feelings even birth pangs, among fathers in primitive societies where the father was by tradition the child raiser.<sup>82</sup>

By now the Egyptian reader, if he or she has gone along with Sa'dawi's arguments, will have been persuaded that men and women are theoretically almost interchangeable in society and are only differentiated physiologically according to sex. It is worth noting here too, how Sa'dawi makes no mention of the staggering hormonal changes which take place inside a woman during the late part of pregnancy which in many women have a profound effect on altering their perspectives on life. This omission of Sa'dawi's seems unusual for one who is a doctor and mother herself.

The chapter on prostitution is particularly disappointing in regard to its content, for Sa'dawi does little else but ply the reader with one example after another of sacred prostitution in various bygone eras. From this type of writing the reader has the impression that the information has been lifted directly from another source and roughly paraphrased to suggest the author's breadth of study. There is little here in the way of original research, if anything, or information about the condition of Egyptian prostitutes today, in spite of the fact that Sa'dawi tells us that she had talked with many such women.<sup>83</sup> In order to gain sympathy for women as the victims in the practice of prostitution, which is controlled by and for men, she launches her chapter with an emotional appeal to her readers to correct the injustices forced upon the weak and poor by the rich and powerful. She whips up the desired sense of outrage in her readers by a tirade against the United States whose millions spent on space travel, she believes, would solve much of the disease and poverty of the Third World.<sup>84</sup> The reader is expected to perceive this as an abuse of power and then draw a parallel with that exercised by men over women. The fact that an Egyptian husband is not punished for making use of a prostitute unless it is in the family home, and that his evidence in court is even regarded as incriminatory against the woman, would suggest a serious need for Egyptians to revise their own laws. Yet Sa'dawi does not call here for such reforms. More attention to this aspect of the subject would appear to be far more urgently needed than descriptions of Babylonian and Phoenician temple prostitution and the adventure of one 15th-century Emperor Sigismund!<sup>85</sup>

In the chapter on 'Repression, fear and lying', Sa'dawi illustrates her theory on the psychological problems suffered by women on account of trying to adapt to Egyptian society. It is probable that she had conducted most if not all her research into women's psychological stress which she was to document in her book al-Mar'awa'l-Sirā' al-Nafsi.<sup>86</sup> The picture of Egyptian women that emerges suggests that many of them suffer a high level of personal distress. Many girls and women confessed to struggling with such feelings as, "If I spoke frankly about or did what I really feel or think, I would be rejected by the society around me."<sup>87</sup> Sa'dawi's illustration of this point allows the Western reader to gain an inside view of the Egyptian domestic scene.

"A woman's feelings of love or hate must be repressed or appear only in a socially-acceptable form. She can show her hatred for her maidservant for example, and can express it with an aggressiveness that society finds acceptable. For example, wives beating their female servants is accepted. But a woman must restrain her hatred for her husband, father, boss, or any other man in a position of authority or of a superior social class. This also happens in the case of feelings of love: there is love that she is forbidden to show and love which she must go to great lengths to show, like her love for her children, total devotion to the needs of her husband, father or family." 88

The Western reader may be surprised at the psychological service the maidservant is performing to her mistress besides the household chores, as a vent for her frustrated anger.

Next, one finds Sa'dawi's elaborate theory on the need for a sense of continuity of time both in the lives of individuals and in their



communities. She feels that the restraints on women deny them the freedom to connect their past and present lives to their future aspirations.

"Intimidation and repression and other practices aimed at blocking the path towards awareness in women are really nothing other than an attempt to cut the ties that bind those continuing cycles of time in the individual's life and to separate the past from the present and the future. It has become dangerous for a woman to retain her past as a continuous part of her present and future, and so she tries to sever it from her life, something which she can never do entirely... it becomes like a foreign body which she is forced to carry around with her. Because of this, events from the past (especially sexual ones) often cause psychological and emotional problems for girls and women." <sup>89</sup>

She goes on to say:

"These few women who have acquired a greater degree of awareness, independence of character and success at work are the ones who can acknowledge their past and be proud of every experience they have been through because they are a part of themselves. These women are able to make others respect them. This is the courageous sincerity which gives the individual the basic ingredients of mental health, for the person who is in this state of mind (whether man or woman) becomes reconciled with all aspects of his life (past, present and future).."<sup>90</sup>

According to Sa'dawi's theory, lacking a sense of continuity between one's past, present and future is the by-product of some form of domination: on the individual's level it is society's and men's domination of women. Sa'dawi believes, however, that an analogy can be extended to the international level and considers that an integral part of imperialist exploitation is the calculated intention of

severing the colonized from their past and future, however this might be achieved. This is how Sa'dawi presents her theory:

"Individuals are like nations here, the strong psychologically-sound individual is the one whose successive stages in life interconnect and who owns his heritage and can make use of it in planning his future. To forget one's past, ignore it or cut it away, means that the future is not built on a firm foundation. Therefore the future of individuals and nations is weakened when their past is uprooted. Imperialism in its various forms and at various periods realized this fact and, whether it was military or economic, it always needed psychological imperialism to back it up. Imperialists made exhaustive efforts to erase the past of the peoples they colonized, or to put barriers between their past, present and future, so that the future was something hanging in the air, likely to fall at the slightest movement.

How often our Egyptian society has been exposed over the centuries to such foreign colonists who wanted to separate our past, present and future so that we would live with a disconnected history and become a weak nation.." 91

It may, however, be argued that this tendency to view time as a static series of episodes rather than the accumulation of cause and effect, action and reaction, over successive periods in social history has been encouraged by the dominant currents of thought in Arab cultures over recent centuries. Bernard Lewis says:

"The word 'atomistic' is often used to describe a habit of mind and outlook, recognisable in many aspects of the civilisation of the Arab and dominant in the later stages of his history. By this is meant the tendency to view life and the universe as a series of static, concrete and disjunct entities, loosely linked in a sort of mechanical or even casual association by circumstances of the mind of an individual, but having no organic interrelation of their own." 92

One has a strong impression that Sa'dawi with her own campaigns is trying to cut her people off from the stagnant modes of thought, traditional prejudices and false dogma which their history has bequeathed them.

It is interesting to note that Sa'dawi does give a little attention in passing to those men who become victims of the social system, who are sentenced as criminals perhaps, or subjected to various treatments in mental hospitals, which suggests that in some cases there are attempts made to redress the abuse done to young girls:

"While I was listening to the words of this young man, a large number of the other inmates of this section (the criminals' section) gathered around and a young peasant chap said in his broad accent, 'God is merciful and forgiving but people aren't. For example, I was sitting in the field under a tree, a little girl came to play with me and I put my finger somewhere, without meaning any harm. She didn't cry out but seemed to enjoy it. Nothing happened to her, but they beat me and accused me of violating her honour and they put electrodes on my head.'" <sup>93</sup>

Sa'dawi comes to a definite conclusion after meeting such men accused of sex crimes:

"What I would like to point out here is the link between extreme religiosity and strict repression, and the link between that repression and psychological breakdown." <sup>94</sup>

Sa'dawi does not feel able to comment on the actual links which she has observed. Also the climate of opinion in Egypt would not then,

and will not even today, allow such a thesis to be explored further. Throughout the chapter 'Religion, morals and mental health', whose title might appear to promise a thorough analysis of the above proposition, Sa'dawi steers well clear of tackling any issues connected with the possible interrelation of these three fields. The Western reader may find this frustrating if he were looking for evidence of a link between the social and sexual problems, particularly those of women, that are specific to Sa'dawi's culture and shared by Arab cultures in general. The utmost criticism that Sa'dawi can deliver against her own culture has to rely heavily on implication and incomplete argument of a chiefly humanistic tone. Sa'dawi depends on the emotive capacity such terms as 'truth, love, justice' and 'freedom' have for arousing the reader to a higher level of humanity and personal responsibility. Rather than observing any of the very real differences in world view presented by the various religions of Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism, Sa'dawi lumps them all together along with humanitarian morality. Her emphasis on the latter in so far as it is integral to each of the main religions to various degrees, would appear to indicate which elements in such systems of thought deserve priority in human relations. She is unable to be more detailed in the definition of the principles of morality which she feels are the essence of religion, but which obviously differ markedly from one culture to another in their sense and application.

"All religions and all humanitarian moral principles call for truth, love, freedom and justice between people regardless of their differences (men, women, children, rich, poor, black, white etc.). There is no contradiction between these principles and mental

health, for the very constituents of mental health are: truth, justice, freedom and love."<sup>95</sup>

Sa'dawi then goes on to ask readers to concentrate on the humanitarian aspects of their own religion as motivation for their behaviour.

"But what is religion? Is it that series of prayers and religious rituals which is carried out inside mosques and churches? Or is religion the striving of the human being towards truth, justice, freedom and love amongst human beings?"<sup>96</sup>

Sa'dawi concentrates on explaining religion in generally socialist terms without attempting any detailed examination of the main ideas derived from the religions found in her own culture which have played such a strong role in conditioning public attitudes. While to an outsider it would appear to be vital to examine whatever strong influences circulated in a society which might have a strong bearing on personal behaviour and on moulding public attitudes, in Sa'dawi's writing the constant deviation from particular discussion of these crucial elements, can only but bring to his attention time after time the impossibility of, and the danger inherent in such an undertaking. He may well have the impression that what is left unsaid is of far greater significance than what is said. Where Sa'dawi might feel restricted from expressing her own views, she feels no restriction on using other people's theories to illustrate what she feels are relevant points; for example, she chooses to mention Freud's idea that religion can be a danger to people in so far as it prevents them from using their minds and critical faculties, and can pose a hindrance to their developing a genuine brotherly love for their fellows and a spirit of

truthfulness and freedom.<sup>97</sup> By introducing an example of Erich Fromm's thought, that religions can be divided into those that are humanistic and those that are authoritarian, Sa'dawi is giving the Arab reader the chance to think about his own religion in the light of Fromm's argument.<sup>98</sup> The point on which she particularly focuses is Fromm's theory that in authoritarian religions the individual projects the 'good' qualities of wisdom, truth, justice, etc., onto the deity upon whom he feels he must rely because of his personal inadequacies and inability to cope with his own negative traits. Fear of the god's divine wrath determines the believer's behaviour and attitudes, and induces even greater self-abasement. The further the individual feels alienated from his own potential for good, the greater he feels the need to worship.<sup>99</sup> If Sa'dawi had not sensed the relevance of this theory to the mentality and beliefs typically found amongst those sharing her culture, she would probably not have felt the need to give so much attention to Fromm here.

After outlining briefly, the socialist view of religion as developing out of an initial revolutionary movement for social justice, Sa'dawi goes on to give a veiled criticism of her country's government. This may well have had much to do with the growing influence in Sa'dawi's life of Sherif Hetata, to whom as we have seen, this book is dedicated. Note the tone of revolutionary fervour and radicalism, in addition to the generalizations in her statement that it is the 'best' people who end up in prison. It is perhaps just as well that Sa'dawi had this view, because she herself was to be arrested six years later, and held as one of those whose ideas conflicted with those

of the authorities:

"Most religions begin as humanitarian, but with the passing of time and the triumph of dictatorial regimes, with the vast majority at the mercy of a dominating exploitative minority, the rulers reach a state where they can exploit religion rather than anything else, in the life of the people. They then strip religion of its humanitarian content and of its basic intrinsic values, and make it like a sword held at the necks of the people. Thus an authoritarian religion becomes compatible with an authoritarian regime, which it in fact aids, in the exploitation of the people under the guise of resounding slogans and maxims.

Hard labour, struggle, being content with a low wage, and sacrificing one's life for the sake of the homeland.. all these are the 'great' values which are imposed on the ruled majority. As for those of the ruling minority, they enjoy peace and comfort, the satisfaction of their greed for wealth, high salaries, and exemption from having to give their life for the sake of the patriotic struggle. Not surprisingly, in these regimes, double-standards govern everything: which results from the rulers saying one thing before the people, while doing the opposite in actual practice. The false double meanings of words which mean the opposite of what they say, gain ground, and truth, justice, freedom and love are vaunted by all. Reality overflows with lies, hypocrisy and injustice, hatred and restrictions: the prisons and mental hospitals are crowded. Under such regimes, the best human beings can find themselves in a prison cell or in a special ward in a mental hospital, there isn't much difference between the two. The political rebel is one who rejects lying, injustice and hatred, who endeavours with all his might to replace the social system by one built on justice, truth, freedom and love. The psychologically frustrated person, man or woman, is one who is unable to be a revolutionary hero like the former, but yet at the same time, is unable to stifle his conscience completely, as other people do. He therefore suffers if he has to engage in lying, hatred or injustice, which induces in him some kind of neurosis, anxiety, insomnia, depression or hysteria." 100

Sa'dawi has introduced then, right at the end of the book, albeit tentatively, the political dimension. It now appears from what she writes that it is not Egypt's patriarchal history and institutions which are entirely to blame for present social problems, but rather its political leaders. Sa'dawi goes on to suggest that authoritarianism is not only a characteristic of the state in its form of government and the use which it makes of a particular ideology, but that it is also a typical feature of Egyptian family life:

"It must be admitted that the relationship between fathers and mothers and their children is based on fear and obedience, rather than on discussion, freedom and love. Many parents imagine that strict discipline and intimidation are all that are required in bringing up sons and daughters properly. They do not realize the danger to their children's mental health from this type of upbringing. They consider obedience a laudable trait and may even boast of how their offspring obey them and never rebel against their authority. But the truth is that this kind of obedience is not a praiseworthy quality but rather a symptom of psychological disorder.."101

It is essential for Middle Eastern feminists writing in the Middle East to understand from every angle the sexism operating within their societies, for it is sexism which everywhere is responsible for women's inferior status. I should like to draw attention here to the fact that sexism is distinct from patriarchy: the former, being the belief in male superiority, automatically implies female degradation. Sexism can exist in spite of legislation intended to achieve egalitarianism between the sexes. Hence even if patriarchal institutions are completely abolished in Egypt, sexism will remain as surely as it has in other socialist states where men and women enjoy equality before the



law, until such time, that is, as the humanitarian consciousness of the people as a whole reaches a sufficiently high standard for a new morality to develop. The other element is that 'patriarchy' essentially means the institutionalization of men's dominance over the family, their wives and children. Although it implies that all important decision-making positions in society are held by men, it does not imply that women are humiliated, deprived of rights or unable to exert pressure on men to force changes in their own lives, or in society as a whole. Sexist attitudes are embodied in the traditional culture of a society and reinforced by the dominant belief systems, whether this is religious or political ideology. The different roles performed by the sexes may exhibit a beneficial complementarity and cooperation in a patriarchal society, whereas in a sexist society, the female's role will always be to some degree humiliating and constricted. Egyptian society is therefore primarily sexist, which is confirmed in its particular patriarchal institutions. Responsible for both of these are the dominant ideas that have circulated in Egypt over the widest area and reached the majority of minds, educated or uneducated. It is the development of these ideas and their passage from one generation to another which have reinforced Egypt's own brand of sexism.

The Western reader might feel that Sa'dawi's stress on her society's problems being the result of purely political and economic causes or foreign capitalist designs is misleading the Egyptian reader by not encouraging him to practise an analysis of those elements in his environment which are more directly to blame for social

problems, and that Sa'dawi is perhaps even misleading herself here, and in the long run frustrating any authentic movement to address the issue of the individual's psychology in relation to his family and society. Once again it is the lacunae in her arguments and conclusions which point clearly to the outside observer the intellectual deficiencies characteristic of the educated Egyptian which arise from the intimidating curbs on free expression which operate in Sa'dawi's society. One can sense the fears and feeling of suffocation experienced by the pioneer who is motivated by humanitarian concern and scientific reason rather than religious or political zeal, which has been such a constant feature of Egyptian history over the last century.

Sa'dawi is, of course, only too aware of what dangers are inherent in her society as a result of the repression of the individual's character. By using the word 'repression' (kabt) she seems to imply that there already exist potentially helpful sources of knowledge within her society to which some people are being denied access by others. The immediate success, though, of Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins and the present volume would appear to indicate a dearth of information on feminist, medical, psychological and sexual subjects on even the most elementary level. It might be more true to say that these ideas, facts and theories have not yet gained entry to Sa'dawi's society until her books began to circulate. Rather than being a form of repression by one minority section who knows, of information which it fears would threaten its position if the majority were to know, it might be more accurate to account for this lack of general knowledge

in the 1970s in Egypt as being the logical result of the attitudes generated in a culture that has been unable to foster the spirit of free inquiry and logic, besides being evidence of the vast problems which Egypt faces in educating its population which directly arise from the physical circumstances of poverty.

Throughout the 1980s Egyptians have been struggling with their feelings of cultural insecurity. This has found its expression chiefly in an interest in reviving what are regarded as religious values. The popularity of religious style dress worn by increasing numbers of young women, the sporting of beards in young men and the stronger denunciation of sexual behaviour outside of marriage, might appear to indicate that the Egyptian people on the whole are not yet psychologically ready for the basically secular, individualist and egalitarian ideas which Sa'dawi propounds.<sup>102</sup> The very alacrity with which the recent socio-religious movements have spread, especially amongst the newly-educated, might suggest a greater predisposition among Egyptians for being an accepted member of the larger community than for the individualism required to enable one to live independently, for example, to reject marriage voluntarily, to admit to a personal need for sex before marriage, or to renounce or change one's religious or philosophical beliefs. Sa'dawi's readers will not be able to achieve that psychological maturity, and practise that equality in their relationships which she advocates, until they are willing to face its negative consequences. They will have to cope with the problems of self-sufficiency, sexual rejection by a partner, living with doubt, and having to take responsibility for the forging of

their own changing moral and spiritual values at different stages of their lives, and the consequent uncertainties and crises which these always entail. Sa'dawi does not mention the possibility of these adverse aspects of the quest for maturity. So far, if they are recognized at all, in her society, they are branded as examples of Western promiscuity and moral degradation which suggests that they are essentially misunderstood as being the very factors which can encourage the development of a mature character.<sup>103</sup>

Sa'dawi imagines the problem of the individual's gaining independence and a sense of personal freedom to be solved purely by having a creative career, and love in one's life: neither of which she defines in sufficiently practical terms to be of constructive guidance to her readers. As if realizing the difficulties that she cannot even begin to tackle through her writing, all she can offer is the hope that young people in Egypt today will be lucky enough to find a wise, free-thinking individual who can guide them.

"Occasionally a young person is lucky and circumstances lead him or her to a broad-minded open-hearted individual with whom he or she can engage in a free and unheated discussion. From such contact he can emerge with a sound heart and mind, without feeling guilty about the fact that he thinks, and able to learn how to listen to others' ideas, how to discuss them and how his own belief in anything must depend on his real personal conviction, not on fear or imitation. Such a young man or woman will in the future become an individual whose thought is unfettered, and who has the capacity to think freely on any subject.." 104

Although this appeared to Sa'dawi in the early '70s to be the saving grace for the young Egyptian, it has curiously not proved to hold true as a general rule. There is evidence of young people today in the late '80s choosing to adopt less tolerant attitudes and stricter values of personal morality even after a relatively unrestricted upbringing by open-minded parents who might themselves have been influenced by Sa'dawi's writings. This is the direct opposite of the problem as envisaged by Sa'dawi. She saw the parents as frequently the stumbling block in the path of the child's psychological maturity, but many young people today are paradoxically rejecting the liberal views of their parents in favour of stricter more traditional values.

This second volume of sociological study relating to women, therefore continues to elaborate on the themes discussed in Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins. They are shown here in more scientific detail and Sa'dawi can be seen to be heavily reliant for her data on outside sources, all of which are Western. From the emphasis that she gives to refuting Freud, for example, and to the biological 'proof' that "the female is the origin", one can sense that her readers' most pressing need for facts is still very much on the subjects of sexuality and psychology. Whilst the female may well be the 'original' of the species, in that each new generation can be seen to be produced out of the female, Sa'dawi can ultimately draw no evidence from this, that women today are inherently superior, more 'original', or even equal

to men. All that biology can tell us is that where male and female are necessary for reproduction, they simply perform different roles.

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References to Al-Unthā hiya al-Asl

- 1) Al-Unthā hiya al-Asl, p. 48. Lester Ward, an American sociologist (1841-1913), whose biological research into the reproduction of plants and animals led him to conclude that in terms of the survival of a species, it was the female whose role was of greater importance; the male he recognized as having only the role of fertilizer.
- 2) Al-Unthā hiya al-Asl, p. 9.
- 3) Ibid., p. 11.
- 4) Ibid., p. 14.
- 5) Ibid., p. 12.
- 6) Ibid., p. 13.
- 7) Ibid., pp. 13-14.
- 8) Ibid., p. 206.
- 9) Ibid., p. 19.
- 10) Ibid., p. 20.

- 11) Gerda Lerner, The creation of patriarchy, Oxford, 1986, p. 31.
- 12) Al-Unthā hiya al-Asl, p. 20.
- 13) Ibid., p. 25.
- 14) Ibid., p. 27.
- 15) Ibid., p. 28.
- 16) Ibid., pp. 9, 42-3. Sa'dawi admits to having been so disturbed by the casual and ineffectual use of electric shock therapy, to say nothing of its cruelty, for simple cases of family discord, when she was working in the Qasr al-Aini hospital in the department of mental illness, that she argued with the leading professor against such treatments and subsequently resigned. To her relief she discovered later that the electric shock therapy had been proved ineffective and had been discredited even by its originator.
- 17) Ibid., p. 33.
- 18) Sa'dawi admitted in conversation, (June 1986) that she had not read de Beauvoir's Le Deuxième Sexe or even the two famous feminist works of Qasim Amin which are in Arabic.
- 19) Al-Unthā hiya al-Asl, p. 47.



- 20) Ibid., pp. 45, 157, 199; also Ibsen, Tolstoy, Chekov, Shaw etc., p. 99.
- 21) Ibid., p. 45.
- 22) See her short story, "Lan tajidih yā Laylā" in the collection Hanān Qalīl, where this point is argued out in fictional form.
- 23) Al-Unthā hiya al-Asl, p. 53.
- 24) The creation of patriarchy, p. 234.
- 25) See her story, "Al-Jarīma al-'Uzmā" in the volume Maut Ma'ālī al-Wazīr Sābiqan, discussed below.
- 26) Al-Unthā hiya al-Asl, pp. 60-61.
- 27) Ibid., p. 63.
- 28) Ibid., p. 67.
- 29) Ibid., p. 70.
- 30) Ibid., p. 71.
- 31) Ibid., pp. 72-3.

- 32) Ibid., p. 73.
- 33) Ibid., p. 74.
- 34) Ibid., p. 82.
- 35) Ibid., p. 85. One can sense from her tone that Sa'dawi, if given the choice, would prefer science to come down squarely in favour of female superiority.
- 36) Ibid., p. 87.
- 37) Ibid., p. 92.
- 38) Ibid., p. 8.
- 39) The position of Egyptian women was certainly improved under Nasser and Sadat, following the Free Officers' Revolution in 1952. Sa'dawi quotes a clause from the National Charter of 1962, (HFE, p. 180), which indicates the intention, at least, of the new regime to recognize the restricted lives led by the majority of its women.

"There is an urgent need to abolish the remaining chains and constraints that severely limit the free action of woman, so that she may be enabled to participate with dynamism and effectiveness in building up a new life."

Women were granted the vote in 1956 and maternity leave in 1959.

During the '50s and '60s they were being educated in greater numbers and entering more of the professions. In 1962 the first woman minister was appointed to the government, and encouragement was officially given to birth control programmes. These changes were obviously not far-reaching enough, or proceeding quickly enough for Sa'dawi writing in the early '70s.

- 40) Al-Unthā hiya al-Asl, p. 92.
- 41) Ibid., p. 97.
- 42) Ibid., pp. 103 f.
- 43) Ibid., p. 103.
- 44) This involved only 180 women, see Al-Unthā hiya al-Asl, p. 107.
- 45) The Norwegian anthropologist Unni Wikan comments on the difficulties facing social scientists, European or Arab, who try to explore the modus vivendi of the Egyptians. These difficulties are presented because of the Egyptians' temperament of reluctance to talk of personal matters. In Wikan's case she was concerned with the lives of the poor of slum Cairo where in the early 1970s national characteristics were more sharply defined due to poverty and lack of education. She briefly compares her experiences among Egyptians to those of hers among Omanis. This is, throughout, a brilliant study of the motives which influence relations

in the Egyptian community and Wikan makes perceptive and original conclusions from her research. Unni Wikan, Life among the poor in Cairo, London, 1980, pp. 2-9.

- 46) Al-Unthā hiya al-Asl, p. 115.
- 47) Ibid., p. 108.
- 48) Ibid., pp 113. What Sa'dawi is probably aiming at here is to encourage readers to see the sex act as being not simply crude intercourse or, as it can be among the fallāhin, little more than legalized rape, but rather a joyous experience capable of raising men and women to higher levels of humanity and communication on a personal level.
- 49) Qur'ān, sura 24:2 states, "The adulterer and the adulteress shall each be given a hundred lashes." (The Koran, translated by N.J. Dawood, Penguin, 1956).
- 50) Al-Unthā hiya al-Asl, p. 115.
- 51) Ibid., p. 117.
- 52) At this point one feels the parallel between Sa'dawi's work and that of the Western pioneer in birth control education, Marie Stopes. In 1918, Stopes published her famous book Married Love, a guide for couples on what was normal in a sexual

relationship and how to handle it, and the clear insistence that sexual pleasure was a female as well as male prerogative. By the mid-1920s, Stopes's work, along with the encouragement she gave to the birth control movement and clinics for women, had achieved a widespread interest and helped thousands of sexually-anxious couples. Sa'dawi is to a certain extent trying to do the same for her Arab readers, with her books Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins and Al-Unthā hiya al-Asl, some sixty years after Stopes's work in the West.

53) Al-Unthā hiya al-Asl, pp. 120-122.

54) Ibid., p. 123.

55) Ibid., p. 123.

56) Ibid., p. 74.

57) Ibid., p. 74.

58) Ibid., p. 133.

59) Ibid., p. 135.

60) Ibid., p. 137.

61) Ibid., p. 138.

- 62) Ibid., p. 138.
- 63) Ibid., p. 140. It is interesting that Sa'dawi automatically places the husband as the first restrictor to be escaped, implying that he is the most frequent object of a woman's repressed anger.
- 64) Ibid., pp. 144-5.
- 65) Ibid., p. 144.
- 66) Ibid., pp. 144-5.
- 67) Ibid., p. 146.
- 68) Ibid., p. 150. Sa'dawi is of course addressing basically middle-class readers who are educated: the poor have no choice of role, their lives are determined by the struggle for existence.
- 69) Ibid., p. 151. Obviously at the lowest level of society, the uneducated poor, the problem is chiefly one of ignorance, of the type which Minces noted during her study; House of obedience, p. 25, in connection with the subject of female circumcision:

"In 1979, I asked women from poor backgrounds why they wanted to impose such an ordeal on their daughters, given that they themselves had complained about the terrible pain. 'That is not the point. It is the custom. God wills it.'"

This attitude had persisted despite 20 years passing since Nasser prohibited circumcision of girls, in 1959.

70) Al-Unthā hiya al-Asl, p. 151. This is an example of Sa'dawi's emotional reaction to certain facets of Egyptian temperament. If we look at the way in which the social system has typically operated within her society, we may find more substantial clues to that which determines people's attitudes, at a deeper level than Sa'dawi reflects here. The fact that boys have traditionally been pampered within the Arab family is due to the fact that the women, mother, aunts, sisters, know that the boy will soon move away into a different sphere upon marriage, for example, or work. Also, according to the tradition whereby males are financially responsible for female family members, it is in the women's interests to try and secure the males' good will so that he will be more disposed to provide generously if they are in need later. There is also the practical detail that boys need less supervision, their virginity is not the subject of anyone's concern.

71) Ibid., p. 152.

72) The creation of patriarchy, op. cit., p. 217.

73) Ibid., p. 218.

74) Ibid., p. 234

- 75) Earl L. Sullivan, Women in Egyptian public life, New York, 1986, p. 34.
- 76) The prominent Egyptian literary critic Muhammad Mandur, refers to the point I have mentioned that Arabs were acquainted with Aristotle but not Plato, among the Greek philosophers. He felt that this was very much to the disadvantage of the Arab cultural heritage as far as literature was concerned. Fī'l-Mizān'l-Jadīd, 3rd ed. n.d., Cairo, p. 67. It is quite probable that Aristotle's thoughts (384-322 B.C.) on the procreative roles, for example, could have been transferred to the Muslim world by the time of Ibn Sina (980-1037) and Al-Ghazzali (1058-1111).
- 77) See Mernissi's Beyond the veil, p. 6. f., for an interesting comparison between Al-Ghazzali and Freud in which the author contrasts the "passive frigid Freudian female" with the active female possessing "overpowering sexual demands" according to Al-Ghazzali's view. See also Sa'dawi's Al-Wajh al-'Ārī li'l-Mar'a al-'Arabiyya, p. 57.
- 78) HFE, p. 141.
- 79) Al-Unthā hiya al-Asl, p. 165.
- 80) Ibid., p. 170.
- 81) Ibid., p. 187.



- 82) Ibid., p. 185.
- 83) Ibid., p. 167.
- 84) Ibid., p. 187.
- 85) Ibid., pp. 192-4.
- 86) See below p
- 87) Ibid., p. 199.
- 88) Ibid., pp. 200-201.
- 89) Ibid., p. 203.
- 90) Ibid., p. 204.
- 91) Ibid., p. 205.
- 92) Bernard Lewis, The Arabs in history, London, 1950, (1977 ed. p. 141).
- 93) Al-Unthā hiya al-Asl, p. 211.
- 94) Ibid., p. 211.
- 95) Ibid., p. 213.

96) Ibid., p. 214.

97) Ibid., p. 218.

98) Ibid., p. 219.

99) Ibid., p. 220.

100) Ibid., pp. 222-3.

101) Ibid., p. 224.

102) Apart from the most fervent supporters of Islam who believe that religious dress is a sacred duty, there are other more practical reasons behind young women in Egypt taking to the veil. For some it is a political gesture, a kind of national fashion aimed at declaring a rejection of Western values; others see it as a way of achieving social justice rather along the lines of school uniform, so that one's class in society is not immediately obvious; while for others it is simply a cheaper means of dressing, because these outfits in subdued colours can be bought at reduced prices from religious groups. Most recently though, young independent-minded women have seen the veil as a way of warding off male harassment, in the workplace or university, using it as a signal to show their non-availability to men, although this attitude, as it gains ground, is tending to encourage an unjustified contempt of those who have not yet assumed the veil, as being relatively loose-moralled.

103) Al-Unthā hiya al-Asl, p. 228.

104) Ibid., p. 104.

The motivation behind Al-Rajul wa'l-Jins (Men and sex), published in 1975, was Sa'dawi's growing realization that men were suffering severe anxieties about their sexuality in her society. It was they who were coming to ask for her help, in greater numbers than women.<sup>1</sup> She felt it necessary to study the role of men from various angles, in order to try and fathom the causes for their incapacitating fears about their masculinity. This involved something of a departure from her previous studies into the psycho-sexual problems of women. That men were damaged too, by their society, was perhaps less immediately obvious in view of the social advantages they enjoyed over women, but damaged they were, to an extent that warranted investigation. Although there are occasional references to Egyptian men as victims of their society's sexual ethos, in her previous books on women, it is far more likely that the reader would have absorbed a certain flavour of anti-male feeling in those works, even if it were only in the constant stress Sa'dawi places on the historic overthrow of women by men. To write for men, to address their fears, required a complete change of tack for Sa'dawi. It meant in many cases, trying to come to grips with the problem from the agent's point of view, helping men to see for themselves the insecurities that drive one into child abuse, another into rape; one into homosexuality and another into promiscuity.

One of Sa'dawi's achievements throughout her factual writing is her insistence on bringing to the reader's attention the phenomenon of the

patriarchal society, as being the underlying cause of so many social and personal problems for her people. It is probably the Arab reader's first encounter with the concept of the patriarchal phenomenon. The term abawī for 'patriarchal' becomes, under Sa'dawi's pen, imbued with a wider, more specific meaning than it originally has in Arabic, for it now connotes the whole history of male hegemony over women, which includes men's control over female sexuality and their domination over the systems of thought, religious institutions etc. It is a more delicate task that Sa'dawi embarks on here, for she has to try and persuade men to relinquish their dominance within the family, perhaps even cede some of their rights too, for their own and their society's sake. There is a certain amount of repetition in this volume, which is understandable as its subject matter overlaps with that of the previous two.

An interesting story from Sa'dawi's childhood shows that she was becoming conscious from an early age of differences in gender.<sup>2</sup> At school, when asked to parse the Arabic sentence for 'Mustafa praises Allah', she was reprimanded by the teacher for omitting the pious epithets which the Muslim faithful customarily pronounce after the mention of the deity. She also neglected to add that 'Allah' was a masculine noun. She recalls how she paused over the gender to inquire why God was masculine and not feminine? Her outraged teacher threatened that any repetition of such audacious ideas would result in her being failed in the end of year language exams. Sa'dawi also relates a discussion which she is supposed to have had with her father, pursuing this subject further, by asking if God had a male organ, since his masculinity appeared to be beyond question. Her father replied that God was a spirit, that spirits were

sexless, and that if He was addressed in the masculine, it was due to the fact that the prophets had all been male, and that they had simply assumed God to be male from an analogy with human beings where the male was superior to the female. Her other queries, such as why Eve should have been powerful enough to lead Adam astray if she were his inferior, and why she should be blamed for so doing, when it was the Devil who had tempted her in the first place, could not be answered convincingly by her father.<sup>3</sup>

So important does Sa'dawi feel the Judeo-Christian tradition to be in the creation of gender stereotypes and the associating of sex with sin and females, that she devotes around thirty pages to criticizing the creation myth as found in the Old Testament which incidentally differs from that in the Qur'ān and Islamic tradition.<sup>4</sup> Sa'dawi also criticizes the creation story as expounded by the philosophers and theologians of the Early Church, Tertullian, Augustine, Aquinas etc. This lengthy exposition is aimed at tracing the development of patriarchal attitudes from their very origin. Whilst Sa'dawi is certainly able to reveal some of the most absurd contradictions in the thought of these influential scholars, and later ones, in an interesting manner, she tends to draw them all as engaged in a plot against women to distort the truth of women's real nature.<sup>5</sup> There is something anachronistic in this sort of approach, which we have seen before from Sa'dawi, for example in her romantic depiction of a matriarchal Golden Age.<sup>6</sup> Neither the early scholars, nor Freud, possessed historical evidence of women as anything much more than submissive wives and mothers. They were only trying to understand the world as they could see it at the time. All they had to build on were the doctrines and conclusions of the previous generations.

Unfortunately, Sa'dawi loses sight of her initial intentions here and sidetracks the reader into the philosophical and religious history of a foreign culture (i.e. the Western European) which is so different from his own that any parallels that might exist between the two in terms of the development of patriarchal institutions, is obscured. For example, does the male Muslim reader need to know, that in the Middle Ages a menstruating woman was not permitted to enter a church, or the details of a debate between two little-known ninth-century Christian scholars as to whether Jesus was contained in the womb or not,<sup>7</sup> in order to understand his own fears of impotence? The Arab-Muslim reader will also see something which Sa'dawi apparently does not. He can legitimately argue that even if such philosophical and religious ideas developed in the West during the ages, and resulted in the consolidation of patriarchal values, male supremacy, the dichotomy between body and soul and the association of sex with sin, they have not become characteristic of his own Muslim society because, in theory, sexuality is not regarded as shameful, and has supposedly been integrated into Islam. He might quote religious sources to state that believing women are valued equally, alongside believing men, and that male supremacy is a God-given, hence irrefutable, fact, while being blinded to the abuses of women that have nevertheless resulted from Islamic culture's patriarchal and sexist orientation.

No matter how absorbing an interest Sa'dawi must have found this subject, a comparable exploration of the Islamic philosophical tradition would have been more appropriate to an argument against patriarchal values. Some Arab readers might well imagine from her stance that

patriarchy was an entirely Western phenomenon born of the Judeo-Christian tradition and something not present in their own society, simply because they were unable to trace its development in the same way. Sa'dawi's only excuse for not tackling the subject from the Islamic point of view, is given as lack of sufficient time and space, together with the dominance of Western culture on the world scene in general.

"I have not embarked on the subject of religious thought in the Arab region, or in Islam, because Islam, as far as the sequence of history is concerned, came after Christianity and Judaism and to discuss it would require another book. Also we cannot deny that Western male-dominated civilization has had a great effect on all parts of the world, especially the Middle East, Asia and Africa, because of the cultural imperialism which necessarily follows military and economic imperialism."<sup>8</sup>

However true this might be, it is only in the last 150 years or so that Western thought has been of such widespread influence in the Muslim East. The latter, during the Middle Ages, had no particular interest in, or felt no need for, the doctrines of the Early Church, or the ideas circulating during the Reformation and the Renaissance.

When Sa'dawi does give some attention to Islam, it is more in its contemporary context and she poses the questions in such a way that a logical mind would conclude that what often goes on, supposedly under the aegis of Islam, is unreasonable.<sup>9</sup> She is encouraging her readers to make up their own minds as to whether men and women are equal in Islamic society today.



"It says in Islam that men are qawwāmūn\* over women because they provide out of their wealth for them. But if the wife pays out on the husband, does that make her in charge? And if the wife shares equally with her husband in the household expenses, does that make her equal to him?"<sup>10</sup>

Sa'dawi follows this by asking whether if a woman shares the household expenses it is still fair that she should receive only half the inheritance of a male as Islamic law prescribes? Another issue pertaining to an inherent inequality between the sexes in the Muslim corpus, is that of testimony.

"It says in Islam that the evidence of a man is equivalent to that of two women, but if a woman is educated and becomes, for example, a government minister, a doctor or university lecturer, does this still render her incapable of giving evidence alone, and make her testimony unequal to that of an illiterate man?"<sup>11</sup>

Sa'dawi continues by asking why women should be barred from the judiciary on the grounds that their evidence and judgement are unstable, if as doctors or politicians they are capable of making decisions of vital importance. How is it that they cannot be trusted to pronounce on, for example, trivial legal cases of land law? the reader can clearly see the absurdity of the Egyptian legal system from the actual case Sa'dawi relates of a university professor being unable to obtain a passport for her daughter to travel abroad with her school's athletics team. The issuing officer would not accept the woman's custody and maintenance of her child as valid for the purpose of authorizing a passport. Even though her husband had divorced her and abandoned her, while their

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\* (which can be translated as 'protectors, guardians,' or 'in charge of')

daughter was young, he apparently remained the girl's legal guardian and the only one who could give the required permission for her to travel abroad. Such incongruities in legal procedure indicate that Egyptian law has failed to keep abreast of social and economic developments in society which have affected women. Sa'dawi also queries whether Islam condones the denial of maintenance to a wife if she refuses to have sex with her husband,<sup>12</sup> or is rendered in any way "non-utilizable as a wife", and wonders if it really is true of Islam that the temporal ruler is to be regarded as God's representative on earth, as a certain prominent sheikh had announced at an Egyptian national conference in 1975.

Sa'dawi declares that it is not her intention here to discuss the position of women in Islam or Muslim philosophy. To date, she has not attempted to write at any length upon this subject. One can however, surmise what kind of treatment she would give it from a glance at her essay, "Women and Islam", in the volume Women and Islam, edited by Azizah al-Hibri,<sup>13</sup> in which she concentrates mostly on the relationship of the Prophet to his wives, and on arguing that there is nothing specific in the Qur'an which prohibits a woman from earning her own living. Sa'dawi also stresses that in her opinion it is not Islam that is to be regarded as causing any oppression to Arab women but rather the patriarchal class system.

Sa'dawi berates the West for not according a more prominent place to Ibn Sina in the history of philosophy and science.<sup>14</sup> She considers among his achievements, the idea of sexual love as a means for man to approach closer to God, and of the body and soul as indivisible, not

separate entities. When one considers, though, that Western civilization was profoundly influenced by Christian dogma from Ibn Sina's time onwards, it is hardly surprising that his ideas were not held in especial regard. Even though they may have been relatively more 'advanced' in terms of scientific theory, the fact that they were built on Islamic foundation, (which, for example, sanctioned the sexual relationship between a man and his four wives) made them something alien to the values of celibacy and monogamy that were the foundation of Christian morality. That his ideas are not held to be distinguished in the West today, apart from their being outdated, is because they are simply irrelevant to our own philosophical and cultural tradition. Sa'dawi, however, prefers to see this whole question in terms of Western cultural imperialism. On why Ibn Sina has not been accorded a higher place in Western science, she says:

"The reason is well known, we do not live in a neutral world and our civilization has been prejudiced in favour of men, just as it has been biased towards the white Western mentality. This prejudice is not because of what is widely believed, that scientifically, the Western man's brain is more developed and intelligent, but rather because of the imperialist design of Western states to erase the heritage of their colonized peoples, and separate their past from their present and their present from their future, in order to make it easier for the colonizing state to weaken that nation, subdue and exploit it."<sup>15</sup>

While such jingoistic sentiments may gratify her Egyptian readers, they are evidence, to a mind less conditioned by state propaganda, of an instability, lack of objectivity and prejudice in Sa'dawi's attitudes.

Another more detailed discussion of Freud's theory of sublimation is included in this volume along with some of his ideas on the role of sex in primitive society.<sup>16</sup> What is noticeable here is that Sa'dawi is beginning to allow some credit to Freud for his work. It is as if she had previously been blind to his achievements, because of his theories having been used to buttress male superiority over women, and has only just become able to appreciate that he made remarkable strides in the fields of psychology and our understanding of the mind.<sup>17</sup> Her discussion of Freud's views here are not the tirades against him found in her previous sociological works.

Sa'dawi gives a little more room here to Marxist thought than before, which marks a new departure in her arguments. Her defence of what she considers Marxism to represent reveals her own sympathy for these theories.

"Marxist thought is widely believed to be based on the need for the individual to be changed into an instrument for the service of society. But actually the contrary is true. The basis of Marxist thought rests on eradicating all those conditions which oppress the individual and make him into a mere tool or object, or means to an end. It also stands for helping the individual to withstand economic and social forces which threaten him or destroy his humanity."<sup>18</sup>

It seems surprising that in all her sociological works, Sa'dawi has not systematically tried to determine what attitudes each sex has to the other. The nearest she comes to this is in her survey on women and neurosis, when she reveals that, according to her statistics, of the 180 women questioned, some 85% said that they would not marry their

spouse a second time around.<sup>19</sup> Although this appears to reveal a high level of marital dissatisfaction, it does not give any specific insight into the actual emotional atmosphere and communication problems which underlie so many joyless marriages. Likewise, it omits the man's version of events. Nor does Sa'dawi take the opportunity here in Al-Rajul wa'l-Jins to probe into the husband's feelings about his wife. It is all very well to use theoretical arguments from sociology, psychology etc., to show how adversely the patriarchal social system can affect women and men through the polarized unnatural roles it demands them to fulfil, but a vast number of families in no way resemble the patriarchal model, and those that do, may well be stable, productive and genuinely loving unions. It would appear to be necessary to ascertain, in a similar survey, whether the wife's dissatisfaction with her partner was shared by him, and if not, why not? Similarly, the theories of man's primeval fear of woman, progressing to envy and hatred of her maternal functions, whilst being of interest to the general reader, may be something which he finds it difficult to relate to his own everyday emotional experience. Sa'dawi also hopes, by giving as much evidence as she can from earlier times derived from anthropology and prehistoric history that she can convince men and women that there have been workable alternatives to a patriarchal ordering of society. On occasions this involves her in a considerable amount of subjective deduction from cave paintings, primitive artifacts and even mythology, e.g. citing the Amazons as an example of dominant women.<sup>20</sup> Sa'dawi mentions various communities in India today which are supposedly undergoing a transition from a form of matriarchy to patriarchy.<sup>21</sup> She relates how she had seen for herself the men adorning themselves, dancing and involving themselves exclusively in temple worship while the women worked in the tea and potato fields in addition to domestic duties.

The fact that these Indian women were able to have several sexual partners, and attribute their children to themselves (two examples of the 'lost rights' which Sa'dawi repeatedly stresses women enjoyed as a concomitant of their apparently high status in society) whilst being excluded from the sphere of power, authority and religion, ought to have alerted her to the fact that neither matriliney nor even polyandry necessarily can be taken as reliable 'proof' that women enjoy a high position in society. Again we need to refer to Gerda Lerner to keep the question of matriarchy in its proper perspective. To bear Lerner's conclusions in mind will be of great value to anyone trying to assess the possible extent of matriarchal currents in pre-Islamic Arabia.

"Until very recently, such evidence as could be found for the existence of matriarchal societies consisted of a combination of archaeology, myth, religion, and artifacts of dubious meaning, held together by speculation. Central to the argument for matriarchy was the ubiquitous evidence of Mother-Goddess figures in many ancient religions, from which maternalists argued for the reality and actuality of female power in the past.. we need to stress only the difficulty of reasoning from such evidence toward the construction of social organizations in which women were dominant. In view of the historical evidence for the coexistence of symbolic idolatry of women and the actual low status of women, such as the cult of the Virgin Mary in the Middle Ages, the cult of the lady of the plantation in antebellum America, or that of the Hollywood star in contemporary society, one hesitates to elevate such evidence to historical proof."<sup>22</sup>

and

"Summarizing the research findings concerning female dominance these points can be made: (1) Most of the evidence for female equality in societies derives from matrilineal, matrilocal societies, which are historically transitional and currently vanishing. (2) While matriliney and matrilocality confer certain rights and privileges on women, decision-making power within the kinship group nevertheless rests with elder males. (3) Patrilineal descent does not

imply subjugation of women nor does matrilineal descent indicate matriarchy. (4) Seen over time, matrilineal societies have been unable to adapt to competitive, exploitative, techno-economic systems and have given way to patrilineal societies.<sup>23</sup>

Sa'dawi is on firmer ground, however, when she maintains that male dominance is achieved through the appropriation of the religious and legal spheres, even on the level of primitive village life,<sup>24</sup> from which the intelligent reader can extend an analogy to the male-dominance reinforced by the revealed religions. Perhaps without realizing it fully, Sa'dawi is putting before the reader certain inconsistencies in her approach to religion. Talking of 'religions' all lumped together in the abstract she gives a strong impression, at times, that she considers them man-made and man-manipulated for the specific purpose of ordering the world in men's favour. It is worthwhile quoting in full her paragraph summarizing the cause and effect of male dominance over women.

"Psychologists say that it is this age-old fear of woman buried in the heart of man that has generated a kind of feeling of inferiority in him. And that it is this feeling of inferiority which makes man distort the truth about woman so that he claims that she is a headless body, or that all manifestations of her fertility, like pregnancy, menstruation or birth, are defiling and impure, or that her sexual organs are deserving of contempt and scorn. As for the male sex organ, that is something to be exalted and be proud of. Women are therefore regarded as the source of sin, evil and death, while the men are held to be the embodiment of goodness and virtue, an extension of the spirit of God, and his representative on earth. According to this, men considered themselves 'spirit' as opposed to women, whom they regarded as representing the 'body'.

From this originated the ideas of those male philosophers who said that man represented God, or represented Spirit, or the spiritual world, and that woman represented the Body and the earthly world... This means that God is for males, the world is for

females. But we know how, after that, man took control of the earth too, and religion and worldly affairs became men's domains, while submission and obedience became women's lot. Woman's only role in life became serving her husband, an endless series of childbirths and looking after children, who became the property of the father. However, the split between the soul and body led to a division between love and sex. From that resulted distorted relationships between men and women. Due to the fact that such relationships lacked stability, they would either be emotional, without sex, or sexual, without love; both types being defective, if not actually harmful."<sup>25</sup>

The style of this passage is very typical of Sa'dawi's sociological writing. As one can see, there is much in the way of wide generalization, and abstract reduction of complex historical and psychological phenomena into simplified theories.

In order to bring the discussion back to the present, Sa'dawi mentions the importance of the family in determining whether children develop inferiority complexes or not.<sup>26</sup> The father's control through discipline and the excessive unhealthy attachment of the mother to her child, are singled out as the main causes of the child's growing up to lack confidence. The different forms the latter takes, correspond to the different standards expected of boys and girls. Sa'dawi suggests that the Don Juan, far from being a potent individual, suffers from an inferiority complex, and a disharmony between body and mind.<sup>27</sup> While he overcompensates for his inadequacies in a sexually active way, a larger number of men create inner tension for themselves by trying within their limited scope (i.e. without entering into promiscuity) to perform according to what they imagine to be the criteria of masculinity. A typical session between Sa'dawi as doctor, and an anxious male patient,



highlights the fundamental lack of communication between the sexes within marriage.

"Some husbands said to me that the thing which they lost most sleep over was not fear of losing their job, or going hungry, or having no clothes, but rather the constant fear of losing their sexual potency one day and being unable to have an erection. I asked one of them: 'What frightens you about that?' He replied, 'My wife'. I said, 'But what will your wife do?' And he said, 'She will tell people that I'm not a man any more.' I replied, 'I shouldn't think so. She's a nice woman and not the kind to do that.' Then he said, 'Even if she doesn't say it, then at any rate she will know that I can't satisfy her and she'll look for another man.' I asked him, 'Are you more frightened of the second possibility or the first? What I mean is, are you worried about your reputation among the people, as a man, or about your wife going to another man?' He replied, 'I'm afraid of both, but my wife going off with another man scares me more.' 'Why?' I asked him. 'Because she's my wife. Is there any man in the world who could accept his wife going off with another man?'

I found during discussions with a number of husbands that the majority of them agreed with the views above, that an inability to have an erection, or loss of sexual potency is what causes men most loss of sleep and arouses within them fear and anxiety. This happens especially after the age of forty or fifty, when a man may be in constant need of convincing himself that he is the epitome of manhood, meaning by that, that he possesses a sexual potency which never decreases or wanes."<sup>28</sup>

After deciding that there is no intrinsic physical reason for men to suffer greater anxiety over their sexual capacity than women,<sup>29</sup> Sa'dawi suggests that a look at historical and social conditions might provide a key. Whatever sympathy for their anxieties her male readers may have felt from Sa'dawi's writing so far, there is a dramatic shift in emphasis as the author returns to her familiar theme and familiar voice. She

sketches the development of male domination over women in terms of a harsh repression of women as a class, by men as a class, motivated solely by men's jealousy and fear of woman's power.

".. in order for man to create his patriarchal family and ensure its continuance, it was necessary for him to restrain the woman's natural tendencies by various means of sexual repression (the chastity belt, for example), and in order that sexual repression should be successful, he was obliged to impose economic restraints, such as forbidding her to work and be productive, confining her duties in life to marriage and unpaid motherhood in return for her maintenance from her husband. In order for this sexual and economic repression to be effective, he had to accompany it by a mental repression, through philosophy, religion and morality, the end result of which was the death sentence (in physical, mental and social terms) for any woman who violated the strict laws of the patriarchal family the most important of which was that entitling her to only one spouse."<sup>30</sup>

The conclusion which could be drawn from this is that men are guilty of a calculated scheme of social repression against women. This has, however, unfavourable repercussions upon men themselves; in so far as they have assumed the upper hand, they feel under stress to live up to the image they have created of men as masterful. From the social and economic position, men feel able to assume dominance<sup>31</sup> but in physical and mental terms, they are struggling to bear the burden of machismo which they have taken on. Despite the fact that the original pretext for the patriarchal family, namely to ensure the line of inheritance from father to sons, is no longer relevant today, mainly due to poverty and the spread of socialism, men still cling, Sa'dawi says, to the authority which the patriarchal system affords them, because in that is embodied the so-called 'masculine' traits of which they are proud.

It appears then that men must accept certain levels of anxiety in order to know their own children. But does Sa'dawi really feel that the alternative is fair for men, that they should not know if they are the father of a child simply because the woman has had several sexual partners? All Sa'dawi is prepared to offer in the way of a solution to a man's fears is for him to realize that he does not have to live up to such ideals;<sup>32</sup> that he does not have to prove his sexual prowess constantly, nor satisfy his wife sexually at all times, in order to stop her going off with another man. Egyptian society, Sa'dawi advises, needs to reappraise its concept of masculinity to exclude the idea of machismo, which, in practical terms, is a meaningless proposition.<sup>33</sup> As a first step, men and women will have to get used to not judging themselves according to the glamorous images of gender stereotypes that are conveyed through the media, or used in advertising. Men should also get used to the idea of loving other men's children and not be so excessively concerned about paternity. Sa'dawi, as we can see here, is coming dangerously close to allocating greater parental rights to women than to men. Until such time as artificial insemination by sperm donors is current practice, it would seem reasonable for men to be accorded a right to know their offspring if they choose to know. Is this type of sentiment by Sa'dawi evidence of an underlying uncompromising streak, or a real prejudice against men for what she has seen of male behaviour in her society and what she surmises it to have been throughout history?

Sa'dawi has intended here to draw men's attention to the fact that their anxieties are the product of the same system that guarantees them automatic status and considerable rights and freedom of behaviour not

enjoyed by women. In a shame society, such as Egypt's where there is no acceptable alternative to marriage and parenthood, and where morals and respectability are enforced through strong social opprobrium, it is difficult if not impossible, for individuals to envisage a different mode of behaviour from that which is upheld as the norm. Sa'dawi defines the maturity which she feels all people should aim for and ideally possess. Basically what she admires is an integrated personality, self-acceptance, self-confidence and a healthy emotional attitude which, for men, includes being able to express tenderness.<sup>34</sup>

Sa'dawi is of the opinion that most men of genius have had problems in their relationships with women, on account of a morbid fear of women linked to an inferiority complex.<sup>35</sup> She denies the possibility that their sexual energy was diverted into their creativity, persistently maintaining her refusal to accept the Freudian idea of sublimation. If the sexual, interacts with the mental and emotional in the individual, as she would have us believe in respect of the Don Juan, why should it be so hard for her to accept the idea that a lack of heterosexual activity might be compensated for in artistic ambition or creative drive? In pursuing her argument that sexual energy can not be channelled elsewhere, she is actually contradicting her own insistence on the individual as composed of interrelated indivisible mental, emotional, spiritual and physical dimensions. It is as if she is isolating sexuality as a separate component, to ignore which is likely to lead to frightening consequences. She goes on to suggest that the achievements of these great men (some 23 of whom she names, from East and West, from Plato and Da Vinci, to Rousseau and Chekov, to Al-Ma'arri and Al-Hallaj), would quite conceivably

have been greater, had they enjoyed happy heterosexual love. There are numerous objections to this idea, not least the fact that these men had found something richer in life, something more able to transport the individual than the sex act, and that every one of them was bowed under the crushing obligation to realize his talents, often in the face of poverty or social disapproval. To suggest that the sublime late works of the deaf Beethoven could have been improved on through copulation, is not only an insult to his art, but shows how little appreciation Sa'dawi has for the workings of a creative genius.<sup>36</sup> Here is another example of Sa'dawi reading modern sensibilities into the past. The role of sexuality in human relationships is much better understood today than in centuries gone by, as it is likewise fraught with fewer dangers, to the extent that modern men and women are sufficiently educated and civilized to endow sex in their own lives, with high spiritual and emotional significance. To project such attitudes backwards to our forebears, who lived in very different, less privileged circumstances, is fallacious. Conversely, some eras have been far more tolerant of sexual expression than certain societies today which has meant that prostitution and homosexuality have not been universally regarded as deviant.

Sa'dawi is cautious about criticizing her own society, but occasionally the juxtaposition of ideas gives a clearer indication as to what her personal feelings are with regard to her milieu. Despite the arguments of Muslim would-be reformers, and apologists, that Islam in theory projects a positive attitude towards sexuality, the practice has been widely different. Sa'dawi is unquestionably associating the strict Muslim stance towards sexuality, as it is realized in Egyptian society,

with the pervasive feeling of guilt about anything remotely connected with the subject.

"Very few people can be completely liberated from this feeling of guilt in a society like our Arab society which is based on strict religiosity, chastity and prudery (in theory and in practice), and traditional values which prevailed hundreds of years ago, which regarded sex as shameful and which divided men from women."<sup>37</sup>

Sa'dawi is also scathing about European society today for its greater sexual freedoms. These she can only see as arising from economic forces: they are not to her, in the European context, representative of greater humanitarian feeling, or an enviable tolerance of the individual's personal rights, which is how she envisages them under her ideal socialism for her own society.

Although a growing number of Egyptian parents are able to avoid instilling guilt in their children over sexual matters,<sup>38</sup> such as exploring their own bodies, or masturbation, the moral climate is not yet such that the expression of a young person's sexuality can be endowed with positive encouragement. Hence even the child of broad-minded parents will not be unafflicted by a guilty conscience. Furthermore, when he sees the society around him enforcing a stricter sexual code, he may even reject his parents' attitudes. At the time of writing, Sa'dawi had not envisaged or encountered the problem which is beginning to manifest itself in the late 1980s, where it is not uncommon for young people in Egypt who have enjoyed a relatively unrestricted upbringing from enlightened, mature parents, along the lines Sa'dawi would have approved, to rebel against

the values that they have been taught, seeking instead the supposed acceptance and security of the larger group in society, by joining, for example, a religious group which upholds strict sexual ethics.<sup>39</sup> The fact that this is a more recent phenomenon, following Egypt's renewed interest in its Islamic inheritance during the 1980s, accounts for any omission by Sa'dawi on this point. She is more concerned here with the opposite problem: how to defend the interests of the child in order for him to understand a healthy attitude towards his own sexuality, in the face of unenlightened parents who adhere to the values of a society which controls its sexual ethics through the process of shame.

Sa'dawi's theory that a child feels strong sexual attraction to his or her parent of the opposite sex, may seem somewhat exaggerated, if not unusual, to the Western reader.<sup>40</sup> Since she gives no sources to back up her ideas, one wonders how Sa'dawi came to this conclusion. The fact that it is announced in a sweeping generalization, suggests that the author believes it to be universal in her society, if not elsewhere. She intends using this as further evidence that children develop a guilty conscience about sexuality when they keep hidden and unexpressed, their sexual attraction for their family members, on account of social taboos.

"The child since his early years feels a natural sexual desire towards the people with whom he lives, (father, mother, brothers and sisters).."

and

"A child cannot understand the social, economic and historical reasons which have made society prohibit a sexual relationship between mother and son, or

father and daughter, but he feels those desires, and they may remain with him for a long time, even after he has grown up." 41

This whole idea is newly introduced by Sa'dawi and it gives a rather different image of the Egyptian family from that which the reader might have gleaned from her previous descriptions. Are we now to imagine the majority of Egyptian children engaged in a constant, silent struggle to resist their sexual urges towards their parents? If so, then the particular characteristics of the Egyptian family and of the type of individual moulded by such a society ought to be the subject of serious research.<sup>42</sup> It leads the Western reader to wonder if sex and sexuality is actually different in Egypt from the physical point of view, as a result of specific climatic conditions (aside from any differences arising as a result of culture) from the expectations and practices which are more typical of those living in colder regions, and could this perhaps be contributory to its apparent importance because of higher levels of fertility and sexual response, not only in the life of the Arab individual, but also in his culture as a whole. (One frequently feels that for Sa'dawi the phenomenon of sexuality is something of an obsession.)<sup>43</sup> It is also pertinent here to remember that when Arabs criticize the West, they nearly always focus on an imagined sexual profligacy here, which they believe to be rampant. Could it be that they are projecting their own priorities or preoccupations onto that which is under criticism? Until such time as the correlation between sexuality and climate is fully understood in scientific terms, then one can continue to amuse oneself in speculating on the Arab as in some way 'naturally' more highly sexed as a function of the degree of sunshine to which he is exposed, in comparison to the perhaps less-excitabile,



colder British.<sup>44</sup> It might even be that the tolerant attitude towards sexuality for which the people of the Scandanavian countries are renowned is as much connected to the fact that they are socialist, as it is to a possible relative lack of importance sexual arousal may play in their daily life through lack of solar stimulation.<sup>45</sup>

If we bear in mind the attitude Sa'dawi has demonstrated throughout her works so far, that sexual impulses in the young should be allowed to develop as unhindered as possible, then her above theory becomes a somewhat alarming prospect. Obviously then, the child's 'natural' desires are going to need a certain degree of restraint if incest as the family norm is to be avoided. Here again we see Sa'dawi talking in cliches, trying to create a theory out of the abstract, rather than from what has been observed through empirical experiment. Perhaps ambiguously, she pleads with parents not to interfere in, or put obstacles in the way of, the development of their child's sexual life. She sees the formation of the individual's sexuality as forming the nucleus of this independence, apparently giving very great weight to its importance relative to educational and economic factors.

"It is important for boys and girls to have a private life if we want them to grow up as independent adults. There is no doubt that it is the sexual desires which form the nucleus of the individual which helps the son or daughter achieve independence." 46

Sa'dawi links childhood guilt feelings with the development of an unhealthy sexuality in adult life. Particularly to blame, says Sa'dawi, is the over-attachment of a son to his mother. Mernissi has also

observed this, but sees it as characteristic of Muslim societies as a whole.

"The close link between mother and son is probably the key factor in the dynamics of Muslim marriage. Sons, too involved with their mothers are particularly anxious about their masculinity and wary of femininity."

and

"In Muslim societies, not only is the marital bond actually weakened and love for the wife discouraged, but his mother is the only woman a man is allowed to love at all, and this love is encouraged to take the form of life-long gratitude."<sup>47</sup>

encouraged to take  
47

It is interesting to see how the two women notice the same phenomenon, i.e. over-attachment of the man to his mother, and subsequent difficulty in relating to his wife, but account for it in different ways. Mernissi finds the answer in sociological terms, seeing the root cause as the life-long gratitude which the Muslim son is enjoined to show to his mother (this she backs up with a relevant quotation from the Qur'ān). Sa'dawi sees it in terms of psychology, perhaps less convincingly than Mernissi, as arising out of an imbalance within the home where the boy develops his affection for his mother, whose sole attention he receives in early years, to the exclusion of his father's. As a young man, the guilt feelings about sexuality inculcated in him during childhood by his parents, somehow interfere later with his ability to make love to his wife. He imagines the latter to be virtuous and chaste, the worthy successor to his mother in so far as she is an object of his love. The sinful connotation of sexual love which he imagines, renders him impotent unless he is in a 'sinful' liaison, i.e. with a prostitute

or girlfriend. One can see the truth behind both positions, but Mernissi's, for supplying the link between sexuality within the family, to the Arab-Muslim cultural tradition, is ultimately more satisfying than Sa'dawi's more lengthy argument which does not account adequately for the son's continued excessive attachment to his mother in later childhood, adolescence and young manhood. If Sa'dawi's reasoning were correct, then an identical or similar argument ought to be able to be conducted into the relationship between a girl and her father. The solution to which Sa'dawi's argument leads her, is that if the mother goes out to work and finds creative fulfilment, she will have less time to assume such an irreplaceable role in the lives of her children. If one takes Mernissi's ideas to their logical conclusion, then no easy solution seems possible, it would necessitate altering the sacred tenets upon which Arab-Muslim culture rests, as well as changing the whole orientation of such societies, into ones where the marriage-bond is valued rather than the mother-son relationship.

Sa'dawi attempts another theory (but how far it is based on empirical evidence is impossible to tell) as to the reasons for different sexual attitudes within her own society. In trying to illustrate how sex norms vary from class to class, she gives some interesting insight into the Egyptian social situation, but also highlights the impossibility, and meaninglessness of talking in general terms about her fellow countrymen's sexual behaviour. In view of what she says here of the relaxed morals of the least privileged sections of society, one can only conclude that she is basing her observations and criticisms in general, on the middle and upper classes. Her theory here of course raises many questions, and

it would appear to be a fruitful field for research to try and explain these supposed variations in morality and their relation to the social class. It would also be worth considering how such variations were accommodated within Egypt's Islamic culture.

"People's attitude toward sexual activity also differs according to their social class and degree of education. In our Egyptian society, people of the working class, and those of restricted means, regard masturbation as a sexual perversion leading to blindness or madness; it is something 'haram', i.e. forbidden, and contrary to religion. This stance is very similar to that of people in very primitive societies. Yet in the educated middle classes, a young man who practises masturbation is looked on as being more decent than one who goes the whole way with the opposite sex. So masturbation tends to be more widespread among educated middle-class families than among people of the working classes. In the very lowest classes, those living below the poverty line, and the peasants, full sexual relations between the sexes and extra-marital sex are widespread, since their moral values are less strict than those of the middle class. It has been found that the more desperate the economic situation of a group of people is, the less they adhere to the prevailing moral values, their first priority becomes how to satisfy their economic needs. Fathers in poor families may sell their daughters in marriage or outside of marriage in order to survive."<sup>48</sup>

Sa'dawi hints at the inadequacy of religion to help the very poor.

Adherence to those 'values that come from the skies', is a luxury not enjoyed by those who have to struggle to find something to eat.<sup>49</sup>

Sa'dawi goes on to discuss the rising crime rate in her society and in the West. It would appear that Egypt was seeing a growth in violent crime, theft, blackmarketeering and drug addiction during the early 1970s.<sup>50</sup> Sa'dawi dismisses the theory that aggression is an inherent mental trait in men, in the form of a centre of aggression within the

brain cells, which, if excised, will prevent the individual from acting violently. She argues that social factors, such as class inequalities and economic crises are to blame. On an individual level, she sees the problem as one of power relations in the family. If the father is domineering, the son may be unable to exercise his individuality in any way, which might cause him to grow up with both a frustrated aggressive streak and an over-dependence on others. Such a type, she asserts, will tend to either sadism or masochism in his adult sexual relationships.

Sa'dawi's main tactic in trying to dissuade men from being domineering is to use ridicule. Thus she pokes fun of the Don Juan, by telling her readers that he is only behaving thus to conceal his inferiority complex, while the sadist wants to inflict pain on his female partner because he has been stifled during his childhood by his father, and because he possesses a hidden fear of woman.<sup>51</sup> One can see how Sa'dawi's simplified theories based on inferiority-superiority complexes, and sado-masochism, all concepts which she uses as handy, ready-made cliches, have been partly shaped by the relatively uncomplicated situations which her patients have described to her, if the following is anything to go by.

"One of the husbands who was a sadist of this type, said to me that he suffered an extreme deprivation of sexual pleasure because his wife was a forceful character and she didn't know how to submit completely to him so that during the sex act she was at his mercy. This was the reason for his going to a prostitute, for she could kindle his sexual desire by pretending to be semi-conscious and whispering to him, 'do what you like to me!'"<sup>52</sup>

In the sixth chapter, Sa'dawi devotes her attention to the subject of 'orgasm'. This is no easy task here, because in Egyptian society, with its history of female circumcision, many of her older readers would be physically incapable of achieving it, and since female orgasm has not had a history of being recognized as 'normal' in Muslim-Egyptian society, or indeed even be regarded as possible, a good many of Sa'dawi's younger readers could easily be unsure as to what orgasm actually were, even supposing that they were not riddled with guilt or fear about their participation in the sex act itself. Sa'dawi faces some difficulties in introducing this subject; even her graph<sup>53</sup> comparing the different male and female paths towards orgasm has to take into account that the circumcized or partially frigid woman will have a diminished response. Sa'dawi sees the tragedy of circumcision as one for husbands too.<sup>54</sup> Faced with the task of trying to arouse a frigid wife, many men resort to pills, potions and even drugs to try and maintain an erection. The studies of Kinsey, Masters and Johnson and Sherfey, etc.,<sup>55</sup> which indicate that a woman's orgasm naturally follows a pattern very similar to a man's is obviously a challenging prospect for Sa'dawi's Arab readers. Here is Sa'dawi again at her best, speaking as a doctor and psychologist introducing her readers to new possibilities that could have far-reaching effects on their own lives, and giving them access to information which they could not obtain from any official source. She is also at her best when she is non-judgemental and showing a deep awareness of the intimate problems that all too frequently destroy sexual communication between couples in Egypt. From the way she deals with this subject, it is obvious to the outside reader, that there is a lack of information available to the Egyptian public about the actual biological facts relating to

sexuality (as we have already seen from Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins and Al-Unthā hiya al-Aṣl). In tackling this problem of sex education, Sa'dawi faces the whole weight of Islamic cultural tradition and Egyptian superstition, which obstructs her path, either by asserting the opposite of what she is trying to teach, or by simply not being able to accommodate the Western research on healthy sexuality. If this were not already a Herculean task, we must constantly bear in mind that whatever she writes is liable to be censored, which means that she has always to confine her expression between limits. Given this atmosphere of tension surrounding her work, it is amazing that Sa'dawi has written so much and so effectively. The Western reader, up to a point, has to exercise a degree of indulgence in assessing Sa'dawi's work and overlook certain blemishes in her style and inadequacies in her reasoning. To help prevent oneself from being irritated by these points during the course of reading, it is helpful at such times to concentrate on the gist of what she is trying to say or teach, and the altruistic spirit in which she is writing. When we consider the environment in which Sa'dawi lives, we can begin to appreciate the enormity of her task and the courage needed to ask the unmentionable:

"The question which appears prominently now is:  
with whom shall the young engage in sexual activity?  
Or to put it another way, how can a young man  
expend his sexual energy during his adolescence and  
young manhood until he marries?"<sup>56</sup>

Apart from the fact that birth control is available only to married women, Sa'dawi lists as factors complicating this matter: the fact that females are more restricted when it comes to exercising their sexuality,

than males; that although men are permitted certain sexual freedoms, the prevailing view in society is that sex is dirty and wrong; the various inequalities between the sexes; the use made by the media, popular songs and advertizing of sexual suggestion, in order to sell their products; and the difficulties of those who continue their education who have to wait a considerable time until they can achieve sufficient economic independence to get married. Sa'dawi also singles out a pernicious type of propaganda which can adversely affect the young person's attitude to his own sexuality, which is more commonly found in Egypt today than when Sa'dawi was writing, due to the renewed interest in Islam: it is "the spread of religious books and moralizing sermons which call for virtue and an avoidance of vice (i.e. sex).."<sup>57</sup> (Sa'dawi's brackets). This she sees as instigated by foreign economic forces, for she adds that such propaganda tends to appear,

".. especially in times of pressing national need when some foreign and internal economic forces resort to fanning religious enthusiasm or creating various kinds of prejudices in order to cover up specific political and economic crises."<sup>58</sup>

Whatever the restriction on adolescent sexuality, young people can always manage to find an outlet for their sexual desire if it is insistent enough: Sa'dawi lists, for example, masturbation, homosexuality, fantasies and sex films, frequenting prostitutes, sexual aggression against females of a lower social class, and the duping of respectable young girls into a sexual relationship with false promises of love and marriage, as the most frequent outlets, while rape and abusing women in public are two more perverted forms. When such feelings find no expression,



they are likely to be diverted inwardly into headaches, mental problems or insomnia. The sexual tension appears to be so high, in the Egyptian context, that the concentration of the young is sharpened to detect the slightest nuance of interest from the opposite sex as an invitation to intercourse. When friendship between the sexes is discouraged, there is no way for the young to differentiate between sexual flirtation and ordinary amicability.

"One of the most serious problems which female university students suffer from in our society, is that the moment one of them smiles at a male colleague, or says 'Good morning', a rumour spreads round within a few days, that there is a relationship between the two of them and it is apparent that the source of the rumour is usually the young man himself.

There are, however, many young men who don't only spread this kind of rumour as a kind of self-aggrandizement, but actually imagine that when a girl says 'Good morning' to, or smiles at, her male colleague, it means only one thing, and that is an invitation to bed, or at least an indication that she would not object if he asked her."<sup>59</sup>

Mernissi has also noted the problem of adolescent sexuality in Morocco and the way in which it assumes different forms according to whether it is in the urban or rural context. She finds the peasants actually more insistent upon sexual segregation than city dwellers. There does not appear to be in Moroccan rural life the laxity of moral values which Sa'dawi has previously noted as being characteristic of the poor Egyptian peasant. (Further research is obviously needed to confirm the authenticity of Sa'dawi's theory, and account if she is correct, for this discrepancy between the Egyptian and Moroccan attitudes.)

Both Sa'dawi and Mernissi, however, agree that the problem for young men in the countryside is connected with their difficulty in earning a living adequate to support a family, and the lack of available partners. (They both feel it necessary to comment on the fact that men will resort to sex with animals in cases of dire need.)<sup>60</sup> Here is what Mernissi says:

"A survey of some rural areas revealed that each village controls its youth to such an extent that young men have no access to women and engage in deviant sexual practices, by the society's own standards. For example, of those who answered the questionnaire,

14%-confessed practicing masturbation or sodomy  
20%-practice homosexuality  
34%-go to a brothel in the nearest town as often as they can afford it."<sup>61</sup>

and

"Most of the young men are resentful of being forced into sexual practices they abhor. They dream of getting married, and do so as soon as they can find a job, which is rather difficult."<sup>62</sup>

and finally:

"The young men resent the fact that older men who have more money monopolize and marry most of the young girls."<sup>63</sup>

In urban areas where access to sexual partners is more relaxed, Mernissi sees sexual segregation, "one of the main pillars of Islam's social control over sexuality", in the process of breaking down. As a result of this, she sees emerging,

".. what the Muslim order condemns as a deadly enemy of civilization - love between men and women in general, and between husband and wife in particular."<sup>64</sup>

It is interesting to compare Sa'dawi with Mernissi. Although they are contemporaries writing about similar topics within a feminist, socialist framework, they do so from different intellectual and personal backgrounds which means that one tends to shed light on the other. Mernissi is a writer with a strong aptitude for scholarly detail, her output is much smaller than Sa'dawi's and she is less didactic. In comparison, Sa'dawi's prolific works seem frequently disorganized and discursive. While Mernissi writes for the intellectual, Sa'dawi writes for everyone! By constantly relating the sexual to the cultural tradition, Mernissi shows more convincingly the reasons for the specific type of relationship problems which occur in her society, than Sa'dawi does in hers by trying to play down this aspect, or ignore it, in favour of economic factors and the Marxist theory of class struggle.

Sa'dawi's approach is noticeably one-sided at times. For example, her comprehensive list containing some dozen reasons for premature ejaculation can ultimately serve no positive purpose.<sup>65</sup> The male reader may identify with one or all of the conditions, but this does not help him to cope with the problem in his daily life. There is no reassurance from Sa'dawi that adolescents should have a legitimate way of exercising their sexuality from puberty until marriage. Nor is there any hint that greater interaction between the sexes during teenage years could be the solution to this problem, besides those of frigidity in women and premature ejaculation in men which might help later to achieve guilt-free sex in marriage. There is thus a gap to be filled before the individual can develop his sexuality and his integrity in a healthy enough way to enable him to enjoy the delights of a mature sexual

relationship which Sa'dawi describes as a means to liberate all his creative potentials.<sup>66</sup>

Sa'dawi spends one short chapter discussing the idea that both sexes have a natural curiosity about what it must be like to be a member of the opposite sex, if not an occasional actual desire to be other than what they are. She briefly mentions various perversions of this normal tendency, including transvestitism, where she must be one of the first Arab writers, if not the first, to broach this subject in a serious manner.<sup>67</sup>

Sa'dawi's chapter on homosexuality<sup>68</sup> aims to show how men have been able to legitimize their perversions from the time of the Greeks. Sa'dawi makes no attempt to see homosexuality as anything other than a perversion, which, as mentioned before, is not entirely consistent with the idea she supports of children having inherently bisexual natures.<sup>69</sup> Again her examples are all taken from Western history or classical culture. One unfortunate aspect of the fact that the author regards homosexuality as deviant, is that it unavoidably colours her judgement and reduces her respect for those men of genius who are known to have been thus inclined; she cites Plato, Michelangelo, Da Vinci and Rousseau etc., in this regard. This intolerance in Sa'dawi is also symptomatic of her attaching too much importance to sexuality in general, which as we have seen, may not be simply the result of a personal obsession, but due to her own cultural conditioning. It seems incongruous that the names of such outstandingly gifted men should be trotted out, divorced from any appreciation of their achievements, to illustrate

Sa'dawi's theory on homosexuality or illegitimacy through the ages, as further evidence of Western moral laxity.

In the course of this chapter, Sa'dawi again raises Freud's theory of sublimation, clearly expecting the reader to believe that it is entirely wrong, merely on the basis of her own statement.

"The error of this idea has become obvious, and it has been found that sexual energy is not changed into creative thought, but is perverted from its natural course into other more complex and deviant channels."<sup>70</sup>

This time she bases her argument on an analogy between the human instinct for food and the sex instinct: if the former can only be satisfied by food, she believes it must follow that the latter can only be satisfied by heterosexual sex. There is no reason for her analogy to be correct, nor for her to conclude that sexuality can only be expressed 'correctly' through heterosexual activity. By begging the question in this manner, Sa'dawi draws attention to her own limitations as an objective researcher.

Sa'dawi proceeds to list various abnormalities in the father-son relationship as found in a male-dominated society, which she believes contribute to the development of homosexual tendencies in a young man.<sup>71</sup> She sees it all as very much connected to the pride of place given to the male organ in her society, (which she also refers to as a "weapon" silāh in Arabic)<sup>72</sup> in the sex war between men and women. She pays particular attention to refuting any suggestion that the greater the size of the penis, the greater the sexual potential of the man. For a woman in a male-dominated, sexually-repressive society, to be telling a

male audience such 'truths' is certainly a surprising state of affairs. Although she is sympathetic towards homosexuals, she does not see them as engaging in loving relationships.<sup>73</sup> In her opinion, they need psychiatric treatment to help them overcome any fear of women and to liberate their personalities. She also suggests that any impediments within society or the family, in the way of the individual's growth to maturity, should be removed.

As a result of the adulation given to the male organ in her society some men who suffer from a diminished sense of their own masculinity resort to exhibitionism in an effort to regain their phallic pride.<sup>74</sup> Sa'dawi tells the reader of Western countries which have tried to cope with such displays of sexuality by allowing clubs where many types of sexual pursuits can be satisfied, e.g. lesbian and striptease clubs. In case her readers should envy the apparent sexual freedoms of the West, Sa'dawi stresses that these are only available to the well-off leisured classes, and are not something to be admired in general.

"Many people might be amazed when they travel to these kinds of countries and see such sex clubs, because they imagine them to mean that the height of personal freedom and liberation is guaranteed to each individual. But anyone who examines thoroughly the laws of these modern capitalist countries will see that freedom is not actually guaranteed to each individual. There is a freedom which the rulers enjoy which the ruled do not, and a freedom which factory owners enjoy which the workers do not, and a freedom for men which women do not have. And just as freedom is not available to the overwhelming majority of people, especially economic and social freedoms, sexual freedom too is only available to those who are capable of taking advantage of it, those whose economic circumstances give them the leisure and money to indulge their personal sexual bent within a club. But the majority of the people work hard and

labour in the factories, and all that a man in this position can do, is to return home at the end of the day to a wife who is depressed or exhausted from the housework and looking after the children, or if he can afford it, he might go to the pub to 'drown his sorrows' with a glass of cheap wine or visit a sick, worn-out prostitute."<sup>75</sup>

Sa'dawi does not distinguish between the freedom to behave as one likes and the freedom to choose within acceptable limits. She also ignores the issue of communal tolerance, which means that such clubs can perform a useful social role by defusing the sexual tension, in society at large and in the individual, by allowing a legitimate safety-valve for those whose sexuality does not find sufficient satisfaction in the stereotyped roles of husband and wife. It is the different climate of opinion in the West which Sa'dawi has failed to appreciate.

Sa'dawi relates how she had met men in prison and mental hospital who had been found guilty of sex crimes such as rape or exhibitionism, and that after a little probing, she could detect some kind of deprivation or abnormality in their childhood background which accounted for their anti-social behaviour, such as the one who had slept in the same bedroom as his parents till the age of nine, and had witnessed nightly what looked to him like an assault on his mother, by his father.<sup>76</sup>

The following chapter on men's sexual fantasies shows more evidence of Sa'dawi's original understanding of the sexual behaviour of her compatriots. She sees, perhaps curiously, a connection between male sexual repression and the difficulty some men find in becoming aroused by women, which makes them indulge in fantasies or find a substitute

erotic stimulation in female underwear etc., when it is far more probable that it is the sexual deprivation such men suffer which heightens their receptivity to anything with the slightest connotation of sexuality.<sup>77</sup> She sums up the difference between the sexes in this regard with her observation that while many men can be aroused by a pair of women's pants or stockings, women show no comparable emotion when faced with men's undergarments!

Still on the subject of clothes, Sa'dawi deplors the exploitation of women's bodies by advertizers, as a means of selling their goods. She believes that the fashion industry is geared towards making women dress in a provocative way to please men; one year drawing attention to one part of the body, the following year to another. This was probably more in evidence in the early 1970s than it is today, both in the West, thanks to advertising control campaigns, and in Egypt, as a result of the Islamic revival. Sa'dawi feels that a mature woman should dress to please herself according to what suits her body and personality.<sup>78</sup>

There is no easy way of accounting for the differences in sexual arousal, between individuals from one culture to another as suggested above, but Sa'dawi alights on what she believes to be the chief determining factor, that of social conditioning arising from the particular moral and educational environment.<sup>79</sup> She illustrates this by a comparison between typical Swedish women and Egyptian women. The former, living in a sexually tolerant society, feel no embarrassment about their own nudity, or their partner's, and are normally aroused without problems. The Egyptian women, though, admitted to a poor image



of their own bodies and anxiety and revulsion at the sight of their husband's; frigidity to some degree is extremely common: two very different images, one could conclude, of the female 'nature'. Sa'dawi asks which is the 'real' woman, the Swedish or the Egyptian? Here is a potentially enlightening new field of future research which Sa'dawi is unable to explore. Some kind of cross-cultural comparison of family upbringing and social expectations would undoubtedly be very revealing of Arab society.

Sa'dawi observes that in the Egyptian context (and this is probably true of any sex segregated society), anything which heightens the differences between the sexes can have a role in stimulating sexual response by confirming the individual's feelings of his own masculinity or her own femininity. She gives a wonderful exposition of this in her theory on the importance of high-heels. High-heeled shoes not only stress the different styles of walking which men and women are supposed to have, by compelling women into a painful, awkward and restricted posture, but also, by retarding women and enfeebling them, they make a useful weapon against those who would seek a more active role in life.

"High heels which are widespread the world over, distort women's way of walking, they slow her down and cause her pain. Yet high heels please men to the extent that they have even taken them into account in designing aeroplanes and skyscrapers' corridors. High heels have become an important weapon along with various other 'feminine' accoutrements aimed at increasing the differences between the sexes, making women weaker, more restricted and feeble so that the man can easily assume the upper hand."<sup>80</sup>

Only the mature man and woman in Sa'dawi's opinion can be independent of the fads and fashions which serve to reinforce gender stereotypes. In this state, the mature person will recognize in the mature individual of the other sex, not so much his or her opposite, but someone who is alive in a similar way.<sup>81</sup> Both will exhibit a healthy blend of what are typically regarded as masculine or feminine characteristics, but which are, in fact, only basic human traits.

The chapter on sexual abuse of children<sup>82</sup> concentrates mostly on the ways in which young girls are victims of the sexually-frustrated men in their families. The groundwork of this chapter is obviously based on Sa'dawi's own personal experiences as a doctor. She has discussed this taboo subject elsewhere and shown her refusal to allow her readers to imagine that it is a rare occurrence, in Egyptian society, simply because it is not spoken of. Incidents of sexual abuse against girls appear, at the time of writing, to be dealt with in a peculiarly idiosyncratic way in Egypt.<sup>83</sup> For a start, parents of girls who have been abused, are reluctant to seek prosecution by taking the case to court, out of a fear that the girl's 'reputation' will be compromised; a misplaced fear when one considers that the girl is not the guilty party.<sup>84</sup> Likewise, if the case does go to court, the presiding judge may dismiss it and let the offender go free, purely on the grounds of protecting the girl's honourable name. Why, one might ask, would it be so difficult for the girl's identity to be kept secret and not published in the papers? Perhaps most bizarre of all, is the 'punishment' given to the man found guilty of raping a girl over 16 years old, which is that he is forced to marry her. While this is almost certainly an attractive proposition

to him (else why would he have raped her in the first place?) what of the victim? She, the innocent party, appears to have to suffer doubly; the guilty rapist is rewarded! And what conceivable reason can Egyptian society put forward for believing such a 'solution' a valid basis for marriage?

One tragic case which Sa'dawi came across deserves to be quoted in full, for it embodies the very essence of the Egyptian patriarchal social system from the point of view of the individual, his family and the authorities. It also illustrates that, whatever arguments are put forward to suggest for example, that Arab women's status is more respected today, or that Islam guarantees them a kind of equality, or that the key to improving women's situation is through education alone, the whole weight of a society so biased against females can easily crush them when they have done no wrong, and support the actions of those who are guilty.

"Among the cases that I examined during my research study on women and neurosis, was that of a young female doctor who had just graduated. She had been engaged and then married to one of her colleagues. On the marriage night her husband discovered that she was not a virgin. She explained to him that she had lost her virginity while still a child and that her father was the culprit. But her husband was unable to take the shock in his stride and divorced her. The young woman returned to her parents' home. She was unable to tell her mother the truth out of fear for the father. The good woman accused her of being perverted and the father zealously joined in, heaping blame upon his daughter. The girl, at her wits' end, wept and finally confessed to her mother all that had happened. In turn the poor woman, exposed to the terrible shock of finding out what her husband had done, almost collapsed. The father, however, accused his daughter of lying and beat her savagely. She was seized with a nervous breakdown which the father used to his advantage. He accused the girl of being insane and sent her off to a hospital for mental disease. The psychiatrist in

charge of the case put his trust in the father's story and refused to believe the girl. The result was that she ended up by losing not only her integrity and honour, the man who was her husband, and her whole future, but also her reason, since for some people at least, she was now considered mentally unbalanced."<sup>85</sup>

Sa'dawi is right indeed to say that the basis of her society is unjust for allowing the above situation to take place.<sup>86</sup> The tragedy for young women lies in the fact that, even in cases of sexual abuse, it is the damage to their virginity rather than the psychological trauma, which is the object of their society's concern.<sup>87</sup>

Sa'dawi leaves the subject of women's talent to the very end, where she is very critical of men as being the cause of so many of women's problems. She reflects that if it is true that behind every great man is a woman, it is only because she, by relieving him of all household drudgery and childcare, allows him to dedicate his life to his profession. It seems ridiculous to ask the opposite; who is behind the successful woman?

"Anyone who looks into the lives of women achievers in our society, will find that they are very few in number because they have had to fight restrictions inside and outside the home which have prevented them from achieving excellence in any field. We also find that behind such an achievement by a woman there is certainly not a man, rather the contrary, it is the man who stands in her way, in every case."<sup>88</sup>

The final chapter entitled, "Towards a more just and moral society", contains the essence of Sa'dawi's philosophy and her attitude towards

her own society. Sa'dawi demands nothing short of a revolution:<sup>89</sup> a

revolution on the economic front,<sup>90</sup> to end inequalities of wealth and the exploitation of the poor by the rich; and on the social front, to replace old values with a new respect for the individual which will afford him or her the right conditions for reaching maturity.

If we stand back to try and see how Sa'dawi's work is of value and how it is being effective, we can discern that it is in giving Egyptians a comprehensive view of their social life and showing how its various manifestations interrelate. She invites them to focus on the 'wood', her dream of a healthy society, rather than the 'trees', the trivial, outdated or harmful issues of the traditional concepts of honour, gender stereotypes, virginity, man as master, phallic pride etc. Sa'dawi is urging Egyptian men and women, especially of the young generation, to take more control over their lives and more responsibility for their actions in order to contribute more effectively to their society. She is trying to prove to them that such things are not only possible but are healthy and are being put into practice elsewhere. As a reward for those who do so, Sa'dawi promises greater maturity and a sense of fulfilment. On occasions she is very forthright, making her point succinctly without ambiguity:

"In order to raise the standard of honour to a higher moral level, respectability (sharaf) must be seen as residing in the individual's head rather than in his lower half. Every person, man and woman, must be responsible for his or her behaviour and thoughts, before other people."<sup>91</sup>

Since Sa'dawi's philosophy is primarily a rationalist, humanitarian one, it inevitably upsets the conservative religious among the population whose outlook on life is coloured and conditioned by religious dogma.<sup>92</sup> Sa'dawi is obviously aware of the fact that some of her demands are incompatible with the Islamic religion, such as her disapproval of polygamy and men's greater freedom to divorce, and her insistence upon equality, where even in the matter of inheritance, a relatively non-controversial subject, the Qur'ān itself upholds the man as superior to the woman and entitled to a greater share. She defines religion in broad humanitarian terms which, as we have seen before, is unrealistic, but then goes on to suggest that religion is not above criticism. This is her boldest statement so far on this point.

"That there are some sacrosanct concepts which ought never to be discussed or infringed, is an anti-religious attitude. Because religions call human beings to use their minds in order to develop their lives and make their society a better and happier place."<sup>93</sup>

The problem here is that Sa'dawi advocates legitimate use of the mind to discard whatever in the religious creed conflicts with an individual's socialist ambitions. This approach constitutes a threat to the whole religious edifice itself, because religion is not primarily accessible through the rational, nor is it appreciated essentially by the reasoning mind. Yet one can argue, as Sa'dawi does, that the use of one's mind is sanctioned by Islam itself and hence it has to be given a place in the Muslim view of life. I would suggest that Sa'dawi has misinterpreted this, for it can only mean to a Muslim, that the believer is encouraged to use his intelligence once his mind has been fully moulded by his

religion's tenets; he is free to use it within those limits only.

Sa'dawi advocates an unrestricted use of one's mental powers. To forestall any criticism that she might be advocating sexual anarchy or moral laxity or even that she is anti-religious, Sa'dawi gives a comprehensive list of her objections to her society as it was in the early 1970s (which was of course, a society that claimed to be permeated by Islamic culture even before the current revival of interest in Islam). Such a society, she says, is already an immoral one for making women and children the scapegoats for men's promiscuity. Sa'dawi sees the roots of Egypt's "immorality" residing in the fact that men can divorce easily which encourages them to behave irresponsibly, and because marriage is too often based on self-interest or financial reasons rather than on genuine mature love. It is furthermore immoral because respectability has come to be judged by superficial, trivial criteria rather than the quality of sincerity, which exacerbates the double standards that operate in every field, and because women and children are still not regarded as having full independent personhood. She is also critical of the fact that in legal terms, the wife is significantly circumscribed in her behaviour by her husband's rights over her, that the family structure and social environment encourages the development of sexual and psychological problems from childhood, that there is a fundamental lack of equality between the sexes in terms of sexual freedoms, men being far less restricted than women by social controls, and because people are afraid of their religion, afraid to question its values,<sup>94</sup> and those values that are upheld, conflict with those disseminated by the media.

There is so much wrong with her society, Sa'dawi feels, that it can only be corrected by a

".. liberation of the family and society from lies, contradictions, fear and blind obedience, deception, double standards, exploitation and physical, mental and economic oppression of men, women and children."<sup>95</sup>

a marvellously idealistic, albeit impracticable vision in which there are no allowances for human fallibility and weakness.

It is quite probable that this book would have relieved the anxieties of many Egyptian men, at least about not feeling that they have to worry so much about their masculinity. There is much sympathy from Sa'dawi for men as unwitting victims of the social system which their forbears created to serve and ensure male interests. There is understanding too, not condemnation, for what Sa'dawi regards as deviant: paedophilia, incest, sexual abuse of young girls by men, and homosexuality. By her very discussion of these hitherto unmentionable topics, Sa'dawi is relieving a whole layer of mental tension within her receptive readers that has been buried deep in the social fabric by those who are engaged in these activities, those who are victims and those who know of such goings on but fear to disclose it. Yet even this cannot prevent Sa'dawi from letting show through her resentment against men as being the architects of a patriarchal culture which has caused so much suffering to women.

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After examining Sa'dawi's first three important sociological works, the reader becomes aware that Sa'dawi can sense a massive amount of energy, a huge creative and emotional potential among her people, which is simply blocked from finding expression, because of the irrational taboos, lack of correct education, social injustices and lack of respect for human life engendered by Egypt's patriarchal heritage. Sa'dawi wants to try and unlock that potential to help her people to find happiness and health. The image of Egyptian society presented by Sa'dawi is unmistakably bleak. What of the good points about her society upon which Egyptians should build? Why does Sa'dawi not even once praise her contemporary society in any way or find anything commendable in it? This may be a reflection of Sa'dawi's own feelings of alienation from the very tenets of her society, the workings of its bureaucracy, its traditional interpretation of religion and its patriarchal institutions. As further evidence of this, if one examines what are frequently held to be the virtues of the Egyptian people as a whole,<sup>96</sup> namely the strength and solidarity of the family network, their generosity, their sense of humour in the face of difficulties, an almost placid resignation to their lot, where every sentence is punctuated with a religious epithet, and their simple piety, one can see that these qualities as they exist now (with the exception of generosity) have no place in Sa'dawi's scheme of things. She sees the traditional family more often as the source of pain, injustice and oppression than of loving support. The ability to laugh at a time of trouble can be little more than an acknowledgement of the individual's incapacity to act to improve his situation, which is also frequently related to the over-reliance on fatalism. When this has reached the point that the individual abdicates all personal responsibility

to try and redress wrongs, or take positive action, to joke about life's problems cannot be considered a virtue. Even so, we would be wrong to say that Sa'dawi is antagonistic to her people or belittling them in any way; we have so much evidence to the contrary: her devotion to educating them, teaching them about their bodies, how to think and examine their values, how to improve their relationships and build their society, not least the fact that she has decided to live amongst them rather than in a writer's exile abroad, and to work with them despite her objections to the state bureaucracy and its opposition to her ideas.

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References to Al-Rajul wa'l-Jins

- 1) Al-Rajul wa'l-Jins, p. 5.
- 2) Ibid., p. 15.
- 3) Ibid., p. 17.
- 4) For a detailed discussion of this topic from the point of view of Muslim apologists see, "Eve: Islamic image of woman", by Jane I. Smith and Yvonne Y. Haddad, in Women and Islam, edited by Azizah al-Hibri, Pergamon Press, New York, 1982, where the authors argue that the creation myth as found in the Qur'ān shows Eve to be neither inferior or secondary to Adam, nor culpable in tempting him to eat of the forbidden fruit.
- 5) Al-Rajul wa'l-Jins, p. 38.
- 6) See the chapter on Al-Unthā hiya al-Asl.
- 7) Al-Rajul wa'l-Jins, p. 40.
- 8) Ibid., p. 45.
- 9) Ibid., pp. 50-53.
- 10) Ibid., p. 50. See the Qur'ān, sura 4:34.

- 11) Al-Rajul wa'l-Jins, p. 51.
- 12) *Ibid.*, p. 52. For a discussion on this legal clause see above p. 212.
- 13) Women and Islam, *op. cit.*, pp. 193-206.
- 14) Al-Rajul wa'l-Jins, pp. 56-7, also HFE, p. 151.
- 15) Al-Rajul wa'l-Jins, p. 57.
- 16) *Ibid.*, pp. 58-9.
- 17) *Ibid.*, pp. 57, 60.
- 18) *Ibid.*, p. 63.
- 19) Al-Mar'a wa'l-Sirā' al-Nafsī, p. 62.
- 20) Al-Rajul wa'l-Jins, p. 68.
- 21) *Ibid.*, p. 66 f.
- 22) The creation of patriarchy, pp. 28-9.
- 23) *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.

- 24) Al-Rajul wa'l-Jins, p. 67.
- 25) Ibid., pp. 70-71.
- 26) Ibid., p. 71.
- 27) Ibid., p. 74.
- 28) Ibid., p. 75.
- 29) Ibid., p. 78.
- 30) Ibid., p. 79.
- 31) Ibid., p. 80.
- 32) Ibid., p. 81.
- 33) Ibid., p. 75.
- 34) Ibid., p. 82.
- 35) Ibid., p. 83.
- 36) Ibid., p. 146.
- 37) Ibid., p. 86.

38) Ibid., p. 88.

39) For further discussion on this point see p. 322 above.

40) Al-Rajul wa'l-Jins, p. 89.

41) Ibid., p. 89.

42) Minces has noticed that puberty is reached much earlier in Egypt than in the West:

"Amongst boys and girls, puberty and consciousness of sexuality are precocious, especially amongst the poorer classes. A 10-year-old urchin will quite naturally make obscene or sexually complimentary comments to a passing woman in the street. He knows what he is saying, and his superiority as a male allows him to do so. By comparison, Western children seem backward."

(House of obedience, p. 36)

43) The reader even finds himself irritated on occasions when Sa'dawi reveals the extent of her own curiosity about sexual matters, for example, when she digresses from a subject to indulge in various examples of perversion, (e.g. p. 95 f.) and her apparent familiarity with the sexual proclivities of the great geniuses mentioned above, which she lists on p. 83.

44) Minces reached the conclusion from her research in Egypt and Algeria that the Arabs, especially the men, are in general sexually obsessed: she chooses to explain it in terms of the typical psychological characteristics which arise in response to the social

and cultural conditions.

".. although sexuality is not bound up with the notion of sin, as in Christianity, people rarely talk about it except with those of their own age. But they think about it all the time, obsessively.

Adolescence starts very early on the sexual level: it is followed by at least ten years of frantic and almost total frustration, which is all the more difficult to bear in that the boy is a little male and must prove himself socially. This feeling of frustration, born of the specific structures of the society and of this long sexually frustrating adolescence, will stay with him for the rest of his life. It is a society which condemns a man to masturbation and chronic sexual obsession, even when sexuality is satisfied, since the women of his family (apart from his wife) are forbidden and the others are hidden away."

(House of obedience, pp. 36-7)

45) This is perhaps not as far fetched as it may seem. That the sun's radiation directly acts on the pineal gland enhancing energy, warding off depression and stimulating other glandular functions, has already been proved in medical science.

46) Al-Rajul wa'l-Jins, p. 89.

47) Beyond the veil, p. 69.

48) Al-Rajul wa'l-Jins, p. 105.

49) *Ibid.*, p. 106.

50) *Ibid.*, p. 108.

- 51) Ibid., p. 118.
- 52) Ibid., p. 118 f. The fact that Sa'dawi has to use the word 'orgasm' transliterated into Arabic, is an indication that Arabic has no recognized term for this which Sa'dawi would feel happy using.
- 53) Al-Rajul wa'l-Jins, p. 121.
- 54) Ibid., p. 122.
- 55) Ibid., p. 123.
- 56) Ibid., p. 125.
- 57) Ibid., p. 125.
- 58) Ibid., p. 126.
- 59) Ibid., p. 128.
- 60) Ibid., p. 133. See Mernissi, Beyond the veil, p. 53.
- 61) Mernissi, op. cit., p. 52.
- 62) Ibid., p. 53.
- 63) Ibid., p. 54.



- 64) Ibid., p. 58.
- 65) Al-Rajul wa'l-Jins, p. 130.
- 66) Ibid., pp. 134-5.
- 67) Ibid., p. 141.
- 68) Ibid., p. 146.
- 69) Ibid., p. 159.
- 70) Ibid., p. 149.
- 71) Ibid., p. 152.
- 72) Ibid., p. 145.
- 73) Mernissi has also noted that the attention given to a boy's penis starts from an early age in Morocco; Beyond the veil, p. 159.

"The male child is introduced differently to sex. His penis, htewta ('little penis'), is the object of a real cult on the part of the women rearing him. Little sisters, aunts, maids, mothers, often attract the little boy's attention to his htewta and try to teach him to pronounce the word which is quite a task given the guttural initial letter 'h'".

- 74) Al-Rajul wa'l-Jins, p. 159.

- 75) Ibid., p. 160.
- 76) Ibid., p. 162.
- 77) Ibid., p. 169.
- 78) Ibid., pp. 170-172.
- 79) Ibid., p. 175.
- 80) Ibid., p. 180.
- 81) Ibid., p. 182.
- 82) Ibid., p. 183. f.
- 83) See al-Unthā hiya al-Asl, p. 299 above.
- 84) Al-Rajul wa'l-Jins, p. 187.
- 85) Ibid., p. 187: quoted here from HFE, p. 22.
- 86) Al-Rajul wa'l-Jins, p. 188.
- 87) Ibid., p. 191.
- 88) Ibid., p. 205.

89) Ibid., p. 197.

90) Ibid., p. 197.

91) Ibid., p. 196.

92) Ibid., p. 198.

93) Ibid., p. 198.

94) Ibid., p. 199.

95) Ibid., p. 200.

96) For an interesting series of observations on Arab character in general, with particular reference to Egyptian national traits, see: Morroe Berger, The Arab world today, London, 1962, pp. 162-9.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE SOCIOLOGICAL WORKS OF NAWAL AL-SA'DAWI, CONTINUED

1. Al-Mar'a wa'l-Sirā' al-Nafsī

In Al-Mar'a wa'l-Sirā' al-Nafsī (Women and psychological stress) Sa'dawi investigates the increasing incidence of psychological stress among Egyptian women through an analysis of the typical problems which they face. This research was carried out between 1973-4 and published in 1976. Sa'dawi's findings are very revealing of the position of women in her society and the attitude of the Egyptian medical profession in general towards women. Sa'dawi was unable to trace any serious study of women's psychological problems in Egypt which she might have been able to use as a starting point for her own research. This came as something of a surprise in view of the fact that female patients treated for neuroses at clinics, significantly outnumbered male, whether this applied to the working population or university students, a phenomenon which obviously warranted investigation. This comes as a matter of less surprise when one takes into account the woman's social situation. The life of a poor or working-class woman in Egypt is so dominated by economic problems that unless her mental and physical condition is prostrating, any complaints which might be seen as symptomatic of a neurosis such as insomnia, depression, headaches, apathy, lack of appetite or sexual desire, tend to go unnoticed. As a

natural consequence of her inferior position in the family, the lower class woman's symptoms tend to be of secondary importance to her husband's. The woman of the more wealthy classes can enjoy better health care so long as her father or husband agrees to pay medical fees.

As a general rule, Sa'dawi observed that a woman's susceptibility to neurosis in Egyptian society rises according to her level of education.<sup>1</sup> The conclusions Sa'dawi reaches in accounting for this phenomenon show considerable insight into the relationship between environment and women's psychological state. She deduced from preliminary investigations, her own experience as a doctor and editor of the magazine Al-Sihha, that the prevalence of women's mental complaints in Egypt is alarming and probably of a higher rate than in the U.S.A.<sup>3</sup>

Sa'dawi is very critical of psychiatry as practised in Egypt: most doctors and psychologists, she found, were automatically biased against women because they had been trained according to outdated Freudian theories and because they held the traditional sexist views current in Muslim societies which act to women's disadvantage. Whether the doctors were male or female, their chauvinist attitudes together with the limited understanding of women's minds and bodies which they had absorbed from their training, made them unsuitable for treating female patients successfully. If we consider the reasons for the Egyptian psychiatric profession's adherence to such conservative views we will realize that their acceptance has been due to the fact that they can be used to corroborate the traditional ideas of the roles of

men and women in society as derived from Egyptian culture and its interpretation of Islam. Any dictum of Freud's that could be used to reinforce the idea that women were by nature passive, masochistic or emotionally unstable and in need of a husband, potentially reinforces the existing beliefs that a normal woman's role in society is submission to her husband and subservience to his needs and those of their children. Various reactionary sections of Egyptian society still cling to these views and derive their security from them.<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately for women in Egypt, any behaviour of a nature that conflicts with their society's stringent demands is likely to cause them to be labelled neurotic. Thus an intelligent, ambitious woman who refuses to be a man's servant and accept an inferior position within the family or society, would be diagnosed as having mental problems.

"An intelligent, ambitious woman is considered neurotic because she is rejecting a position of inferiority in relation to a man and is rejecting the role imposed upon her in the home as a servant to her spouse and children."<sup>5</sup>

In trying to formulate scientifically the mental tensions which give rise to psychological distress in Egyptian women, Sa'dawi examined subjects from a broad cross-section of her society. These were divided into four groups which were classified as: fifty neurotic educated women, fifty neurotic uneducated women, thirty normal educated and thirty normal uneducated women, all between the ages of twenty and twenty nine. The 'normal' woman Sa'dawi defined as one who feels

no distressing mental symptoms for which she might consult a doctor, or take tranquillizers or anti-depressant drugs.<sup>6</sup> An educated woman is one who has received a university education or is working in some kind of creative or intellectual position. An uneducated woman is one who received only basic or elementary schooling, for example housewives, domestics and those engaged in repetitive manual tasks.

It will be seen that the labels 'normal' and 'neurotic' are entirely inappropriate when viewed out of the context of a strictly patriarchal society. For this reason I prefer to use inverted commas for the terms normal, neurotic and neuroses, when used in accordance with current Egyptian medical opinion which would be at variance with Sa'dawi's views. Sa'dawi reveals that these terms when used by the Egyptian medical profession, in fact designate the very opposite: those supposedly 'normal' women are only those who have been successfully conditioned according to the values and mores of their society. Effective socialization of females in Egypt appears to necessitate their abandoning control of their own lives, surrendering their mental and emotional development, accepting the legitimacy of male domination and renouncing their independence, personal and financial, in favour of men who traditionally govern their lives. This is not 'normality' for Sa'dawi. That such a large number of women do conform thus, is understandable. The climate of opinion regarding basic human rights for Egyptian men and women and an enhanced role for women in society, not to mention their entitlement to education, sexuality and independence, is unfavourable at present, to women at all levels of Sa'dawi's society unless they adhere rigidly to traditional family and social norms.

When this is complicated by political, economic and religious factors, as it is in practice, it presents a formidable obstacle for an intelligent young woman striving to achieve intellectual and personal fulfilment. As a more accurate criterion for normality in a young woman, Sa'dawi would rather see a productive orientation towards some kind of creative or intellectual work, through which the individual has the opportunity to grow in personal maturity and responsibility.<sup>7</sup> Healthy normal women, especially intelligent educated ones, says Sa'dawi, are less willing to abdicate their personalities and are more keenly aware of what opportunities and rights they are lacking in comparison to men of their class. They thus tend to clash with prevailing values and the inadequacy of Egyptian society to cater for their needs. Their 'neuroses' stem from the very values society upholds.

Sa'dawi chose to interview her subjects in a relaxed atmosphere often in their own homes or hers.<sup>8</sup> By questioning them about their economic and social background, childhood, adolescence, work, marriage, dreams, fantasies, behaviour, attitudes, and where applicable, psychological illness, Sa'dawi was able to draw up tables of comparison between the different groups of women, which she then used to shed light on the major factors which underlie women's psychological adjustment or lack of adjustment, to their milieu.

Discrimination between the sexes in childhood and adolescence appears to be a major determining factor in causing neuroses. Over 58% of subjects wished that they had been born male. (A much higher ratio was recorded among the 'neurotic' educated and uneducated women



who would have preferred to have been born male, than among the 'normal' women.)<sup>9</sup> Sa'dawi interprets this as a preference for the wider opportunities available to males in general. The greater privileges and fewer restrictions enjoyed by men in Egyptian society are more obvious to the intelligent and educated woman. Sa'dawi's theory thus contrasts with the popular Freudian theory that any woman who would prefer to have been born male, must suffer from a castration complex and should be regarded as abnormal. The typical Egyptian psychiatrist would look for 'reasons' of mental illness in the patient's childhood, heredity or sexual fantasies, ignoring the often obvious explanation in the woman's daily situation. In the effort to slot the case into a neat Freudian theory, the root problem, for example a young woman's distress at being beaten by her father or dominated by her husband which is far more likely to be to blame for her stress than suppressed sexual desire, Oedipus or Electra complex, is entirely ignored. It often happened that the young educated woman had a better awareness of her problem than her doctor.<sup>10</sup>

Sa'dawi discovered that girls and young women suffered various degrees of traditional forms of sexual repression, for example, over 80% had been circumcized. This harmful procedure which leaves an indelible effect on the woman's psyche has been a focal point of Sa'dawi's courageous campaigns to improve women's health care in Egypt. Sa'dawi mentions a study carried out in 1965 by two brave male doctors in which they conclude that the operation causes a sexual shock to the girl and makes orgasm difficult if not impossible.<sup>11</sup> She also mentions the obstacles and prejudice they and she encountered in undertaking

studies related to women's intimate biology. She doubts the power of the present education system, which upholds traditional values about sex and virginity, to spare girls this ordeal.<sup>12</sup> Another reason that makes it unlikely that female circumcision will die out quickly is the money which doctors and midwives can make out of the operation.<sup>13</sup> The same applies to examinations to check virginity and operations to repair the hymen. All these services as supplied by doctors are necessitated of course by the particularly prohibitive attitude towards female sexuality in Egypt's contemporary culture.

The pioneering nature of Sa'dawi's work has largely centred around her refusal to endorse any kind of male aggression or oppression against members of her own sex. She has relentlessly exposed the intimate details of those areas in which girls and women have suffered. One particularly important aspect of her work has been the distressing subject of incest and sexual abuse of girls. She is the first in Arab-Muslim society to have had the courage to confront this disturbing topic. Amongst those she interviewed, she found that as many as 45% of uneducated women had suffered some form of incest or molestation from an adult male (who was in many cases a relative) during childhood.<sup>14</sup> The fact that such abuse appears to occur more frequently in the poorer and uneducated families, Sa'dawi deduced, is due to their cramped living conditions. When it occurs in sexually-repressive families it indicates that the strict morality of such people does not allow them a legitimate outlet for their pent-up sexual frustration outside the family. Tremendous psychological problems are likely to develop in the sensitive adolescent girl as a result of the guilt and shame

she feels about such acts, which occurred through no fault of her own. Along with the constant fear that she may lose or have lost her virginity, (often a matter of life-determining proportions) such understandable guilt complexes are exacerbated to a serious degree. The burden of responsibility for the family's public honour would appear to fall unfairly on the shoulders of those least capable of defending it, the young girls.

More than 70% of Sa'dawi's subjects were aware of overt preference given to boys in their families,<sup>15</sup> which was most noticeable in the area of education. Typical cases included that of a bright young girl who was not allowed to attend university while her younger less intelligent brother was allowed, or that of a young woman forced to abandon her college studies by parents eager to see her married. In both cases the resulting intellectual frustration caused serious psychological suffering to the young woman by the time she was in her mid-twenties. The more intelligent the girl, the more keenly she felt the denial of her opportunity to develop herself.

Education appears paradoxically to be the cause of, and solution to, many women's mental problems: traditional education is responsible for the former suggests Sa'dawi, while a modern liberal education (as yet unrealized in Egypt) will provide the latter. The educated and aware young women in Egypt face more acute contradictions in society today because their new expectations, albeit modest ones, resulting from higher education (or reading Sa'dawi's books), conflict with the traditional role society still expects of them.<sup>16</sup> Pressure comes from

their relatives who may feel that ambitions for a career or further study are incompatible with marriage. Marriage is still society's top priority for young women. Sa'dawi sees Egyptian society going through a transitional period in which new values are challenging traditional attitudes. This has a greater impact on women because it is their roles which are changing rather than men's. Social, ethical and economic values are still biased in favour of men. Thus the educated woman faces more conflicts in trying to get herself recognized as a respectable, career-minded worker, than the educated man. Egyptian society is not wholly ready yet to accept women in their new roles, though it relies on their labour, their training and professional expertise in the medical, social and educational fields. Some idea of the point which Egyptian women have reached in the mid-1980s and the response from their society can be gained from Sullivan's descriptions.\*

"The strict sexual division of labor, characteristic of the not too distant past, can no longer be used as 'proof' that women are incapable of performing important political, economic, or technical tasks. The evidence that women can do these jobs is now part of everyday experience. For many traditionalists, however, this does not make women's public roles any less controversial. For them, seeing women work is not proof that women can do these tasks, but proof that society is perverted and organized improperly. Thus, for some Egyptians, the fact that the sexual division of labor has changed makes the public role of women more controversial rather than less. Even in the face of evidence to the contrary, they doubt the capacity of women to do important public work and deny the propriety of it when it is done.

Although it is impossible to tell how many people hold such views, or how powerful they are or may become,

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\* He is writing of conditions some ten years after Sa'dawi's work.

this hard core opposition to women's emancipation is likely to remain a force to be contended with in Egyptian public life. In the early 1980s, it seemed to be held in check, but no one can say for certain what the future will hold. Women who attempt to function in the public arena as agents of change will not succeed without overcoming an enduring challenge to the legitimacy of their role."<sup>17</sup>

and speaking specifically of the mid-1980s he says:

"Although some women have had successful careers in politics and business, there is no evidence to suggest the dominant bias against such roles for women has been replaced by a more supportive ethic. Instead, what exists now is a set of competing notions regarding women's roles in society, both of which have substantial numbers of important supporters. Slowly and irregularly, change has occurred, but women who seek education, wish to work outside the home, or enter politics still encounter opposition, although, due to factors discussed below, that opposition is less formidable than it was a few decades ago."<sup>18</sup>

A great many Egyptian women have, of course, always worked, but it is regarded that a wife's money is a welcome financial help to the husband and not a legitimate means to her economic independence. Wives are expected to do all the household tasks in addition to their work outside the home; if they are mothers too, they face the additional problem of finding childcare. Sa'dawi comments on Egyptian men's reluctance to help with domestic tasks, and proceeds to argue that if the wife is helping the husband in his traditional role of earning the income then it is only fair that he should share in the tasks which society expects her to perform.<sup>19</sup>

Only education of a type that broadens the mind, is ultimately able to raise young women's consciousness so that they can make personal

decisions, assess their own and society's values and take responsibility for their personal needs. Armed with healthy, honest attitudes, women can begin to reject those outmoded customs which operate to their disadvantage in psychological and social terms, by placing excessive importance, for example, on virginity before marriage and the role of woman as a childbearing receptacle. Sa'dawi does not comment on the content of Egyptian education though elsewhere she deplores its conservatism and rigidity, but it would appear, even so, to contain enough progressive elements to inspire many young women to resent the subordinate role to which certain elements of Egyptian society would like to confine them.<sup>20</sup>

Sa'dawi found striking differences in behaviour between the 'neurotic' educated and supposedly 'normal' woman. Adjusting to marriage can be particularly difficult for the former, because she is typically less willing to be dominated by her husband. The more intelligent and aware the wife is, the more she may rebel against the restriction of married life: an unhappy rebellion that finds its only outlet in mental distress.<sup>21</sup> Such women also tend to be bolder in trying to find satisfaction for their desires, besides being more able to select their own husband and indulge in extra-marital affairs when their marriage is unsatisfactory. It is not surprising therefore to find that Sa'dawi noticed her 'neurotic' subjects to be less inhibited and far more open about their emotions and sexual experiences than the 'normal'. She found too that the 'neurotic' educated woman is more aware of her body and more responsible about controlling her fertility, by the use of birth control. For such a woman, children

would not represent her only means of self-fulfilment, she would see them curbing her time and freedom, confining her to the home. When she becomes a mother, Sa'dawi comments, such a woman clings less to her children in a healthier relationship than the over-protective full-time mother. This smothering of children by over-protective mothers which is very noticeable in her society, is interpreted by Sa'dawi as nothing more than women's desperate search to compensate themselves for the personal deprivations which they unconsciously feel in other areas of life. Sa'dawi therefore differs in opinion from many Egyptian doctors who would diagnose the educated 'neurotic' woman as deficient in maternal instinct.<sup>22</sup>

For a culture that attaches so much importance to marriage, it is perhaps surprising to find that Sa'dawi's figures indicate a widespread dissatisfaction with this institution. A staggering 85% of the Egyptian wives interviewed by Sa'dawi would not wish to marry their husbands a second time around!<sup>23</sup> 'Neurotic' and 'normal' women alike, also complained of sexual dissatisfaction within marriage: the percentages were almost identical, 77.5% for the former, 70.4% for the latter. Sa'dawi despairs of marriage as it is commonly found in Egyptian society today. Happiness in marriage cannot be achieved without equality, love and freedom, she says.<sup>24</sup> Early marriage as is customary in the countryside has one important thing to recommend it, in that it at least solves the problem of adolescent sexuality. Young people are therefore not subjected to the forms of sexual repression which they meet in urban society, where the tendency is towards later marriages, nor the double standard of morality and media pressure.

Sa'dawi corrects some erroneous attitudes, which society upholds, regarding female sexuality: she points out, for example, that it is not circumcision which prevents a girl from making a 'mistake' but rather, knowledge and awareness, which help her to define a goal and meaning for her life, which she can strive to achieve.<sup>25</sup> Sa'dawi challenges too the idea that women are preoccupied with sex, with her discovery that the more liberated and intelligent the woman, the less concerned she is with sexual matters, because she is able to put her sexuality into perspective within the context of her whole life.

"The most liberated girls tend to be less preoccupied with sex because their minds are busy with many other aspects of life."<sup>26</sup>

It is rather those girls who are repressed sexually and denied outlets for their intellectual and creative talents through a stimulating education, who have nothing to occupy their heads, but men and sex.

From what Sa'dawi writes, it would appear extremely difficult for women to achieve even a limited personal liberation in Egypt: the peasants suffer from the physical burdens of their degrading social and economic conditions, middle-class working wives and mothers are exhausted from their dual role, while the upper middle-class and wealthy women who would seem to have the leisure, educational background and material means to pursue a liberated ideal, are often, paradoxically, very conservative in their views and the most restricted of all women by social mores. The upper-class husband may feel it an insult to his pride and status as a capable provider if others see his wife going



out to work. Being thus unemployed and under-occupied, the upper-class young woman is frequently denied any outlets for making a productive, creative or intellectual contribution to society, through which she could find self-fulfilment. Staying at home, without work, even though in comfortable surroundings, is not the ease and relaxation it would appear, suggests Sa'dawi, who noticed how unhappy these women tended to be.<sup>27</sup> Wealthy leisured women trapped in an unhappy marriage typically seek compensation in buying clothes and make-up, in wasting time on gossip, eating or yearning for more children. This type of woman is spoiled and satiated but deprived and empty inside.

Only exceptionally strong women (like Sa'dawi herself) are able to avoid the complexes which the social situation in Egypt so often induces in intelligent women, by turning their rejection and rebellion into real action. Such revolutionary women channel their feelings into positive acts in an attempt to remove those factors that oppress and exploit them.<sup>28</sup> After pointing a finger of criticism against those elements in Egyptian society which are to blame for the inferior position of women and for the alarming increase in women's psychological distress, Sa'dawi suggests various solutions to the problem. The medical profession in Egypt needs to alter its methods and bring them into line with modern theories of psychiatry: Sa'dawi had found female doctors even more reactionary than male in upholding traditional patriarchal values which adversely affect woman. The ignorance of women's psychological and physiological nature, which is widespread among the medical profession, needs to be eradicated. Sa'dawi deplores the lack of understanding of the causes of mental problems in general

in Egypt, and is well aware of the political dimension of this problem. While the medical profession in Egypt is working to reinforce and maintain the conservative political, social and ethical values of society, there would appear to be little room for optimism that more enlightened theories could find acceptance. Likewise, as long as the subject of sex is taboo, especially when it comes to scientific research, little headway can be made in appreciating the true nature of normal, healthy sexuality. The number of brave pioneers who like Sa'dawi are actively engaged in trying to correct the 'medieval lies' which distort medical science, by replacing them with more accurate theories from modern Western sciences is still relatively small and their efforts typically meet with opposition.<sup>30</sup>

Social and economic conditions together with the difficulty of obtaining divorce and the stigma attached to single womanhood, persuade many unhappily married women to continue to submit their ambitions, personality and intelligence to their husband's control rather than seek a life on their own.

Sa'dawi states that religion has been used to insidious effect to exploit and oppress the people, and that a reappraisal is due of those outmoded practices and attitudes which have acquired a moral force and sanction from incorrectly interpreted Islamic tenets.<sup>31</sup> For example, she argues that circumcision is not divinely ordained by Islam<sup>32</sup> on the basis that God would not have created woman with an organ specifically for sexual pleasure, if he had not intended her to benefit from it.<sup>33</sup> She sees nothing in Islam that prohibits birth control.

Nor does she feel that a wife's enjoyment of sexual pleasure is incompatible with her being a good Muslim.<sup>34</sup> A more healthy attitude towards female sexuality would put an end to girls and young women being racked by guilt about masturbation, sexual desire and pre-marital affairs or living in dread of losing their virginity and becoming pregnant. The media are accused too for perpetuating their man-made images of women as voluptuous love objects.

Sa'dawi prefers not to leave the blame entirely with her society, but feels it necessary to take it a step further by claiming that it is foreign imperialism in cooperation with the internal political regimes which are ultimately responsible for the persisting backwardness of Arab societies.<sup>35</sup> It is unfortunate that Sa'dawi departs from her close involvement with Egyptian women's problems, into general criticisms against such complex factors as foreign imperialism, religion and feudal mentality, which tend to assume from her pen a propagandistic tone. As an attempt to place Egypt's problems in an international context and account for patriarchal society's mores in economic terms, it is understandable, but the reader is left with a disappointing sense of anti-climax.<sup>36</sup> Nor does it serve a useful purpose to speak of love, equality and freedom in undefined generalizations, as the sole prerequisites of a valid marriage, or to make deductions about such widely-differing variables as marriage and marital sexual relationships, without the backing of a significantly larger and more comprehensive study than Sa'dawi has made here.

"With its oppressive laws which discriminate between men and women, marriage has failed to bring about happiness for husbands and wives, for happiness can only be realized in an atmosphere of equality, love and freedom." 37

Sa'dawi points out that economic change occurs more quickly than social, cultural or emotional, and that such massive changes as progression from feudalism to capitalism to socialism, can still leave feudal tradition and attitudes intact.<sup>38</sup> One would expect therefore that marriage and male-female relations would require far more than amendments to the legal system designed to provide equality to both sexes before the law, or even drastic changes of a socialist nature aimed at improving the situation of working women, in order to improve. It would be hoped that any social changes benefiting women would, given time to be accepted by the public consciousness, ultimately bring about increasing equality between men and women and concomitant improvements in relations between the sexes.

In this detailed study of young Egyptian women, we see Sa'dawi's tremendous commitment towards trying to correct those serious misconceptions about women's fundamental nature which circulate in her society. What is particularly striking is that she challenges society's concepts of the 'normal' and 'neurotic' woman, by indicating that the reverse may be nearer the truth! This is amply verified in the sixteen case studies which make up the second half of the book. Every section overflows with Sa'dawi's involvement with her subjects, in what are often truly heartrending cases. Some of the situations which typically cause conflicts in an intelligent young woman include: being denied

education at university (see the cases of Zaynab, Durriya, Samiha, Aliya and Suhayr), being married against her will (Ibtisam, Aliya, Samiha and Fatima 'b'), being dominated by a jealous husband (Susan, Madiha, and Aliya), having fears about her virginity (Camilia and Aliya) or problems associated with a strict religious upbringing (Fatima) and being over-burdened as a working mother (Layla). It is stressed that all the women suffering psychological stress were very intelligent and most of them were ambitious to work in a creative capacity. An intelligent woman has more need of intellectual fulfilment than other women because of her heightened consciousness and sense of personal worth which permit her to realize the incongruity of her situation, says Sa'dawi.<sup>39</sup> When such women are constrained in a position which they find oppressive and which they feel powerless to control or change, their frustration and rejection of their situation can find its only outlet in distressing psychosomatic disorders.

Since the majority of Egyptian women accept their situation without showing undue anxiety, they are the ones commonly regarded as 'normal' because they fulfil the role which their male-dominated society has outlined and approved for them. Sa'dawi questions this normalcy: in her view these women are in fact showing signs of weakness and incapacity in their submission to the status quo.<sup>40</sup> Symptoms of anxiety may in many cases be regarded as a healthy sign, because, says Sa'dawi, they indicate the presence of a stronger and more defiant personality wanting to overcome her subjection in order to achieve integrity and self-fulfilment.<sup>41</sup> They are also the 'red-alert' that the individual feels threatened by what Sa'dawi terms 'psychological-intellectual

death'.<sup>42</sup> Dissatisfaction with one's situation can be the prelude to personal progress.<sup>43</sup>

Despite wide differences between the cases, some common factors can be noted. All the women appeared to have been the victims of some form of exploitation, most typically sexual, financial and social. Their freedom to think, act or choose the direction of their lives, had been denied them, usually by the men in their families, though at times by other women. Furthermore, medical treatment had consistently failed to 'cure' these women: drugs, hormone injections and electrical therapy had been ineffective because the doctors had failed to understand the significance of the patient's social situation, which constituted the root cause of the symptoms, and in which the potential remedy lay.

One of the most dramatic cases was that of 24-year old Suhayr,<sup>44</sup> who had been taken away to mental hospital at the request of her father and stepmother, during her final year at medical school. At the age of sixteen, she had been sexually abused by her uncle. When she tried to tell her stepmother what had happened, she was beaten for slandering his good name. She suffered further oppression from her jealous stepmother when it became clear that Suhayr was gifted and soon to qualify as a doctor.<sup>45</sup> The stepmother then arranged for Suhayr to be engaged to one of her own undesirable relatives, which occasioned even more anxiety in the young girl. One day, after refusing to make lunch for her father, she had been beaten by him and his wife. Suhayr became

hysterical and ended up in mental hospital. The doctors refused to believe her when she complained of her home situation and the molesting from her uncle, on the assumption that she was mentally sick and thus incapable of telling the truth. They preferred to believe the lies of the stepmother. Suhayr received electric shock and drug 'therapy' to try and induce her to admit that the incident with her uncle had not happened, and to make her speak respectfully of her family. These were the two conditions for her release. Suhayr begged Sa'dawi to help her to get discharged in time to sit her final medical exams. It was her only hope to try and salvage a future for herself. From the other patients she met at the hospital, it became obvious to Sa'dawi, that many healthy women had been abused by their relatives. Under Egyptian law, a male relative can conveniently rid himself of an unwanted wife or rebellious daughter by complaining to the medical authorities that she is mentally sick. The police are empowered to remove such victims to a mental hospital. Fortunately Suhayr's story had a successful ending: Sa'dawi, helped by one sympathetic doctor, managed to obtain her discharge. Suhayr then went on to qualify as a doctor. In the meantime, her father had divorced her stepmother, and actually encouraged Suhayr to begin divorce proceedings against the stodgy husband because he was related to the stepmother.

In spite of the discursive style of the first section of this work, which makes it difficult to draw together Sa'dawi's arguments fully, the author makes an important contribution to the field of psychology in Egypt, by showing the vital relation between a woman's mental problems and her social situation. She shows some of the

contradictory forces operating in Egyptian society during this unique transitional period, which have a direct bearing on the lives of young women, most especially the conflict between traditional ideas of femininity and more modern ideas based on reliable medical and sociological research. It is also a work which would provide much comfort to an individual young woman in Egypt who found herself in a similar situation to those Sa'dawi covers. Almost all the cases are thought through and resolved in a sympathetic manner by the author, thus giving practical examples of how the young woman might face her own dilemmas in a positive fashion and achieve a greater understanding of her society in the process. In its potential to help individual women lies the value of this work, and also because it furnishes challenging, new material for those engaged in the fields of sociology, medicine and education, besides being relevant and supportive to the young generation of Egyptian women.

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References to Al-Mar'a wa'l-Sirā' al-Nafsī

- 1) Al-Mar'a wa'l-Sirā' al-Nafsī, p. 11.
- 2) Al-Sihḥa magazine was closed down after only three years for the following reasons according to Sa'dawi:

"Our conception of health did not separate between physical, moral, sexual, social, economic or educational health. The linkage between all these domains threatened the regime and uncovered injustices. We tried to discuss the original causes of diseases, such as why people become sick? Some poor people suffer sickness because of lack of food, poverty etc.. why people become poor? So we touched on the politics of poverty and malnutrition. This also threatened the regime. We spoke and wrote about (the) psycho-sexual problems of women, and discussed some traditions and habits that affect the health of girls and women such as clitoridectomy 'excision of the clitoris' circumcision of girls.. etc. Such subjects were taboo. The Minister of Health wanted to dominate the magazine and use it as propaganda for himself and the ministry. We refused and said the magazine is 'educational for the people' and not propaganda for the Minister.. etc."

From a letter dated 18 August 1987.

- 3) Al-Mar'a wa'l-Sirā' al-Nafsī, p. 11.
- 4) For a concise summary of the basic Freudian view of women see Kate Millet, Sexual Politics, London, 1971, p. 194. (The following references from Millet seem particularly relevant to Sa'dawi's arguments in this work, and give some help to the reader in understanding the distortion of Freud's views to achieve a political purpose.)

"The three most distinguishing traits of female personality, were, in Freud's view, passivity, masochism, and narcissism... The position of women in patriarchy is such that they are expected to be passive, to suffer, and to be sexual objects; it is unquestionable that they are, with varying degrees of success, socialized into such roles. This is not however what Freud had in mind. Nor had he any intention of describing social circumstances. Instead, he believed that the elaborate cultural construction we call 'femininity' was largely organic.. He also prescribed it as the norm not only of general development, but of healthy development."

and p. 196:

"Freudian theory mobilizes itself against the threat of insubordinate women, specifically stipulated as 'emancipated' or intellectual, whose penis envy has gone beyond the knowledge of unworthiness and whose new educational privileges have alienated them from their 'instinctual' nature. All the forces of psychoanalysis came to be gathered to force woman to 'adjust' to her position, that is to accept it and submit, for the security of society and the strength of traditional marriage depend upon her accepting her fate."

and p. 189:

"The theory of penis envy shifts the blame for her suffering to the female for daring to aspire to a biologically impossible state. Any hankering for a less humiliating and circumscribed existence is immediately ascribed to unnatural and unrealistic deviation from her genetic identity and therefore her fate. A woman who resists 'femininity', e.g., feminine temperament, status, and role, is thought to court neurosis, for femininity is her fate as 'anatomy is destiny'".

and finally, p. 187:

"A philosophy which assumes that 'the demand for justice is a modification of envy' (Freud, *Femininity*, 1933) and informs the dispossessed that the circumstances of their deprivation are organic, therefore unalterable, is capable of condoning a great deal of injustice. One can predict the advice such a philosophy would have in store for other disadvantaged groups displeased with the status quo, and as the social and political effects of such lines of

reasoning are fairly clear, it is not difficult to see why Freud finally became so popular a thinker in conservative societies."

- 5) Al-Mar'a wa'l-Sirā' al-Nafsi, pp. 12-13.
- 6) Ibid., p. 14.
- 7) Ibid., pp. 60, 67, 78-9.
- 8) Ibid., p. 16.
- 9) See Tables 7-10.
- 10) Al-Mar'a wa'l-Sirā' al-Nafsi, p. 51.
- 11) Ibid., p. 56.
- 12) Ibid., p. 57.
- 13) Ibid., p. 73.
- 14) Ibid., p. 58.
- 15) Ibid., p. 27.
- 16) Ibid., p. 49.

- 17) Earl L. Sullivan, Women in Egyptian public life, New York, 1986, p. 163.
- 18) Ibid., p. 165.
- 19) Al-Mar'a wa'l-Sirā' al-Nafsī, p. 49.
- 20) See the introduction to Al-Rajul wa'l-Jins.
- 21) Al-Mar'a wa'l-Sirā' al-Nafsī, p. 62.
- 22) Ibid., p. 63.
- 23) Ibid., p. 62.
- 24) Ibid., p. 75.
- 25) Ibid., p. 74.
- 26) Ibid., p. 74.
- 27) Ibid., p. 79.
- 28) Ibid., p. 80.
- 29) Ibid., p. 55. Professional women who have risen to positions of prestige and authority in male-dominated fields frequently show

a lack of sympathy for those members of their own sex who do not share their ambition or have not enjoyed their advantages and whom they therefore regard as weaker. This attitude when found in women in prominent positions, stems from an exaggerated pride in their own achievements which shows itself in a contempt for other women who are not considered to be making sufficient efforts to 'improve' their lives. The argument that it is difficult for women to excel in a male-orientated society is discounted by such women for their own 'success' is proof to them that 'superior' women can succeed.

30) Al-Mar'a wa'l-Sirā' al-Nafsī, pp. 6-7.

31) Ibid., p. 74.

32) Ibid., p. 71.

33) Ibid., p. 74.

34) Ibid., p. 69.

35) Ibid., p. 74.

36) Ibid., p. 73.

37) Ibid., p. 75.

38) Ibid., pp. 77-8.

39) Ibid., pp. 63, 68.

40) Ibid., p. 62.

41) Ibid., p. 64.

42) Ibid., p. 93.

43) Ibid., p. 70.

44) Ibid., p. 125.

45) Ibid., p. 127.

2.

AL-WAJH AL-'ĀRĪ LI'L-MAR'A AL-'ARABIYYA

Al-Wajh al-'Ārī li'l-Mar'a al-'Arabiyya\* was first published in Beirut in 1977. It was not permitted to be published in Cairo until 1985. The title of this work, literally in English 'the naked face of the Arab woman', gives no suggestion of the subjects broached by the author. Whilst it very definitely concentrates on the problems of the Arab woman, Sa'dawi is attempting here to set them in a wider context. She is exploring in particular the historical, political, religious and literary dimensions of the inferior position of women in her society. The discussion in Al-Wajh is all aimed at informing modern, open-minded Arab readers of the reasons for their society's attitudes towards the female sex. It is also aimed at removing potential obstacles towards women's greater involvement in public life. What is perhaps very surprising to the reader is the defensive stance towards Islam taken by the author, an avowed socialist, and her condemnation of Christianity and Judaism purely on the basis of historical examples without a comparable evaluation of Islam, and also her vision of Egyptian women ever possibly constituting an organized political force.

In common with all her factual works, this book provides the Western reader with fascinating insights into life in Egypt, an interesting first hand view of Arab culture from a writer capable of absorbing the currents of modern thought as they circulated in her society in the

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\* Henceforth Al-Wajh

late 1970s against an increasingly traditionalist background. Again, Al-Wajh is a curious mixture of personal experience, historical fact, philosophizing, exhortation, socialist thought and moralizing. Running to over two hundred pages of close type, it is Sa'dawi's most substantial work so far. About a quarter of Al-Wajh is reproduced in The Hidden Face of Eve, an abridgement in English aimed for the Western market. Despite a certain similarity in title, the two works are not directly comparable: the Arabic contains a great deal more information which is of immediate interest to Arab readers, due to its references to Arab culture, history, literature and Islam.

The opening chapter of Al-Wajh, however, appears in the English work too. Its subject dominates both books and leaves an ineradicable impression on any reader: it is none other than the traumatic account of Sa'dawi's circumcision as seen through the eyes of the six-year old Nawal.<sup>1</sup> Sa'dawi was the first person to draw public attention to the problem of circumcision in her society. To admit so openly that she suffered thus herself and to describe how intimately she suffered, was to bare her face not only to her people but to the whole world; a momentous act for any woman to make. As is usually the case with instances of physical abuse and widescale human suffering, it is not until a living voice is clearly heard crying out against personal injustice, that steps are ever taken to remedy the situation. The Hidden Face of Eve ensured that the English-speaking world heard from the circumcized girl. Personal confession on intimate topics is rare amongst Arab writers, but it repays the author in this case many times, with devoted female readers who have identified Sa'dawi's experiences



with their own, and who are grateful to see this subject acknowledged at last in print.

Sa'dawi's childhood experiences developed into a drive to understand the reasons behind her society's customary discrimination against girls, and why circumcision was ever deemed necessary. She wanted answers to the questions that her parents and society failed to provide. Personal suffering coupled with a strong awareness of injustice, from a young age, was therefore the starting point of her intellectual life. Sa'dawi's quest took her back to Egypt's remote past. The ancient culture-bearing myths of Adam and Eve, with their Egyptian counterparts, Isis and Osiris, needed, she felt, to be exposed as fallacious and interpreted anew. This task of demolishing those stereotypes which are detrimental to women, especially if they are centuries old, is one common to all feminist writers. Once Sa'dawi gives her corrected interpretation of the myths, namely that Isis and Eve were the true creators, were active, more advanced mentally than men and eager for knowledge, the traditional explanation where the male is credited with greater ability, with creativity and supremacy appears as a ludicrous machination straining to justify what is clearly the reverse of the truth.

".. man was never objective in interpreting these ancient myths which clearly reflect the high position which women occupied in pre-historical and pre-monotheistic eras."<sup>2</sup>

In a well-argued and authoritative account, Sa'dawi tries to expose the false reasoning behind the traditional interpretations of religious

myth which were devised by men to serve the interests of their male-dominated society, but as is only to be expected, she is unable to shed any new light on the reasons for that devastating takeover by men in the first place. Why men should seek to monopolize the myth and religion-making processes and why they ever needed to interpret these myths to their advantage, is still an area of speculation for feminist scholars.

Sa'dawi elaborates here on subjects dealt with in her earlier factual volumes, but showing no change in her attitudes. She therefore continues to romanticize the past, by imagining a glorious pre-patriarchal Golden Age in which either men and women were equal, or women were dominant in some way. Sa'dawi believes that women's exalted status, to the point of divinity, could only have been a direct reflection of their superior status in society, before the rise of the patriarchal family, private property and class divisions.

"The elevation of women to the heights occupied by goddesses was a reflection of their status within society before the systems characterized by the patriarchal family, land ownership and division into social classes came into being."<sup>3</sup>

The prehistoric, pre-literate periods of Middle Eastern history have given rise to much debate. The answer to questions such as whether certain societies were patriarchal or matriarchal, and if the latter, did women ever possess real authority, can never be known for sure, although we have seen above how modern Western scholars like Lerner have been able to end a certain amount of dubious speculation about

these early times which has so far been paraded as fact.<sup>4</sup> What 'knowledge' (ma'rifa) with which Sa'dawi credits the early women is never explicitly stated, though one can infer that she must mean an awareness of biological processes leading to childbirth, besides certain magical and primitive medicinal powers.<sup>5</sup>

One cannot argue satisfactorily from mythology as Sa'dawi tries to do, or even from cave paintings, to arrive at the 'truth' of the situation between early man and woman.<sup>6</sup> Are we to conclude that Sa'dawi believes, for example, that men and women once formed two opposing camps when she says:

"There are those who say that men were able at some prehistoric period to wage war against women, subdue them by force of arms, and deprive them of their divine status by wresting away their intelligence and their creative ability and attributing them to themselves."<sup>7</sup>

Although Sa'dawi is correct in attributing much maligning of women's capacities to the Old Testament treatment of Eve etc., she does not explain why the tables were turned against women, nor does she give here any reliable evidence of women's supposedly superior position in society. As far as we know, women have not created any religions or legal systems, the usual evidence of power in early societies, despite being high priestesses and queens. Sa'dawi continues to fall into the trap of reading modern sensibilities into past phenomena. It is clear, however, that she is fascinated by the early development of religion and society, especially the ancient Egyptian past. It is to

her credit that she impresses on the reader the importance of examining the past in order to understand the relationship between the sexes in its historical and contemporary contexts, but indulging her curiosity in the ancient myths, history and religions to the extent she does here means that the reader is presented with a certain amount of material that is not strictly relevant to the matter in hand.<sup>8</sup>

One of the author's aims in writing this book appears to be to absolve her country's Islamic culture of blame for women's inferior position in society. To tackle the subject of Islam critically in print, from any stance other than a conservative or traditional one in an Islamic country, is to tread a dangerous path. This is even more so in Egypt today in the late 1980s, with the stress on fundamentalism, than when Sa'dawi wrote in the early '70s. Nevertheless, Sa'dawi is not above attempting some objective comments on her country's religious history. To some, such a statement as the following is tantamount to heresy:

"It is wrong for us to turn our attention to women in Islam in isolation from the other revealed religions of Judaism and Christianity, since Islam has adopted a great deal from them and been much influenced by them."<sup>9</sup>

The attention which she gives to ancient Egypt and the 'freedoms' which women supposedly enjoyed then is also worthy of suspicion from orthodox circles, in view of attempts made by recent Egyptian governments to deny the importance of their country's pre-Islamic achievements.

Sa'dawi can be seen to be implicitly challenging various tenets of Islam: polygamy arose, she explains, out of the need for a large workforce during a period when the acquisition of private property made it essential for the husband to know his own legitimate offspring; men in positions of power were able to impose rules demanding chastity, virginity and monogamy on women, which were then reinforced by divine decree. If Sa'dawi is suggesting here that certain laws pertaining to the male-female relationship were man-made or absorbed from the practices existing at the time of Islam's inception, then she is obliquely undermining the belief that such regulations are unalterably either sanctioned or condemned by religion.

"Chastity, virginity and marital fidelity were imposed upon women with all the weight of earthly and heavenly laws so that the man, the possessor, should have no suspicion of an alien child sharing the inheritance of his possessions along with his own children." 10

and

"The revealed religions derived their concepts concerning women from the patriarchal class-divided societies which were based on masters and slaves, male and female." 11

From what Sa'dawi writes that is in accordance with a socialist view of historical evolution, the open-minded reader will begin to see how society moulded religion and how the latter responded to social exigencies. Needless to say, he would not meet with this approach from traditional Egyptian or Islamic education.

"The continual tribal wars, in which many men were killed, the need to build up the new Islamic order, the large numbers of women prisoners of war and slaves, all tended to make out of polygamy a practice responding to social needs. Islam, therefore, put its religious stamp on sexual freedom for men and their right to have several wives, as well as concubines and women slaves." 12

Sa'dawi briefly discusses early Judaism, Christianity and Islam with particular reference to polygamy, the position of women in the family and adultery. One interesting conclusion she reaches is that the sharī'a law regarding adultery was, and is, intended to be applied only to women and poor men. Since men have been permitted several sexual partners at one time (up to four wives and unlimited female slaves) they have no reason to be adulterous unless they are poor, and thus unable to afford a second wife.

"Why should a man commit adultery if it is his right to divorce his wife at any moment and marry another woman, and to keep up to a total of four wives at one time and any number of concubines or girl slaves his right hand could afford?<sup>13</sup> The religious laws or sharī'a, therefore, were meant to be applied only to women when they dared to challenge the patriarchal system which only allowed a woman one husband... The religious laws were also meant to punish poorer men.. whose limited resources imposed a fidelity that lacked conviction and prevented them from changing wives, or marrying up to four.." 14

Sa'dawi regards the original messages brought by Moses, Jesus and Muhammad as essentially a call to revolt against the injustices of the slave system. She makes it clear how succeeding generations of 'religious' men perverted the liberating messages of Jesus and Muhammad

so that any initial gains that women might have made under the new creed were swiftly reversed as orthodoxy further reinforced patriarchal society.

Sa'dawi then turns her attention to the position of women in pre-Islamic and early Islamic times; an era when matriarchal characteristics were much more in evidence in the peninsula than at any succeeding period.<sup>15</sup> Apart from various well-known examples of women who were prominent in Muhammad's society such as Khadija, his first wife, and Aisha, his favourite, and others who had a reputation as fierce fighters, like Hind and Umm Sulayem Bint Malhan, Sa'dawi gives details of the early forms of sexual association which consisted mainly of temporary marriages and polyandric practices. Women obviously enjoyed more flexibility at this time in their sexual relationships, but Islam swiftly abolished all these practices,<sup>16</sup> thus restricting women sexually to a much greater degree than they had been accustomed to, a point which is worth bearing in mind vis-a-vis the argument that Islam improved women's situation and defended their rights.<sup>16</sup>

Women apparently struggled to assert themselves during the early Islamic era only to be gradually beaten down by the overwhelming force of patriarchal values.

"Arab women did not lose their independence and positive personality traits overnight. It was a gradual, slow process related to the socio-economic changes taking place in society, and they struggled hard not to lose their ancient rights. Sometimes they were successful, but it was mostly

a losing battle, ending in the complete predominance of the patriarchal system."<sup>17</sup>

For any significant social change to take place in an Islamic country there has always been the need to prove that the proposed reform is within the bounds of Islam in order to mollify conservative religious sectors; only thus can an author hope to avoid being accused of bid'a, innovation of an heretical nature. This has been especially important since the turn of the century with the early reformers al-Afghani, Muhammad 'Abduh and Qasim Amin etc. Sa'dawi to some extent continues in this tradition. Those who wish to oppose her ideas and who have criticized her and blocked her way are the ultra-conservative religious elements among the Egyptian authorities. A Western reader might easily fail to appreciate the full relevance of Sa'dawi's references to the Prophet, the Qur'an and important Islamic thinkers such as al-Ghazali, in arguing the case for women's liberation today. He may ask himself why so much reference to the past has to precede any future progress, and why so much attention is given to what are generally accepted as Islamic concepts especially since Sa'dawi has rejected any idea of Islam's being a hindrance to women's emancipation. What Sa'dawi is trying to do though is to forestall criticism of her views from the expected quarter. She attempts to disarm her critics by using their own sources. She has of course to be highly eclectic in her choice of references because the Islamic heritage abounds with justifications for women's inferiority.



Every Muslim has the right to interpret Islam for himself, asserts Sa'dawi. Only by such tactics can she hope to excuse what she has written according to her personal interpretation and evade any charge that she might be prescribing rules for others. It appears that her ideas of the basic principles of Islam are broad in the extreme. They could apply equally, for example, to Buddhism or Communism: they are essentially humanitarian values stripped of any divine purpose.

"The basic principle of Islam is that the human being should use his mind to think freely and sincerely about what is around him in the way of life's problems, and this is what I have attempted to do in writing this book."<sup>18</sup>

What Sa'dawi ignores is that it is man's devotion and submission to God which is the essence of Islam: that its concerns are with the eternal rather than the temporal, and its focus is on a demanding god which can be appeased by certain ritual obligations, not on the indwelling of a loving holy spirit with the potential for transforming man on earth through redemption, as in Christianity, or the entire concentration on all living creatures as bearing their own divinity within them, as in Buddhism. One logical result of man's possessing freedom to use his intelligence, which Sa'dawi has not mentioned, is that he will use it to choose not to believe in the dogma of a particular religion. Even so, Sa'dawi clings to the belief that seeking knowledge is, in Islam, man's highest endeavour. "Knowledge is the highest form of worship for believing Muslims."<sup>19</sup>

Sa'dawi dips into the early Islamic sources of Muhammad Ibn Sa'd's Al-Tabaqāt al-Kubrā and al-Isfahani's Al-Āghānī, for interesting examples from the Prophet's life which she then holds up as a model for modern Muslim man to follow. After relating the story of Leila bint al-Hatim who proposed to Muhammad and then asked for a divorce, both of which Muhammad complied with, Sa'dawi wonders, "... how many Arab women today could do what Leila bint al-Hatim did thirteen centuries ago?" and "... how many Arab men could give women the freedom to choose them or reject them just as Muhammad did?"<sup>20</sup> Sa'dawi actually rebukes modern Muslim men for not following the Prophet's example:

"Muhammad was married fourteen times to women who had been divorced or widowed. The only virgin he married was Aisha. In this respect he was much more progressive and more open-minded than most of the men today, who prefer to marry a virgin and who search for the usual bloodstains on the wedding night."<sup>21</sup>

From the example Sa'dawi gives of the misogynist Omar ibn al-Khattab's strict attitude to women, we can see the way in which the patriarchal takeover was swiftly reinforced by Muhammad's successors and how contempt for women was incorporated into Islam at an early date.<sup>22</sup> Omar forbade men to take advice or any direction from their wives, and censured Muhammad's wives for their rebelliousness. Such a sentiment serves the interests of those who hold power in a male-dominated society far better than the example of the Prophet having shown high regard for Aisha's opinion.

Sa'dawi highlights that perennial need for Arab scholars to review their history, to disentangle what is authentic according to the more reliable records of the early community, from the distorted practices which over the years have gained currency and acceptance in Muslim communities: for example, Sa'dawi argues against the institution of Bayt al-Tā'a which operated until very recently in Egypt, and which empowered the police to return a wife who had fled the conjugal home, to her husband, using force if necessary, by drawing attention to the fact that Muhammad's wives were under no compulsion to stay with him.<sup>23</sup> Many stories exhibit the freedom of speech and independent action of these early women. Aisha, whose personal qualities and fine example were acknowledged by the Prophet before others, even challenged him on the authenticity of some of his revelations.<sup>24</sup>

Sa'dawi chooses to interpret Islamic teaching as inherently constructive when it comes to women's entitlement to sexual fulfilment. If this is so, then Arab women's achievement of their sexual equality ought to be less problematic than it proved to be for Western women, who had to fight against Victorian prudery for example. Sa'dawi advises Arab women to look to the past for models of independent and positive behaviour in their dealings with men, and to make up their own minds about what constitutes truly 'Islamic' behaviour for women. She singles out in particular the ability of those early women to reject or protest at anything which threatened their personal dignity:

"If only Arab women everywhere today would read the history of the Arabs and Islamic philosophy from its real sources along with the lives of

(early) Arab women and the Prophet's wives, in order to realize that Islamic philosophy was based on the strength of character and positive activity of women who at that time were bolder and more active than they are today, and that this passivity which has been imposed on women is not their innate characteristic, and that this obedience and submission to their husbands is not religious or moral virtue and that this timidity or fear of recognizing their rights is nothing but a recent innovation without any substance."<sup>25</sup>

Apart from these early Muslim women, there appears to be a shortage of examples of true womanhood worth mentioning unless it is that of the sexually-active, seductive and cunning women of the Thousand and One Nights.

In spite of the much greater sexual freedoms Arab men have permitted themselves within the bounds of respectability, which Arab women have not shared, Sa'dawi denies the popular Western stereotype, found almost exclusively today in films and the inferior quality press, of the Arab man as a sex-crazed luster after women. This example reflects her defensive stance as a Third World writer vis-a-vis the West. It is this slant upon her thought which brings her to the opinion that the Western media maintains such stereotypes to conceal the struggle of her people against imperialist exploitation.<sup>26</sup> Orientalists and colonialists stand accused of having ignored or misunderstood the fact that it was the patriarchal system, not geographical location or Islam which has produced an apparent licentiousness in the Arab character.<sup>27</sup>

The tales of the Thousand and One Nights have been the most enduring source of the Westerner's view of the Arabs. Sa'dawi is

somewhat ambivalent in her attitude towards these tales, at one time giving credit to Arab men for the frank acknowledgement in popular literature of their sexuality, showing how the stories abound with examples of strong active clever females, at a stage in history when Europe was lost in the Dark Ages, while at another stating that they were far from being a true picture of Harun al-Rashid's court and had no relevance to the lives of the majority of poor. If anything, they formed a compensatory vision borne of the utter deprivation of the latter.<sup>28</sup>

If Sa'dawi objects to the West perpetuating its favourite stereotype of the Arab, she does nothing to diminish the Arab stereotype of the Christian West. She chooses from history her examples of sexually-depraved clergymen, witch hunts and Victorian prudery, which are hardly representative of the libertarian, tolerant and comparatively permissive attitudes of today which have gained precedence ever since the separation between Church and State. This lack of understanding shown by Sa'dawi of Western ethics and the degree to which intelligent people in the West take responsibility for their own moral and spiritual development reveals that along with most of her compatriots, she is intellectually circumscribed by personal prejudices against, and a misinterpretation of Western thought and lifestyle. In common with most Egyptians Sa'dawi shows signs of suffering from a khawaga complex, either a love or an abhorrence of all things foreign, most typically seen as an alternating obsessive fascination-repulsion in regards to anything Western.<sup>29</sup>

Sa'dawi highlights another fruitful field for research when she delves into the subject of Islam's attitude to women's sexuality. When Islam first appeared in Arabia, women were apparently sexually active, relatively independent and uninhibited in using their charms, chiefly due, says Sa'dawi, to the vestiges of matriarchal society, the need to compete for man's protection, and the recognition given by Islam to sexual relationships as an essential part of daily life.<sup>30</sup> Such a situation must have been short-lived. Whatever tolerance or respect Muhammad may have shown to his women was permanently and quickly upstaged by the various sayings attributed to him concerning the evil or danger of women's seductiveness.<sup>31</sup> The debate has always centred around the word fitna which suggests that women possess a mischievous power of allurements capable of distracting men to the degree of destabilizing society. Sa'dawi refers constantly to Al-Ghazali the chief Islamic philosopher who debated the question of sex in the 11th-12th centuries. As soon as the strength of female sexuality was appreciated, moves were made to curb it and render it impotent. This began in the Prophet's day with the sanction for polygamy and what led to the custom of veiling for modesty.<sup>32</sup> Islamic philosophy was later able to elaborate arguments, especially in the form of ahādīth to buttress those institutions which served to suppress female sexuality. So powerful has this current of thought been, that it is commonly believed today in the Arab world that men naturally have greater need for sexual adventure than women. It is partly to correct this view that Sa'dawi is writing: she feels man's primal fear of women, and patriarchal society are to blame for this.<sup>33</sup> (Similar religious and philosophical, and at a later date psychological, arguments were

elaborated in the West from Christianity, especially within the Catholic Church, to sanction the institution and continuation of patriarchal mores.)

Although Sa'dawi has credited early Islam, the Prophet and al-Ghazali with recognition of women's right to sexual pleasure, she has not explored the connection between that sexual pleasure and women's love, or the emotional relationship between man and woman. A case can indeed be made out for Islam's being positive in its attitude towards sexuality for both men and women, but scholars like Mernissi and Fatna A. Sabbah have uncovered the truth of this situation when they concluded that whilst the above may be true, the emotional dimension or development of an affectionate relationship between the married couple is not given divine approval. It can be argued that sexuality in Islam is divorced from emotional love: women are debased to a level where they are referred to as being fields for their husbands to plough.<sup>34</sup> No comparable encouragement is given in the Qur'ān to women to consider their husbands as objects of sexual convenience. One can always challenge those who defend Islam as being positive towards female sexuality by arguing that if it were true, then both polygamy and polyandry would have been accepted as normal.<sup>35</sup>

Possibly the most enduringly harmful aspect of the slurs against women in Muslim society has been their being associated with evil.<sup>36</sup> The only way out of the contradiction that sexual pleasure was one of the good things of life but to succumb to women's charms led to fitna, was seen as marriage, an institution which assumes much greater

significance in Muslim doctrine than in Christian.<sup>37</sup> Muhammad is well-known for having urged his followers to marry.<sup>38</sup> Sa'dawi quotes his saying: "He who marries has ensured for himself the fulfilment of half his religion. Let him therefore fear Allah for the other half."<sup>39</sup> It is certainly much less well known that Al-Ghazali likened marriage for women to a form of slavery, a sentiment which Sa'dawi does not dispute.<sup>40</sup> Even so, Al-Ghazali is not to be held up as an advocate of women's rights; Sa'dawi takes him to task in an extremely effective passage which is an excellent example of her original approach to her material, her style of argument and her use of material for didactic purposes. Here she is teaching her readers how to evaluate and challenge what they had previously never thought of or dared to. Her quotation from Al-Ghazali shows him enumerating the benefits of marriage to men, viz. it relieves them of the burden of looking after the home and arranging the necessities of life which would waste their time and distract them from devoting themselves to work and knowledge. But Sa'dawi is so rankled by these sentiments that she bursts out:

"So we are to understand from this that the husband is unable to devote himself exclusively to religion and learning unless he has a wife who is solely occupied with the domestic matters, waiting on him, feeding him and cleaning his clothes. But the question here is surely: what about the wife? How does she devote herself to religion and learning?"<sup>41</sup>

We soon realize that no other Muslim Arab writer has ever thought to challenge this in such an outspoken fashion. It has been a foregone conclusion in Arab-Muslim society that the wife has no place in the



fields of learning or religion, and that her only function in life is housework, cooking and washing etc. and those other tasks which Al-Ghazali calls a source of troubles and disturbance to the heart which upset the calm of life and which, if a man were to undertake them would waste his time and make it difficult for him to work or devote himself to religion.

Any insight into female sexuality which Al-Ghazali might have had is rendered insignificant by the above passage in which he not only legitimizes women's subservience, but also disqualifies them from any intellectual pursuit. Thus one can see how easily extraneous ideas have been brought into the scope of Islam and accepted as unalterable dogma, so that women have been assigned the supposedly 'sacred' duties to obey a husband, respond according to his whim and never to contradict him. One result of Islam's leniency towards men as far as their rights to several partners is concerned is that sexual prowess has been elevated into a virtue and used as the criterion for virility without a corresponding sexual ethic for women.<sup>42</sup> This in turn created a desire for having a virgin as a wife: having had no experience of sex prior to marriage she would have no standard by which she might expose her husband as anything other than supremely potent.

Sa'dawi then launches into an attack on the exploitative nature of marriage, by illustrating the typical situation many wives have found themselves in, that of being financially dependent on a husband, condemned to repeated pregnancies and receiving no actual remuneration for the work they perform besides the essentials for maintenance.<sup>43</sup>

Women are unable even to authorize or demand their paltry rights to a dowry and pay for breast-feeding.<sup>44</sup>

It is impossible to estimate the impact of Sa'dawi's fierce denunciation of marriage, on her female readers. The strength of her argument and the clarity with which she exposes the inherent exploitation of women within marriage throughout patriarchal history, must strike a reverberating note in the minds of all but the happiest of wives. She is enabling women to see for themselves the inequalities between husband and wife, and the perpetuation of women's inferior status which have always characterized marriage under male-dominated society. Having understood the economic and social background which gave rise to the ethos of their society, how it prescribed fidelity and monogamy for women, how their children born out of wedlock were stigmatized as illegitimate, how domestic burdens have traditionally fallen to their lot etc., women are in a much better situation to evaluate what amounts to blatant propaganda aimed at constraining their life in society and confining them to a 'feminine' role.<sup>45</sup> They will be able to appreciate the link Sa'dawi makes between moral standards and economics and understand how men and women in the East came to inhabit such vastly separate worlds.<sup>46</sup>

One of the most important aspects of modern Arabic culture is its literary traditions. Sa'dawi's brief survey of literature from different periods shows how the educated Egyptian reader can find in his libraries volumes of material from past to present which will implicitly confirm the male-chauvinist views which dominate his Muslim

society. Western literary giants such as Tolstoy, Chekov and Shaw are found by Sa'dawi, to be no less guilty than al-Ma'arri, al-Aqqad, Mahfuz and al-Hakim for portraying women as inferior beings with evil intent, despite the relative literary sophistication of the former. The curious thing is that women, so maligned and underestimated, restricted from acting in so many 'male' spheres of life should have proved such a compulsive focus of male writers' interest.

Sa'dawi accounts for this by seeing it as a reflection of man's primitive fear of woman's capacity to generate life; a fear which has turned to hatred. Running as a theme through the novels of classical male writers is man's ambivalent attitude towards woman: she is stereotyped as weak and passive yet is credited with a mind deceitful enough to tempt man, supposedly her superior in moral rectitude and intelligence, to an evil degradation.<sup>47</sup> This contradiction is amply illustrated in the works of the well known writer Abbas Mahmud al-Aqqad, whom Sa'dawi singles out with special ridicule as the most misogynist of Arab authors.<sup>48</sup> His prejudices against women are the more virulent for being built on the authority of Islam where the Qur'ān itself brands women with the qualification, "Great is their deceitfulness."<sup>49</sup>

The stereotypes of women in Arabic literature reflect their roles as prostitute or lover, chaste mother and wife or pure virgin, and neatly divide women into two opposite camps: those who are respectable, but do not enjoy sex, and those who are not respectable who do.<sup>50</sup> This division was already striking by the time of the compilation of the Thousand and One Nights. These classic tales contain images of bold,

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\* The last four named are well-known Arab men of letters. Al-Ma'arri's dates are 976-1058, al-Aqqad, Mahfuz and al-Hakim are all twentieth-century Egyptian writers.

seductive women who, without exception, assume the role of servant to their master or lover. Drawn as genies or sorceresses, their powers of allurements prove them to be worthy successors to Eve, according to Sa'dawi.<sup>51</sup> Yet these spirited women, caught for ever in the act of creating fitna, are not characterized as Muslims, even though they share some of the traits of their early Muslim forbears. They are shown as Christians who finally embrace Islam out of love for their lord.<sup>52</sup> As a result of their lasting popularity as folk literature in both the East and the West, the Thousand and One Nights have been able to sustain the links in the Arab imagination between forceful women and sex, deceitfulness and magic, besides fuelling Western impressions of an innate lasciviousness of the Arab people.

Some of the Egyptian folk epics which Sa'dawi discusses are perhaps more worthy to be considered as 'classics' of the Arabic literary heritage than the Nights, for they reflect the prominence of women in chivalrous exploits. There is the tale of Dhāt al-Himma, for example,<sup>53</sup> who challenged her suitors to a duel, prepared only to marry the one who could subdue her. The women in these tales appear as chaste fighters wedded to the sword and ready to fight to defend their faith of Islam, not as the seductive genies of the Nights.<sup>54</sup> One can sense Sa'dawi's disappointment that modern Arabic literature did not follow up the positive images of women portrayed in these epics.<sup>55</sup>

As representatives of the modern style, Sa'dawi mentions Taufiq al-Hakim's depiction of woman in his novel Al-Ribāṭ al-Muqaddas (1945) as an empty unintelligent creature motivated solely by physical desires,

and Taha Husayn's novel Du'ā al-Karāwān (1942) in which woman is shown as a helpless victim of man's injustice, driven to action solely by passion and subjugated in every way to man.

Even the literary giant Najib Mahfuz whose works have enjoyed fame throughout the Arab world, does not stand up well under Sa'dawi's scrutiny. The female characters of Muhammad Abd al-Halim Abdallah's novels are similarly treated with condescension by their author who shows them as weak, passive and prone to die if they cannot find a man to live through. The author for whom Sa'dawi shows most respect is Muhammad Husayn Haykal for being the first to attempt a portrayal of the harsh social conditions of women in Arab society in his novel Zaynab.

The literary portrayal of Arab women made a certain advancement in the 1940s-50s in Sa'dawi's view, on account of Mahfuz's socialist insight, albeit a superficial one, into the economic difficulties which predisposed lower-class women to prostitution. Hitherto, women had been drawn as being variously too weak, too ignorant or too lustful to be able to resist losing their honour.<sup>56</sup> Despite his imagining a role of somewhat greater activity for women and comradeship with men, Mahfuz was unable to admit female respectability in other than traditional values: virginity was the husband's 'prize' and a woman had to have a male guardian. His approach to women would appear to reflect the dilemmas faced by many educated Arab men of recent years who sincerely believe in women receiving education and helping to build a socialist

society, but at the same time, are unable to extricate themselves from the powerful traditions which identify masculinity and femininity according to an irrational set of behavioural characteristics pertaining to sexual function.

"Arab men are becoming more and more insecure and confused with the increasing number of women seeking, and finding employment outside the home, and participating actively in the life of society. This movement away from domestic imprisonment has taken on momentum, especially after the spread of socialist ideas to the Arab countries. Arabic literature has started to reflect this growing tendency and the conflicts and problems arising from it. Men tend to support the idea of women seeking a career or a job, and looking for work in order to earn money; but for them this remains simply a help in shouldering the financial responsibilities of the family, and ought to be only a secondary function for the wife whose main role is to look after her husband and children. The ideal woman in novels is still the beautiful, quietly angelic and obedient female, who does not show any particular boldness or ambition." 57

It is in Sa'dawi's observations on the prominent place accorded to prostitutes in modern Arabic literature that she is able to sum up exactly what has been lacking in the fictional output of Egyptian men. It is also an indication of her depth of commitment in so far as she is conscious of being a socialist writer with the opportunity to address social issues in fictional form.

"How many examples there are of prostitutes in our contemporary literature, especially in the works of Mahfuz who often tried to give a human frame to them by his pity and understanding for them as victims of society. However it was always an incomplete understanding in which the woman's social tragedy was acknowledged without going to the depths of that

tragedy and without exposing its real reasons. As far as the moral and sexual dimensions of woman's tragedy are concerned, most Arab writers ancient and modern have not even touched on these subjects." 58

When we bear Sa'dawi's pertinent literary criticisms in mind, we will recall how these substantial contradictions in relation to the literary depiction of women are absent from Sa'dawi's own work. Nor are there any condescending moralizing pronouncements put into the mouths of characters (acting as spokesmen for their male author's prejudices), of the nature that "woman is a frail vessel, less intelligent than man, in need of his protection, prone to fall", or even that she is "the balm of life" etc.. Both these aspects of Sa'dawi's style can be counted as achievements in the realm of providing the educated in society with a less hysterical view of the relationship between the sexes, whilst conveying a more coherent outlook on life which reflects Sa'dawi's own views on women.<sup>59</sup>

Sa'dawi then traces for her readers the path of those who have tried to come to grips with the Egyptian woman's tragedy, in the more tangible spheres of education, welfare and social life. She describes briefly what she sees as the heroic determination of the Arab peoples throughout history to throw off their imperialist conquerors.<sup>60</sup> She bolsters patriotic pride in Egypt's more recent history by referring to her country as the cultural and intellectual focus of the Arab world and mentioning the leading role it played in the political struggles of its neighbours against colonialism.<sup>61</sup> By skilfully juxtaposing the quest for national liberation and freedom from exploitation, made by the oppressed Egyptian people, with the moves for improvements in women's

situation, urged by such men as Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi, Muhammad Abduh and Qasim Amin, Sa'dawi tries to show how the latter is an essential concomitant of the former. There is no suggestion that women's liberation is any less important, less respectable or less rational a cause than national liberation.

Women's lack of emancipation was seen by those early reformers as a major contributory factor to the backwardness of their people, which made them easy prey to foreign domination. Greater opportunities for women were envisaged solely in terms of their increased potential to help their male compatriots, rather than from any purely altruistic desire to end female subjugation. One cannot help noticing how the history of women's liberation in Egypt is repeating itself and how Sa'dawi has sustained attacks from the same quarter for her efforts as Qasim Amin some sixty years before.

"Despite the fact that Qasim Amin's call was for women's education to enable them to take care of the family and bring up their children in a better way, and despite the fact that he based his call on the principles of Islam and didn't infringe upon them, he was vehemently attacked by the men of the Azhar (the religious authorities). These men were important pillars supporting the rule of the Khedive Ismail, an exploitative and tyrannical rule for the Egyptian people because of his cooperation with British imperialism." 62

Sa'dawi prefers to ignore the fact that one result of British imperialism in Egypt at the turn of the century was the establishment of a relatively free press which allowed the debate about women's right to education etc., a wider public hearing in the first place,



besides encouraging a greater intellectual exchange of ideas, than would probably have been possible under any other system of government at that time in Egypt,<sup>63</sup> or elsewhere in the Arab world, as is attested, for example, by the extensive emigration of Lebanese and Syrian intellectuals to Egypt at the time.<sup>64</sup>

History has throughout the world been written by men, until the very recent efforts of feminists to speak up for the forgotten half of humankind. We have this to thank for the names of early female pioneers in the cause of women's liberation being absent from our books on Arab social or literary achievements. Sa'dawi makes a truly commendable effort to lay the basis for a feminist critique of modern Egyptian history. The names of Aisha al-Taymouriyya, Zeinab Fawwaz, Malak Hifni Nasif and May Ziada<sup>65</sup> provide a good starting point for those interested in pursuing this neglected line of research.<sup>66</sup> What is perhaps even more indicative of Sa'dawi's dedication to those who paved the way before her is the way in which she elevates the efforts of the ordinary Egyptian woman, whether she be a peasant labouring in the fields, or a poorly paid lower-class woman struggling to keep her family by working in a factory. Their labours have meant that the women of today already have an example of strong female workers to encourage them, even though the jobs which those women performed were abominably paid and unskilled.<sup>67</sup> Arab feminists today need to recognize this aspect of their own history and give due credit to their true heroines rather than be persuaded that what Sa'dawi considers the paltry changes ushered in by the upper-class feminists led by Huda Sha'rawi and Cesa Nabarawi<sup>68</sup> constituted the most important steps in

Arab women's liberation.<sup>69</sup> Sa'dawi pays tribute to the brave Egyptian women who participated in the 1919 uprising against the British, some of whom died as martyrs, while many others were imprisoned. She also draws our attention to the first women to demonstrate publicly for better working conditions specifically for women, who went on strike and occupied their factories in the early 1920s. She gives an example of how she feels the Women's Federation which was formed by Huda Sha'rawi in 1923 was out of touch with the exploitation of the masses of working women.<sup>70</sup> The aristocratic leaders preferred to concentrate on the issue of abolishing the veil rather than speak out on behalf of their poorer sisters' grievances.<sup>71</sup> Sa'dawi is very critical of the members of the Women's Federation for their lack of achievement which was due principally to their inability to represent the majority of women. These early women pioneers were not, however, the only ones, the Bint al-Nīl organization formed in the 1940s was more active and demanding in the cause of women's liberation, yet Sa'dawi does not mention its achievements nor those of Doria Shafiq, its leader.

"Although more than 53 years have passed since the creation of the Women's Federation with all its enthusiasm and devotion to these causes, practically all its efforts have come to nothing. The laws of marriage and divorce in Egypt still permit the husband to divorce his wife whenever he wants and to take more than one wife."<sup>72</sup>

The reader may wonder why Sa'dawi takes such pains to enumerate so many different political rebellions in which Arab women have participated over the last 70 years when their ultimate gains have

been so minimal. Whether they were opposing a foreign colonial power, such as the heroines in the Algerian War of Independence, or their own Arab governments, such as those Jordanians who cried out against their government for its persecution of the Palestinians, women's efforts have not been rewarded in the Arab world.<sup>73</sup>

It is at this point that the reader can sense Sa'dawi's own frustration and a tone of pessimism: even if women were to be allocated seats especially for them in the Egyptian National Assembly, she does not imagine that this would lead to any significant improvement in women's conditions.<sup>74</sup> Sa'dawi's grounds for believing so are based on historical analogy: when the peasants were accorded 50% of the seats in the National Assembly after the Egyptian Revolution of 1952, these were soon monopolized by upper-class 'representatives' of the peasants.

"I don't imagine that the situation of women would be much different. If women were allotted some seats in the Parliament they would probably be occupied by women of the upper-classes who would support the status quo; they might even be occupied by men disguised as women!"<sup>75</sup>

Sa'dawi is equally sceptical that a woman as head of state would achieve anything for members of her own sex.

Sa'dawi is firmly of the opinion that women will not achieve liberation within a patriarchal, class-divided society of any type. Only under what she refers to as 'true socialism' will women's liberation be attainable. She also denies that any socialist country yet

practises this 'true socialism'. This is significant in view of the fact that Egypt had its own socialist revolution in 1952 when Nasser became president. The National Socialist Charter enacted by Nasser in 1962 seemed to promise a new era for women because of its public recognition of their disadvantaged state.

"The National Charter promulgated on 21 May 1962 contains an extremely important provision of paramount significance not only for women, but for the whole of society: 'There is an urgent need to abolish the remaining chains and constraints that severely limit the free action of woman, so that she may be enabled to participate with dynamism and effectiveness in building up a new life.'" <sup>76</sup>

Sa'dawi suggests that women have little cause for confidence in Egyptian law. Whatever the 1962 Charter says, the 1956 Constitution expressly stated that: "The State will facilitate for women the reconciliation of their work in society and their duties in the family."<sup>77</sup> However, some twenty years later, Sa'dawi had noticed no progress in this respect. Work outside the home was still regarded as secondary to women's 'career' of homemaking, and was tolerated only because of pressing economic circumstances.

Sa'dawi does not elaborate on the immensely complex situation in Egypt which has produced this lack of socialism within a socialist state. Nor does she say what gains might usefully be made by women in the intervening period before the inauguration of this ideal classless unbiased socialism of which she dreams. On the state of existing types of organizations ostensibly concerned with women in the Arab

world as a whole, she says:

"The women's organizations in Arab countries are still either groups of upper-class women occupying themselves with various charitable works of superficial importance or just sections of the political organizations under the name of the socialist federations which are socialist only in name and which consist of a passive bureaucratic group of men and women who receive their instructions from the authorities." <sup>78</sup>

and

"Arab women working in any Arab country do not represent a force capable of putting pressure on these rulers or politicians to provide these kinds of conveniences (facilities to help women with domestic and child-rearing tasks.)" <sup>79</sup>

Sa'dawi did not consider that belonging to political parties, voting in the elections and joining women's liberation movements as they existed in Egypt in the late '70s was the way for women to strive for progress.

"This proves to us the big mistake which some women who belong to women's liberation movements, fall into when they imagine that women can be liberated by simply plunging into the battle for political rights or taking part in elections or political parties or even rising to positions of authority and sharing power with men." <sup>80</sup>

Yet women need somehow, Sa'dawi believes, to become a political force strong enough to seize their rights for themselves. How women might organize themselves thus, and what type of action they might pursue to achieve their aims, are not discussed. Sa'dawi's sentence, "Freedom

is taken, not bestowed as a gift, as we have learnt from history.",<sup>81</sup> might seem to imply the need for militant action. This question of how women are to redeem their rights is crucial to the future effectiveness of Sa'dawi's message. By the creation of the Arab Women's Solidarity Association in 1982, Sa'dawi has been able to gather together those women who share her views (and also those men sympathetic to the women's cause) and who wish to be politically independent. But at the time of writing there was undoubtedly an idealistic tone about Sa'dawi's vision of a woman's political party:

"The most urgent tasks required of a woman's political party are, for example, to set down a new plan for the productive women's workforce so that it includes peasant women and housewives. Our official statistics say that the female workforce is only 9.2% which does not take into account the peasants, but only those women who receive a wage. The Egyptian peasant woman is 100% productive, but because she is deprived of a wage, she is also deprived of the honour of being included in the productive workforce, solely on account of her being unwaged.

I imagine that one of the main functions of the women's political party will also be to set down standards for women's work within the home which are in accordance with the working and production standards in society, so that a housewife's work is included in the productivity of society. In other words, giving housewives credit for their contribution to the economic output would be to grant them the basic human honour of being counted among the productive members of society (not just as its consumers) while in addition it would enable them to obtain a wage equal to that which any other person would receive for doing the same work as a job.

Another of the party's important functions would be to liberate women working outside the home from domestic work by state provision of canteens, laundry facilities and nurseries. Provision of such facilities has to be seen as a priority in

the state budget because failure to provide them leads to numerous problems and crises not only for women and children but for men too." 82

Sa'dawi does not seem to be consciously aware here of the central dilemma facing feminists everywhere: what is the exact relationship between patriarchal oppression and capitalist opposition? Sa'dawi appears to be regarding them somewhat confusedly as equivalent, which may account for her failure to address the question of why the liberation of women has not been achieved in socialist states today.

In attempting to formulate any practical strategy for women's liberation, it is incorrect to identify women's unpaid housework, which does not create any surplus value for the community, with the situation of a worker robbed of the surplus value of his work by a capitalist. The class struggle alone will not emancipate women, but the overthrow of capitalism automatically seems to create a more favourable milieu for their emancipation. Conversely, if a patriarchal revolution could be conceived such as a wholesale rebellion by women against men and patriarchal values, this alone would be insufficient to end class oppression or reorganize the mode of production for a society. Everything appears to hinge on the question of the structure of the family. As long as the nuclear family (or extended family) is regarded as the basic social unit, there will be no escaping the dominance of patriarchal and capitalist values. Only with the dissolution of the family model as we know it today, and the development of alternative forms of social and familial intercourse, will patriarchal oppression disappear under socialism. Sa'dawi has spoken elsewhere<sup>\*</sup> on the potential benefits

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\* See al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins, p. 136 f.

to be derived from a communal lifestyle, but she has not tied this in sufficiently clearly with the radical feminist activities which will almost certainly be required to push through measures to liberate women already in socialist society. This is an example of that lack of coherence which the reader can detect in Sa'dawi's arguments, where the final stages leading to a satisfying conclusion are missing. There are often many stages in her arguments, and many conclusions. She is adept at exposing every aspect of women's oppression and communicating this effectively to them, but she does not set out clearly to them where they should begin in order to end their frustrations and achieve 'liberation'. What women's goal ought to be in practical terms, whether acting individually or collectively, is likewise not clear: should they be aiming ultimately to reject family life and/or marriage; should they be enlisting men's help or acting alone; how could women ever be united as a political force given their different social and educational backgrounds; and most especially, if they seek and gain access to positions of influence in the male-dominated institutional structures of today, what is to prevent women behaving exactly like men? These questions all need to be aired publicly in Egypt (as elsewhere). (It is very difficult to envisage any form of free debate of such issues under the present circumstances in Egypt.) It is to be hoped that if Sa'dawi does not answer them in her future writings, then some younger feminists, perhaps inspired by her work, will see fit to complete the picture. Without the tactics and the clarification of goals, Sa'dawi's pioneering work will remain abortive; it will have helped to unleash a wave of dissatisfaction and frustration, hitherto unrecognized, in a whole generation of Arab women. Their situation will be all the more



distressing because they will have limited outlets for their stress, yet in this state of affairs lie the seeds of progress in the future.

Sa'dawi describes what she believes liberation for a woman will ultimately mean: equal pay with men, the right to own her own body, to have children or abortions when she wishes, and to name her child after her, the freedom to choose the kind of relationship she wants with a man, whether to marry or reject marriage, and the freedom to choose her work and not have domestic tasks and childcare imposed upon her because of her sex.<sup>83</sup> All these options must be freely available to her without any loss in her social respectability. Some of these are not incompatible with capitalist society. Whatever the shortcomings of the socialist states today, Sa'dawi feels that the position of their women is preferable to that of Western women under capitalism.<sup>84</sup>

This need to clarify goals and the means to achieve them is essential if what seem to be various reforms on the road to liberation are not to rebound on women. For example, provision of the pill has been of universal benefit in allowing women some control over their fertility; at the same time it endangers their health and puts them under increasing pressure from men to assume total responsibility for contraception.

The idea of a women's political party appears attractive to many feminists, Sa'dawi included, but again it would have to compete in the state machinery of a culture created by men. The most important thinker of this century on the women's situation, Simone de Beauvoir, had some

apposite words to say when asked her opinion on this subject:

(The idea of a women's party).. "is bound to take them up a blind alley. Anyway, what is the term 'women's party' supposed to mean? After all, where politics are concerned, we don't want to restrict ourselves to the ghetto of the women's problem, we want to take part in discussions about everything. It's not just a question of women's problems. And I also think that with a carbon copy of the existing system - except that instead of a male-dominated party, there is a party in which women have the power - one is sticking too closely to the existing rules of the game. And the existing rules of the game are always those of the people in power. We must put a brake on the machinery of power, rather than go on oiling its wheels. We must fight against the exploitation of women in all areas, not declare ourselves content with any one party."<sup>85</sup>

Since paid work outside the home is increasingly becoming an option open to those Egyptian women who wish to escape the role of dependent housewife, Sa'dawi devotes much attention to the obstacles facing women who choose to have a career, as well as those who are forced to take a job because of financial difficulties. Peasant women and poor women in Egypt who have always formed the majority, have always had to labour, says Sa'dawi.<sup>86</sup> The concept of wives staying at home to look after the children and domestic affairs, is for many such women a luxury to be aspired to. A minority of middle and upper-class women who have received an education especially at college or university, are more and more wanting to enter professional life for the sake of work itself. That opportunities for such rewarding careers are limited in Egypt today, only increases the frustrations of these young women. When Sa'dawi speaks highly of paid work as beneficial for women, the reader has to understand that she is referring to a fulfilling career,

carrying a certain cachet in society, on a par with that of a professional man: for example, that of doctor or university lecturer, rather than nurse or secretary.

At this point, reference to the cross-cultural study, contemporaneous with Sa'dawi's work, by Nadia Hajjaj Youssef, Women and work in developing societies,<sup>87</sup> will shed valuable light on the position of women and employment in Egypt. In her comparison between Middle Eastern and Latin American societies which were at similar stages of economic development, Youssef found that;

"The female activity rate in the least developed country in Latin America - Honduras - is six times as high as the female activity rate of the most developed country in the Middle East - Iraq."<sup>88</sup>

In trying to account for this discrepancy Youssef came to the conclusion that it was the social conditions existing in the Muslim Middle East which militated against Arab women taking up jobs in the service and industrial areas, the sectors traditionally associated with the entry of women into employment in developing societies.

".. it is argued that the absence of Middle Eastern women from occupational sectors historically associated with female employment can be understood as a result of the interplay between women's avoidance of certain sectors, because of the socially stigmatizing aspect, and the informal prohibition of occupational opportunities imposed by males. The former acts as a volitional seclusion, the latter as an imposed exclusion."<sup>89</sup>

In general, Youssef found Arab women to be relatively well represented in the professions, but reluctant to enter the less-skilled jobs, especially if it involved any contact with men. Both men and women, for example, felt that there was a stigma attached to factory work in the Arab world: it is not uncommon for nurses, airhostesses and factory workers to be automatically considered promiscuous.

While Sa'dawi is to be commended for urging women into the professional sphere, it would seem that a stubborn resistance to female employment resides in those women of the lower and middle classes who lack the ability or family backing to enable them to enter a professional career. It is in the service, clerical and industrial sectors in such countries as Egypt, that the entry of women to employment would bring most progress in economic and social terms. One would hope that the work of Sa'dawi and others concerned with the position of women in society will ultimately lead women in Egypt to break out against what Youssef calls their "volitional seclusion" by overcoming their fears of violating sex taboos, and begin to enter the intermediate occupations.

Youssef did not see the patriarchal element in Catholicism as constituting any impediment to women in Latin American countries gaining work in the service and industrial sectors, and also enjoying a higher standard of education than their counterparts in the Middle East.<sup>90</sup> The machinery of social control over women is neither institutionally strong nor tightly integrated in the Latin American society, and within the family, the male's authority has been weakened, due to various cultural and historical factors. In the Middle East, kinship networks

have stayed strong, because no other institution has yet challenged or even questioned the authority of male family members. Youssef felt that the Islamic culture as a whole was responsible for the social situation of women in the Middle East, rather than any economic or political factor (and here she would definitely meet with Sa'dawi's disagreement). The essential problem to women's work is that everything hinges on the matter of women's and the family's honour, which is envisaged only in sexual terms in the Middle East. As we have seen above,<sup>\*</sup> young women, by taking the veil in the '80s, are making a visible claim to respectability and chastity which is helping them to overcome prejudices from both sexes, to their employment.

Youssef draws succinct parallels between the two religions as she has observed them operating: Roman Catholicism she sees as "nonfamilistic", Islam as "anti-feministic"; Catholicism has a weak hold over men, but strong support by women, while Islam has a strong support over and by men, who in turn exert it over women.<sup>91</sup> Catholicism also does not share Islam's religious sanctioning of polygamy, concubinage, divorce at will by the husband, unequal female inheritance and unequal weight given to female testimony of women.

Whereas Sa'dawi prefers to see political factors as underlying the position of women in her society, (and it is tempting for her readers to be swayed by her persuasive tone) it is essential to preserve an objective stance and an open mind over the extremely complex subject of women in Arab-Islamic society, by consulting the works of such as Youssef, which are lucid, logical, highly consistent and very well substantiated by statistics.

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\* See footnote no. 102 to Al-Unthā hiya al-Asl.

If we return now to Sa'dawi we will see how she pours scorn on her critics by highlighting exactly the kind of exploitation of women by men that occurs in Egypt, in the following attack on male chauvinists who object to women working outside the home:

"If it were not for the peasant woman leaving her house before sunrise every day, the men who oppose women's emancipation (and those who don't as well!) would not be able to have their breakfasts each morning, nor find any clothes to dress in nor find any paper on which to write their retrogressive ideas about women.

There are still in our Arab society, even today, quite a number of these men who object to women going outside the home to work, or receiving education, on the pretext that it is necessary in order to preserve a woman's femininity or honour. These men pretend to be ignorant of those millions of peasant women who leave their homes every day to work. Probably these men don't consider the peasants to be women, or that those women who work as porters and servants have no femininity or honour, otherwise how can we explain their complete silence when it comes to this vast number of women going out to work every day. How can one of these men claim to be concerned about guarding women's femininity or delicacy when he doesn't bat an eyelid when he's walking in the street and behind him his servant, a weak little girl carries his heavy bags for him. Nor does he bat an eyelid when he sees every day queues of women working as porters (carriers) or labourers in the fields or factories where women work twice the hours men work because they work inside the home too. Nor does he move a muscle when he is lying in bed and his wife is waiting on him. She is on the go all the time in the home in order to cater for his demands and those of the family and children.

This just goes to prove that the concern of such men for the honour or femininity of women and their objection to women going out to work is not a moral or humanitarian stance but an attitude reflecting class exploitation." 92

As a result of strict segregation between the sexes, when the idea of training women for employment was entertained, specifically 'female' occupations were created for the purpose of catering to the needs of the sequestered upper-class women.<sup>93</sup> From what Sa'dawi writes, it is clear that the first batches of midwives and nurses trained in the special schools inaugurated by Muhammad Ali<sup>94</sup> in the mid-19th century, were regarded as menials, and that for one's daughter to attend such an institution was a social degradation.<sup>95</sup>

On the whole, girls' education in Egypt had a patchy history from its origins during the late 19th century until it was officially encouraged after the 1952 Revolution. In spite of efforts to educate girls, with the additional opportunities of university education after 1929, the illiteracy rates for Egyptian women are still high.<sup>96</sup> Sa'dawi draws attention to some of the results of education on young women in Egypt:

"Paid work outside the home has played a role in liberating some Egyptian women especially those who have had a measure of higher education, who constituted 0.03% of the total number of women in 1966. (In relation to the total population the percentage of those with higher qualifications was only 1.2 in 1976, whereas it had been only 0.02 in 1960.) This has led to their economic emancipation and has also enabled some of the married women amongst them to seize new rights for themselves in society or within the family, in spite of the injustice of the marriage law in relation to women. Some of them have rejected marriage so as not to be subjected to this backward law and some have married then divorced in the endeavour to achieve some freedom and independence."<sup>97</sup>

Sa'dawi feels very keenly the prejudices against women in Egypt which have given rise to various striking inconsistencies in relation to their employment. A few examples of this will show how the strength of Islamic tradition determines what is practised. From the point of view of the law, there is no discrimination between the sexes as far as education and employment are concerned, in theory. This has not, however, prevented widespread discrimination against women in practice.<sup>98</sup> Women have not yet been able to gain appointment as judges because the conservative judicial authorities cling to the Islamic principle that declares a woman's testimony to be less stable than a man's. (Two female witnesses are regarded as equivalent to one male when it comes to giving evidence in an Islamic court.) With such a proviso it is difficult to imagine any climbdown from the judicial authorities which might allow women into the profession. Women are similarly barred from the executive positions of Governor, Mayor of a town and Head of a village. Yet Egypt has had women ministers in the government since 1962.

"This just shows the inconsistencies of modern Arab society. For at a time when a woman is allowed to become a minister and head a ministry in which thousands of men and women work, and to pronounce resolutions of the highest importance, she is prohibited from being a judge in a petty court and is also barred from being a headman of a small village who would have to pass judgement on various limited matters."<sup>99</sup>

Sa'dawi goes on to ask a pointed question directed at the religious authorities.<sup>100</sup> Assuming that the qualifications necessary for becoming a judge, soundness of mind, masculinity, sense of justice and knowledge



etc., are also required by a government minister with his greater responsibilities, why is it that the accession of a female minister did not draw similar opposition? Could it be, she wonders, that the religious authorities consider it legitimate for the President's directives to supercede the holy principles of Islam?

Egyptian women are seriously disadvantaged by the laws relating to civil rights which have a bearing on their employability. There is, for example, the inconsistency between Islamic principle and Egyptian law relating to women's free disposal of their possessions. Under Islamic law, women are entitled to own and handle their finances for themselves, but this is impossible for them to take advantage of as long as they have no entitlement to determine their own lives. Other restraints on an Egyptian woman include the fact that she is not permitted to travel abroad without the written permission of her husband or male guardian; she can be forcibly returned to the marital home by the police if she runs away; and her husband can effectively prevent her from taking a job, which Sa'dawi points out is a violation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>101</sup> (This also works the opposite way so that a woman can be pressured into a job if her husband wishes.) Sa'dawi illustrates the hypocrisy of Arab governments in general for paying lip-service to women's rights in the field of international relations, whilst perpetuating deplorable restrictions on women in their home countries.

"Is it possible for women who are physically enslaved and who don't have the freedom to act independently as far as their own bodies are concerned, is it possible for them to dispose freely of their own wealth? Can a woman who is afraid of being divorced at any moment reject her husband's intrusion in her own financial affairs? How is it conceivable that a woman, who can be driven back to her husband by the police, can enjoy the freedom to dispose of her money when she is incapable of acting independently in every area of her life?"<sup>102</sup>

Sa'dawi reflects on the probability that a working wife and mother will be doubly exploited both in society from the point of view of her labour, where she may receive equal pay with men, but not equal career prospects, and at home where she usually performs all the domestic work and is not free to spend her earnings as she likes, and also because her husband can overrule her. Social changes are inevitably occurring as a result of women's entering the workplace alongside men. Mernissi has already observed such social changes taking place in Morocco. For example men are showing greater respect for women's abilities, and professional relationships between unrelated colleagues of different sexes are being more widely forged.<sup>103</sup> Whether these social changes will occur in Egypt as quickly as, or indeed more quickly than, the similar changes which occurred in the West, which they mirror, is impossible to determine in the light of the present trend towards Islamic fundamentalism in Egypt today.

One of the aspects of this book which must have annoyed the authorities is Sa'dawi's attack on the Egyptian education system,

and the bigotry practised by social institutions in general. Sa'dawi believes the root cause of the inadequacy of the system to be the alliance of national Arab governments with foreign imperialists.<sup>104</sup> Under such influence, she feels that education has become more attuned to indoctrination than to developing pupils' reasoning and debating skills: the Egyptian system is still old-fashioned and backward looking, out of touch with reality and the needs of society. It relies heavily on cramming pupils' brains with information without regard for whether it is understood and without tying it in with other disciplines, without giving a comprehensive view in order to explain truthfully and realistically various phenomena and problems from which the majority suffer.

"There is no discussion nor analysis, nor tolerance of another's views, but obedience and passive receptivity, all in the aim of turning out an army of bureaucratic male employees who will accept subordination to their bosses and the authorities, and an army of female ones who will be compliant both to their bosses and their husbands."<sup>105</sup>

Given this stifling educational environment in Egypt, which has only changed in recent years to take on a more dogmatic Islamic stance, Sa'dawi's non-fiction work takes on added significance. Her style of logical argument, her challenges to the status quo and to everything shrouded in hypocrisy which distorts women's views of themselves and men's view of women, offer an alternative and radical form of social education. The subversive nature of her ideas can only be appreciated from a Westerner's position when they are set in the context of her society. As has by now become obvious to the outsider, what he can learn of Egyptian society from official sources, e.g. that women have

the right to work, dispose of their wealth, divorce their husbands, set conditions in their marriage contracts, keep their maiden name after marriage, attend university etc., does not accord with current practices, nor do such theoretical rights have the same implications for Egyptians as they do for Westerners. For bravely exposing these types of contradictions Sa'dawi deserves credit. She has also enabled the Western reader to take a closer and more private view of what actually goes on behind the official statistics.

In her chapter on women's work inside the home, Sa'dawi demythologizes the theory that women's role is in the home. This role which in Islam has acquired an almost sacred mystique, is certainly seen as every woman's duty. Those open-minded women who read this book when it was first published in the late 1970s probably found themselves questioning their values and priorities in a completely new way, and in the most painful and abstruse of areas. It must have shocked and hurt many of them to follow Sa'dawi's argument that they, as housewives, were deprived of certain rights, whilst bowed under heavy familial obligations for which they received no recompense, and that somehow this was all linked not just to religious injunctions, but to the political strategy of the government.

"We can imagine the money which any government would save by making women stay at home without a wage, when we realize the huge sums needed and the difficulties involved for these jobs to be done in a socialist society, which tried to liberate its women, who worked outside the home, from their domestic work and childcare."<sup>106</sup>

Sa'dawi constantly refers to women's 'lost rights', but nowhere does she list them comprehensively. Apart from the general freedom to choose her own lifestyle for herself and to come and go without needing permission, and equality before the law, Sa'dawi adds in more detail here that a woman ought to regard recompense for her domestic work, bearing children and breastfeeding as her due from society. When this is not forthcoming, a woman should have the right to reject marriage and prevent pregnancy.<sup>107</sup>

The problem of housekeeping raises various questions which Sa'dawi has not dealt with: would not pay for housework in itself simply be an official justification for women's staying at home and being burdened with their 'traditional role'? Women would still not have escaped the confines of the home. And what about the unmarried career woman, for instance, her housework still has to be done? And those workers whose task becomes the housework of others, would they feel fulfilment in their work with its unchanging routine, would they not become the new dregs of society? As Sa'dawi says:

".. service jobs such as sweeping, cooking and washing, are not respectable in society for the simple reason that society does not respect those who do them, and only rewards them with a pittance of a wage. They are the lowest jobs on the ladder of social life, for they don't require intelligence or expertise, they are dirty jobs in which the hands are constantly immersed in water, onions and garlic, or filth."<sup>108</sup>

The reader may well be puzzled now after following Sa'dawi's arguments as to what attitude one ought to take towards housework.

Is it the drudgery and trouble Sa'dawi seemed to regard it in connection with the quotation from Al-Ghazali? Is it a stultifying occupation which leads to the exploitation of women and prevents them from fulfilling themselves? Or is it an occupation that becomes respectable as soon as it is financially rewarded? Sa'dawi has also called housework a 100% productive activity;<sup>109</sup> does this imply that it warrants permanent or full-time status? What about the thousands of women who actually enjoy staying at home, keeping house and bringing up children, who have even found the latter more rewarding than a career outside the home? Are they somehow less valuable as women or less effective as mothers because they have rejected the rat race of the commercial world which is, after all, a product of a male-dominated culture? (Sa'dawi herself, we recall, was disillusioned with the world of medicine and the bureaucracy of the United Nations.)

Whatever their social class and whatever aspects of liberation they may already enjoy, all married women in Egypt share the tragedy of the marriage and divorce laws.<sup>110</sup> Even though progressive measures in favour of women have been taken in many Arab countries regarding divorce, and the limiting of polygamy etc., Egypt has made no attempt to follow suit. Sa'dawi feels that women who have gained places in the People's Assembly have failed their sisters, by not broaching the subject of changing Egypt's common law, which she attributes to their reluctance to being seen to be concentrating on supposedly 'limited' issues rather than affairs of international importance. Such a mentality amongst female politicians would, one hopes, not be characteristic of women if they were representing their own female political

party! <sup>111</sup>When Sa'dawi lists those everyday affairs which ought, along with the marriage laws, to be the concern of the government, she gives a unique glimpse of the typical problems facing Egyptians in their daily lives:

"The 'higher' politics of a country are not settled in these assembly halls and lobbies, nor the diplomatic conventions, but in the minutiae of people's daily lives: such questions as whether the peasant can go to work each morning after urinating without pain and without passing blood (the disease of belharsia drains the blood of the Egyptian peasant every day and drains up to 70% of the national economy), and whether the worker can get a piece of cheese or some ful<sup>112</sup> to eat so that he can keep on standing before his machine and whether the peasant woman can set out for the field every day without her husband crippling her with a beating, whether the female office worker can ride on the bus without anyone pressing himself on her from behind; whether the wife can refuse to have sex with the husband if she is tired or ill, and whether the father cares for his children and doesn't abandon them to rush to a second wife or a new girlfriend etc.. These very small, personal matters like eating, urinating, having sex, going out each morning and riding on the bus, which occur in the daily lives of men and women, these are what makes the state: they make up the 'higher' politics." <sup>113</sup>

Sa'dawi has to confront for her readers the question of why the Egyptian authorities have not seen fit to change their laws of personal status while other neighbouring Arab-Islamic states have? It is obvious that she herself does not regard laws which have their base in the Islamic religion as immutable.<sup>114</sup> The fact that she recognizes how they originated according to expediency, implies that they could also be changed today according to modern needs. If politicians have found no objection to discarding Islamic laws that have hindered their economic goals, for example, there is nothing to prevent them from

changing marriage and divorce laws. Sa'dawi also believes that in the final analysis it is the state which is the higher authority, not the religious institutions. This is comprehensible providing the two are separate, but when the government itself purports to be for example, an Islamic government, as the fundamentalists would like Egypt to be, then the secular trends cannot dictate policy freely.

"Anyone who studies the history of the Islamic countries will realize that the political authorities in any country have always been able to make laws which are contrary to the sharī'a. No religious institution has been able to prevent the issuing of these laws but in fact has cooperated with the political authorities and made religion conform to political policies. They have extracted from the verses of the Qur'ān and from the shar'īa new interpretations that are in keeping with the wishes of the rulers." 115

Sa'dawi takes the example of birth control: where Islam has recently been invoked both in support of it, as when Nasser instituted a family planning campaign in 1962 to control the population growth and in opposition to it, as when the World Islamic Association prohibited it in 1975.<sup>116</sup> (Sa'dawi does not give the reason for this reversal, one can only suppose that it must have been convenient for Sadat's de-Nasserization politics.)

The only explanation Sa'dawi can give for Egypt's reluctance to change the marriage laws, which she regards as the most backward and repressive to be found in the Arab world, is that it is further evidence of the domination of patriarchal values which rule in men's interests.<sup>117</sup> This raises the question, however, as to the extent of patriarchal



domination in Tunisia, Pakistan, South Yemen, Somalia etc., who have changed their marriage laws: is it substantially less than in Egypt for these measures to have been put through, and if it is, how did it become so? <sup>118</sup>

There is something curiously defensive about Sa'dawi's boast to Arab women that they are more fortunate than European or American women in that they can retain their maiden name (which is after all, only their father's name!) after marriage and are 'free' to dispose of their own wealth, two 'rights' which she believes they have inherited from their matrimonial past and the breadth of vision of the Prophet Muhammad.<sup>119</sup> Such a passage, clearly does not stand up to much criticism, especially after Sa'dawi has previously pointed out how irrelevant is the right to dispose of one's wealth, to the vast majority of Egyptian women, given their husbands' legal authority over them. It strikes a discordant note and makes the Western reader ask: is this the real Sa'dawi speaking? Is her vision of Western women so limited that she cannot appreciate the freedoms they have won? Is she displaying a cultural favouritism, that khawaga complex mentioned above,<sup>\*</sup> which makes her defend her own traditional culture against the West as a matter of principle? Or is this a passage intended to mollify her critics and confirm her national loyalty, to disarm them from attacking her for a pro-Western bias or an anti-Islamic stance?

It is symptomatic of Arab-Islamic countries which have not had a history of free political debate, nor a humanist reformation, that any

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\* See reference no. 29 above.

prospective social policies have to be proved to be in conformity with Islamic doctrine. Since Egypt is one of those countries which prides itself on its Islamic orientation, Sa'dawi has to continue in this tradition if she is to gain any credibility for her views. She therefore reminds the reader of Islam's flexibility in the past, and how today religious scholars cannot agree on what is Islamic and what is not. She argues that there must be latitude of interpretation and that this is enshrined in Islam's early history. She claims a right to interpret Islam for herself.<sup>120</sup> What is to decide though whether her interpretation is ultimately more suitable than that of another? The reader can detect that she is interpreting Islam in accordance with her socialist beliefs and rational humanitarian principles. Whole areas of Islam she leaves untouched, which have a bearing on such questions as whether a Muslim woman should be free to marry a Christian man; whether a female witness is inherently less reliable than a male, and how should adultery be punished, if at all etc., upon which Islam has pronounced.<sup>121</sup>

Reading between the lines, one might deduce Sa'dawi's tacit approval of those who consider adultery to be less of a crime than a personal problem, which would accord with her own theories on sexuality, but she cannot give away more than this:

"A few Arab writers have called for poverty to be eradicated from Arab society, before the thief's hand is amputated, and for the problem of adolescent sexual repression to be solved, before the penalty for adultery is applied, but this 'logical' mode of thought is only a drop in the ocean of 'illogicality'." <sup>122</sup>

It would be necessary to know much more of Sa'dawi's opinions on such matters, which can be seen as more specifically 'Islamic' problems, before she can be regarded as truly interpreting Islam and not just making a judicious selection of its more liberal aspects in order to justify her views on socialist equality.

The Egyptian law of divorce, as it stands is wide open to abuse by men: "The law, custom and religious legislation support the man in his irresponsible behaviour towards women."<sup>123</sup> That no significant changes have been made during the last ten years to help prevent such abuse is evidenced by the independent research carried out for the BBC Television series Lovelaw (1986).<sup>124</sup> Women are particularly prone to suffer if they have no means of earning their living and have invested heavily in creating a home and rearing a family. Conversely, they may suffer through the husband's refusal to divorce them in cases where a separation would be a blessed relief to the wife. With Sa'dawi's suggestion that women try to shield themselves from such tragedies which can arise through marriage, the liberation of women takes on a more tangible meaning, instead of being an abstract slogan. Women need liberating from this specific type of economic and sexual injustice from husbands, to which they are vulnerable and against which the law offers them no protection.

It would appear that when leniency is shown in an Egyptian court, it is practically always to the man's advantage rather than the woman's. The need to stick to the letter of the law and the lack of credibility given to women's testimony in general, militate against any appeal they

might make to extenuating circumstances. A wife who flees the marital home has customarily been returned forcibly to her violent, drunken, criminal or pimp of a husband.<sup>125</sup> Such a provision as the bayt al-Tā'a, Sa'dawi argues, should have no place in a legal system even if it claims to derive its legitimacy from Islamic principles, since the Prophet pronounced that a woman should not be forced to live with a man against her will.<sup>126</sup> But the very fact that bayt al-Tā'a has gained acceptability within an Islamic community would suggest that at some point it was interpreted as being in accordance with the sharī'a and the other principles which Muhammad expounded which quite clearly put wives under the authority of their husbands. It has in effect been absorbed into Islam.

The few clauses which do entitle a wife to a divorce, for example, her husband's leprosy, insanity, imprisonment for three years or more, or his violence towards her, (only if it has been severe enough to maim her) all contain loopholes which can enable the husband to escape or make it impossible for the wife to give the required 'proof' against him.

To relieve this very gloomy picture of Egyptian marriage which is concerned with documenting its shortcomings not its successes, there is a note of optimism and promise of progress as far as women are concerned. Sa'dawi notes that young women in the cities, where there are more job opportunities, are better able to support themselves after divorce and are thus less afraid to instigate proceedings to escape a failed marriage.

"A woman who can feed herself because she has an independent income doesn't need to submit to servitude like the woman who needs her marriage to continue in order that she can eat and who fears divorce because she will lose her source of food." <sup>127</sup>

Some women have gone further towards independence:

"However, Arab society has begun to witness in recent years a minority of career women whose independent mentality and distinctive moral stance has enabled them to refuse to be pressurized into the patriarchal institution of marriage and divorce. They have chosen a way of life that suits themselves and forced society to respect them for it and acknowledge their status too." <sup>128</sup>

Such women are living in a very different social milieu from the majority of poor Egyptian women. <sup>129</sup> The former have been liberated from the extended family which has a value system of obligations and shame that can pose quite a distinct set of constraints in addition to the official law. It is always as well to bear in mind the difficulties Sa'dawi faces in generalizing about her fellow countrywomen simply because of their great disparity in education, social and economic situations. Another positive factor which suggests that the cause of Arab women is not without hope is the permeation of socialist thought amongst the educated. <sup>130</sup> This has changed, and is continuing to change the mentality of women and men throughout the Arab world, as is the increasing number of young women going out to work; a tide which cannot be reversed easily. <sup>131</sup>

Sa'dawi's discussion of women and divorce ought to be a salutary warning to her government and Egyptian men, that unless the institution of marriage is made more amenable to women, the divorce rate will gather

momentum. Evidence of the dissolution of the patriarchal 'model' of family relationships in the West, is also a warning that Egypt's own patriarchal institutions are not inviolable.<sup>132</sup> If opponents of such social change believe that appealing to religion can prevent it occurring and somehow 'protect' the family, Sa'dawi draws their attention to the fact that the state has already encroached upon what were traditionally regarded in Islamic society as the male's preserves, by usurping his authority as head of the household.

A more reliable indication of Sa'dawi's opinion on the state of religion in Egypt, comes with her indictment of the authorities for the restrictions on freedom of expression:

"Religion and state in advanced Western industrialized societies have become separate and the authority of the Church has retreated before the capitalist technological advance which has swept away a great deal of what was regarded as sacrosanct according to Christian and feudalist thought.

However, in most Arab-Islamic countries, religion has not become divorced from the state and this is one of the reasons which has alienated so many Arab intellectuals from an objective analysis and scientific criticism of the family and the changes which it is obviously undergoing.

Freedom of thought in regard to religion is still taboo in most Arab countries as is freedom of thought about the political system."<sup>133</sup>

The charge of heresy has been and can still be levelled against any thinker who does not toe the official line. Heresy is a much more serious charge especially today in Egypt, than its name would suggest in the West. It is the repercussions which would ensue from this

charge which are powerful enough to intimidate Sa'dawi. It is worth noting Sa'dawi's fighting terminology here: she refers to the charge of heresy (ilhād) as being a powerful 'weapon' (silāh) used by those in power,<sup>134</sup> whilst she refers to man's mind as his only 'weapon' in life for conquering discrimination and injustice.<sup>135</sup>

Sa'dawi's final words on liberation for women form a positive encouragement to stand up to a society that does not accord them adult status:

"Arab women realize that in being liberated they have nothing to lose but their chains."

"Freedom has its price which the emancipated woman pays with regard to her health, peace of mind and society's hostile attitude towards her."

".. women also pay a price in terms of their health, personality and character when they choose to submit. Far better to pay the price and be free, than to pay it and remain a slave."

"In my opinion the price paid in slavery, regardless of any peace of mind or security from the social point of view, which has come from acceptance, is much higher than the price paid for liberation, even if it means the threats and hostility from society. There is no doubt that for a woman to regain her personality, her humanity and her full selfhood, is more important than the approbation of a male-dominated society."<sup>136</sup>

The final section of Al-Wajh elaborates on the type of oppression females can suffer in Egyptian society, continuing the themes found in Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins. It is obvious from Sa'dawi's subject matter that she has witnessed the depths of injustices perpetrated against her sex.

It is for her sensitive handling of the subjects of rape and incest of young girls, for example, and the type of intimate cases which she cites, that Western readers can gain the best impression of Sa'dawi's personal qualities, as well as a mine of information on Egyptian society which is unobtainable from other sources. Whilst the cruel facts of child sexual abuse have only recently been acknowledged publicly in the West, Sa'dawi, ahead of her times here, refuses to let her readers deny that it is widespread in Egypt. How much more difficult must it have been for Sa'dawi to broach this subject in her society with its relative lack of tolerance, its repressive attitudes towards sexuality, its lack of free speech, than for a reformer to do the same in the West!

"The overwhelming majority of readers in Egypt and the Arab countries know that what I am writing about and presenting here is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the manifold sicknesses which are widespread amongst us and which can only be treated by exposing and diagnosing them with greater courage and honesty, and an attempt to discover their real reasons." 137

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One pervasive aspect of Sa'dawi's style, as noted before, is her ability to make the complex simple and readily comprehensible. For the most part she is successful in using this technique for educative purposes. In this book it is particularly effective for clarifying the issues facing women. What might have been a general malaise or



a vague dissatisfaction, perhaps previously unfocused within a woman's mind, because of society's insidious processes of moulding her for the role of supportive wife and devoted mother, now becomes concentrated into a struggle to be waged for her personality against an indoctrinating, exploitative society, unjust marriage laws and male domination. This is all due to the fact that Sa'dawi has taken apart those myths which surround women's role in society.

"Society deceives the wife by making her believe her only work is at home for her family and children, and by surrounding these jobs with a halo of empty words, such as 'the home is the wife's realm', while the ideal mother is she who sacrifices herself for the sake of her children and the ideal wife, she who obeys her husband and serves him." 138

One of the dangers of this oversimplification of very complicated social and personal relationships and Sa'dawi's rousing call for women to emancipate themselves, is that it might encourage the rejection of any more moderate 'middle way'. Everything will be seen in terms of a black and white, good or bad; for example, there may be a rejection of marriage rather than a serious attempt at working out problems within it to the advantage of both partners, without proper preparation for an independent life, ignoring the fact that pursuing a career may be for a woman ultimately less rewarding than rearing a family, given the male-dominated structures in the workplace. There may be a rejection of the nuclear family in favour of an idealized communal life without an awareness of how the latter might stifle that individuality which Sa'dawi so prizes. On a larger scale, there is the possible rejection of anything connected with capitalism, and

this must include any manifestation of Western lifestyle, in favour of a nebulous 'true' socialism without an acceptance that it too will always have its limitations. More serious still is the way in which Sa'dawi encourages her readers to believe that all their problems, including women's oppression, are due to Western imperialism.<sup>139</sup> This fuels antagonism towards the West and will hinder Egyptian feminists from benefitting from the lessons their Western sisters have learned, e.g. how to put pressure on men in power to grant them improved rights, how to juggle home, husband and career etc., whilst it diverts Egyptian minds from focusing on what successive Egyptian governments have done to suppress their own people and what actions should be taken against them now to improve the lot of citizens male and female, especially since Egypt regards itself today as an independent socialist-Islamic state. For Egyptians to acknowledge some blame for their own problems, instead of attributing them all to outside influences would complete the theory of where feminists should direct their aims. To absolve Islamic culture or the Egyptian government of responsibility as Sa'dawi does here, for the understandable reasons of censorship and imprisonment, is to endorse implicitly their treatment of women.

"The Arab woman must realize that the issue of Arab women's liberation is not specifically an Islamic issue, nor one of sexual liberation, nor of hostility to men or opposition towards Eastern tradition, but essentially an economic and political issue which is against imperialist organizations within the Arab region and without. It is also opposed to all kinds of restrictions and any form of moral, cultural, social, sexual or economic exploitation."<sup>140</sup>

This is the supreme example of what was referred to previously as being a lack of conclusiveness to Sa'dawi's arguments. How much this is due to the threat of censorship or to a particular anti-Western prejudice of the author's is impossible to tell. If this apparent attitude of cultural loyalty no matter what the cost to one's conclusions, is the only way in which Sa'dawi can write her views on women in her society, she must be credited for saying so much, whilst staying within the bounds of acceptability by throwing in the occasional pro-Islamic, anti-capitalist slogan. One can also begin to sense her deep frustrations at not being able to express her hostility towards those public institutions which have been and still are to blame for retarding women. There does remain, however, the danger that her readers will take such anti-Western rhetoric too seriously which will blind them to the responsibilities and failings of their own social institutions.

There is also the ease with which the label 'patriarchal' can be bandied about and applied perhaps erroneously, to anything which at first sight appears to thwart women. Sa'dawi is not always careful how she uses the term, which embraces a multiplicity of meanings. Nor does she ever attempt to define it with reference to all its historical, religious and social implications. The vexed questions remain still unanswered as to why women have cooperated for so long in the oppression of their own sex, and how to stop women's newly-won rights from rebounding on them, and exactly why, if Islamic culture as it is understood in Egypt is not to blame for the oppression suffered by women, are they not as liberated as those in certain other Islamic

states (or for that matter, as liberated as women in Western societies, where according to Sa'dawi, Christianity has been even more oppressive of them) and finally, how can patriarchal society be eradicated in Egypt without attacking Islam? <sup>141</sup>

Sa'dawi is helping to found a new field of research, that of feminist scholarship, in Egypt, with her exhortations to women to search for themselves throughout their history, social traditions and religion to understand their present situation.<sup>142</sup> If it were not for the compulsion to put everything in an Islamic context and seek sanction for every action by harking back some 1300 years, one would expect Sa'dawi's works to be more future-orientated. Humanitarian concern pervades her work both on the surface and as undercurrents, but the humanitarian vocabulary is strikingly sparse. Where such concepts as tolerance, generosity, human understanding, aiming for future progress, building a brighter future etc., do occur, along with Sa'dawi's calls for equality and honesty, they do not convey the clear vision of one who looks forward with untrammelled optimism, but are always clouded by the potential stranglehold of the past.

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References to Al-Wajh al-'Ārī li'l-Mar'a al-'Arabiyya

- 1) Al-Wajh, p. 11: HFE, p. 7.
- 2) Al-Wajh, p. 17.
- 3) Ibid., p. 21.
- 4) See pp. 334-5
- 5) Al-Wajh, p. 20.
- 6) Ibid., p. 20.
- 7) Ibid., p. 17.
- 8) Ibid., pp. 27-8, for example.
- 9) Ibid., p. 21.
- 10) Ibid., p. 29.
- 11) Ibid., p. 30.
- 12) Ibid., p. 30.
- 13) This is a literal translation of an Arabic idiom.

- 14) Al-Wajh, pp. 32-3.
- 15) Ibid., p. 40.
- 16) Ibid., pp. 41-3.
- 17) Ibid., p. 43.
- 18) Ibid., p. 216.
- 19) Ibid., p. 48.
- 20) Ibid., p. 44.
- 21) Ibid., p. 68.
- 22) Ibid., p. 63.
- 23) Ibid., pp. 45, 49-50.
- 24) Ibid., p. 50.
- 25) Ibid., p. 48. There is a sizeable Christian population in Egypt who would not of course wish to model themselves on the lives of the Prophet and his wives. While there are differences between the two religious communities, there is a great deal that is common to both in terms of accepted morals. If anything, the

Christian personal morality is more rigid than the Muslim, virginity, chastity and obedience being prized as essential to the Christian tradition of monogamy.

26) Al-Wajh, p. 53.

27) Ibid., p. 51.

28) Ibid., p. 52.

29) See, Sullivan, Women in Egyptian public life, p. 168. "There is evidence of a strong 'khawaga complex' in Egypt, whereby some people love all things that are foreign while others abhor them." This form of cultural bias is noticeable also in the work of Ghada al-Samman, where it is effectively summed up by the writer Hanan Awwad in her study of this author:

"Al-Samman also repeatedly contrasts the Eastern and Western societies, rather superficially describing the former as emotional, spiritual, moralistic, and family-orientated, while depicting the latter as cold, immoral, unemotional, and materialistic. On this point, I find that she has fallen into the same pattern as many other Arab writers and observers, in that she remains open-minded within a specific set of issues, but once these issues are removed from the foreground, her perception of reality alters drastically, so that her estimate of the impact other cultures and philosophies have had on the destinies of the Arab world becomes much less reliable."

Hanan Awwad, Arab causes in the fiction of Ghadah al-Samman, Quebec, 1983, p. 113. Ref. 29 is continued on the next page.

"Is it not Eurocentric to put forward the lives of Western women as the only democratic, just and forward-looking model? 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 generally, should be universal."

House of obedience, p. 25.

30) Al-Wajh, p. 55.

31) Ibid., p. 56.

32) Ibid., p. 57.

33) ibid., p. 55.

34) See the Koran, translated Dawood, sura 2:223, which says, "Women are your fields, go then into your fields as you please."

35) The reader will be able to keep the debate about whether Islam has a fundamentally positive or negative approach to female sexuality, in better perspective if he remembers certain points which all indicate that sexual contact with women is defiling for a man: a Muslim must perform ablutions after lovemaking, and thorough purification is needed before prayer if the man has had contact with a woman. There is also a prohibition on intercourse, or even desiring a woman, during the sacred month of Ramadan.



- 36) Al-Wajh, pp. 57-9.
- 37) Ibid., p. 60.
- 38) Ibid., p. 58.
- 39) HFE, p. 137.
- 40) Al-Wajh, p. 61.
- 41) Ibid., p. 62.
- 42) Ibid., p. 68.
- 43) Ibid., p. 64.
- 44) Ibid., p. 63.
- 45) Ibid., p. 65.
- 46) Ibid., p. 70.
- 47) Ibid., p. 77.
- 48) Ibid., pp. 77, 79-80.
- 49) Ibid., p. 80.

50) Ibid., p. 81.

51) Ibid., p. 84.

52) Ibid., p. 85.

53) Ibid., p. 87.

54) Ibid., p. 89.

55) Ibid., p. 90.

56) Ibid., p. 95.

57) Ibid., p. 104.

58) Ibid., p. 105.

59) Ibid., p. 97.

60) Ibid., p. 109.

61) Ibid., p. 110.

62) Ibid., p. 111.

63) According to Albert Hourani, in Arabic thought in the liberal age,  
Oxford, 1970, p. 197:

"For twenty-three years (1884-1907) Egypt was ruled in effect by the British Agent and Consul-General, Sir Evelyn Baring, later Lord Cromer. Cromer's rule gave Egypt financial stability, a better and more extensive system of canals, a better administration of justice; but it also meant the restoration of the authority of the khedive, only restrained by British control, of the financial power of the foreign bondholders, and of the economic and legal privileges of the foreign communities."

and, p. 174.

"In the late nineteenth century Egypt had had great freedom of speech and publication, partly because of the Capitulations, which gave foreign protection and privileges to most journals, and partly because of the influence of Lord Cromer."

- 64) See Thomas Philipp, The Syrians in Egypt, 1725-1975, Berliner Islamstudien, Band 3, Stuttgart, 1985.
- 65) Of these Malak Hifni Nasif (1886-1918) and May Ziada (1886-1941), were the most important: the former wrote for periodicals, but is chiefly remembered for her feminist essays entitled Al-Nisā'iyāt. May Ziada, of Palestinian-Lebanese origin, lived mainly in Cairo where she wrote in French and Arabic. She was also famous for her literary salon. Zeinab Fawwaz (1850-1914) was a Lebanese poet and writer on feminist topics.
- 66) Al-Wajh, p. 111.
- 67) It would appear from Judith E. Tucker's interesting work Women in nineteenth-century Egypt, Cambridge, 1985, that Egyptian women in

the last century played a much more active and prominent role in their society than is commonly imagined, though Sa'dawi does not seem to show any particular awareness of the type of contributions which women were making to social life during this period. Tucker basically describes how the business activities of women as producers and traders enabled many of them to dominate the market place, amass a small capital and achieve a sense of independence, which gave them sufficient confidence to defend their cases when necessary, under the shari'a court system.

"Women themselves, through the manipulation of contradictory definitions of their roles and status achieved considerable power and control in a fundamentally patriarchal setting."

(p. 61. See also pp. 61-3, 100.)

However, those who manipulated the system and profited from it were not the innocent victims of it or those rebelling against it, whom Sa'dawi finds as more attractive heroines for today's woman to be proud of.

68) HFE, p. 176. Huda Sha'rawi (1879-1947) is chiefly remembered for leading a demonstration of women in support of the Egyptian nationalist cause in 1919, for casting off her veil in public in 1923 following her return to Egypt from an international women's meeting in Rome, and for founding the Egyptian Feminist Union in the same year.

69) Al-Wajh, p. 118.

- 70) HFE, p. 175.
- 71) Al-Wajh, p. 117.
- 72) Doria Shafiq founded Bint al-Nīl, an attempt at a women's political party, in 1948 in Cairo. The broad aims of the organization were to abolish illiteracy and establish full political equality between the sexes. Members of Bint al-Nīl briefly occupied parliament, and Mrs Shafiq went on hunger strike in 1951 demanding political representation of women. Their action helped to gain women the vote in 1956 and the election of the first women to parliament in 1957. (It is interesting to note that women were granted the vote despite opposition from the Sheikh al-Azhar, who issued a fatwa (religious ruling) declaring that women were too unstable to vote!) It is curious that Sa'dawi does not mention Doria Shafiq or Bint al-Nīl as contributing towards Egyptian women's liberation!
- 73) Al-Wajh, p. 119.
- 74) Ibid., p. 120.
- 75) Ibid., p. 120, (HFE, p. 179). Reserved seats for women was a measure largely introduced by Jihan al-Sadat based on a similar arrangement operating in the Sudanese parliament. It became part of the Egyptian law in 1979 when 30 women were made new Members of Parliament. It was probably the draft proposals for this which

gave rise to Sa'dawi's scorn here. It is interesting to refer to Sullivan's study Women in Egyptian public life, which focuses on the new breed of parliamentary women during the 1980s. Sullivan observed that although these women come from different social backgrounds, they share certain qualities regardless of their individual persuasions, such as some kind of professional expertise, a good command of Arabic, relatively high level of education and a conservatism in dress and behaviour. (pp. 72-3)

"Egyptian women who have served in parliament tend to have come from relatively privileged families and to have had educated and supportive parents. The role of fathers in encouraging their daughters to get an education and seek a career outside the home is particularly notable. As young girls, these women learned self-confidence, optimism, and an appreciation for the value of work. Of the forty-six studied, twenty-five of the women were urban while twenty-one represented rural districts in parliament. All but four were Muslim. Twelve, all from rural areas, wore Islamic dress while the remainder wore Western-style clothing. Regardless of place of origin or style of dress, the women studied all came from families where education was considered a necessity for all children. Two-thirds went to Arabic schools and, as one consequence, most of Egypt's female parliamentarians developed a good command of the Arabic language. Several also learned at least one foreign language. Both of these linguistic assets proved to be valuable tools for those who possessed them when they entered politics.

On the whole, the women in Egypt's parliament are well-educated. Seventy percent of them have earned university degrees and, of that group, one-third went on to receive at least one advanced degree. Exact figures pertaining to their male colleagues are not available, but it is quite clear that the women are better educated than the men."

and, p. 77:

".. most of the women who have succeeded in politics in Egypt have acquired professional expertise and contacts which have enabled them to make a substantive contribution to debates, discussions, and the making of laws. This background gives them durability and a special place in the system, especially when many of their male colleagues lack this background and have little but their own wits and loyalty to the system, or to a particular leader, to offer as a political asset."

While these women have demonstrated a solidarity regarding traditional feminist issues when these have arisen on the agenda, it would appear that they show a diversity and independence in their attitudes and a commitment to their constituents which would belie Sa'dawi's fears that such positions would be monopolized by upper-class women. These new parliamentary women would seem to have the very qualities of professionalism, and uphold the importance of education and the work ethic, in which Sa'dawi so fervently believes. Sa'dawi's expectations that women M.P.s would support the status quo is fulfilled to some extent; nevertheless, some women have been noted for taking a critical stand against the government. (Sullivan, p. 76)

Sullivan highlights the difference in attitudes of the women in parliament which we can usefully take to be representative of those of Egyptian women in general.

"Women in the group were asked, 'Should the women in parliament work together as a group to provide a 'women's perspective' or position on most if not all major public issues?' A large number did not respond to the question, suggesting they did not

feel comfortable with it. Several, however, made detailed comments, some examples of which may help us to clarify the variety of perspectives taken by women in this group. One rural woman said simply: 'Everyone has her own position and work to achieve.' A veiled woman said: 'Yes, because in working together they constitute a stronger force.' But one of her veiled colleagues felt that: 'Everyone works with her own decisions.' Sharply defined views were outlined by two urban women. One said: 'No. Not at the moment. They should act within their scientific and professional capacities rather than as women.' In perhaps the bluntest comment of all, one influential member of the group said her female colleagues should 'try to forget about being a woman. After all that has been gained recently by women, now is the time for them to give, not to seek more rights or benefits.'"

In view of these comments it is helpful if we bear in mind this potentially vast range of reactions from Egyptian women to the feminist debate, as we read Sa'dawi's factual works.

76) HFE, p. 180.

77) Al-Wajh, p. 127.

78) HFE, p. 188.

79) Al-Wajh, p. 128.

80) Ibid., p. 121.

81) Ibid., p. 121.

82) Ibid., p. 137.



- 83) Ibid., p. 139.
- 84) Ibid., p. 140.
- 85) Alice Schwarzer, Simone de Beauvoir today: conversations 1972-1982, London, 1982, translated from the French, p. 98.
- 86) Again, see Tucker for a detailed study of the type of work engaged in by Egyptian women in the last century.
- 87) Nadia Hajjaj Youssef, Women and work in developing societies, Population monograph series, no. 15, Connecticut, 1976.
- 88) Ibid., p. 19.
- 89) Ibid., p. 37.
- 90) Ibid., p. 43.
- 91) Ibid., p. 99.
- 92) Al-Wajh, p. 115, HFE, p. 173.
- 93) Al-Wajh, p. 123.
- 94) Muhammad Ali was ruler of Egypt during the first half of the 19th century. He inaugurated the beginnings of a Western-inspired

economy, army and education system and introduced industry into Egypt.

- 95) Al-Wajh, p. 124.
- 96) HFE, p. 185, Al-Wajh, p. 130. Figures for women's illiteracy in Egypt in 1966, were 78.9% and in 1976, 71%.
- 97) Al-Wajh, p. 125.
- 98) Ibid., p. 126.
- 99) Ibid., p. 126.
- 100) Ibid., p. 127.
- 101) That the attitude behind Bayt al-Tā'a appears to have been still effective in 1984, we can see from the curious story quoted in Sullivan's Women in Egyptian public life, p. 112, which is summarized from "Al-Ahram", Feb. 4th, 1984:

"In February, 1984, it was reported that a man had gone to court to ask it to force his wife into bayt al-taah (house of obedience), that is, return to his house and submit to his authority. He had beaten her and mistreated her in other ways and then thrown her out of the hut in which they lived, which was adjacent to, and even had the same address as, a public toilet. Having expelled her, he then went to court to have the police force her to return and be obedient to him. The judge demurred, but only on the grounds that a public toilet was not a legal home. The case could

have gone the other way. If women, particularly poor women, must face even the remote chance of having to submit to such an indignity, it is easy to understand why so many politically active women are inclined toward opposition to the regime in power, regardless of how well-intentioned toward women that regime may be."

102) Al-Wajh, p. 128.

103) Mernissi, Beyond the veil, p. 129.

104) Al-Wajh, p. 130.

105) Ibid., p. 130.

106) Ibid., p. 136. Sa'dawi believes it would be much more difficult for a capitalist society to liberate women because it regards them as a losing cause, and that to provide them with the facilities which would enable them to work would reduce their profitability (p. 30). Elsewhere, she argues somewhat sardonically, that when capitalism liberates women from divorce laws, for example, it is only to avail itself of their labour. Is it perhaps evidence of Sa'dawi's anti-capitalist prejudice which blinds her to the fact that socialism is even more in need of women's labour and that this may be behind its apparent provision of greater freedoms for women? (p. 156)

107) Al-Wajh, p. 136.

- 108) Ibid., p. 190. Perhaps the Chinese have come close to solving this problem by having special days allocated for cleaning and housework in which the whole family shares the tasks, thus preventing it from being carried out in isolation, or delegated to a stigmatized section of workers.
- 109) Al-Wajh, p. 135.
- 110) Ibid., p. 142.
- 111) Ibid., p. 143.
- 112) Ful beans provide a high protein content, they are almost the national dish of Egyptians.
- 113) Al-Wajh, p. 142.
- 114) Ibid., p. 144.
- 115) Ibid., p. 144.
- 116) Ibid., p. 20.
- 117) Ibid., p. 148.
- 118) Ibid., p. 145.

119) Ibid., p. 145.

120) Ibid., p. 216.

121) Ibid., p. 159.

122) Ibid., p. 201.

123) Ibid., p. 160.

124) See the book based on the series, Lovewlaw, pp. 141-144, 153. This series set out to explore how people from different cultures responded to falling in love, choosing a partner, marriage and divorce. Insight into the workings of the divorce law in Egypt is given by Dr Afaf Mahfouz, an Egyptian lawyer, and former cultural attache at the Egyptian Embassy in Washington whose own dramatic divorce is also mentioned here. (p. 141)

"Dr Mahfouz explains that there are three ways to obtain a divorce in Egypt. The first involves going to court. In most instances, it is the wife who chooses this option for reasons that will become obvious. Before the court, she argues her petition on the basis of a specified breach of the marital contract. In practice, few women seek a divorce in Egypt, even if unhappily married, for the simple reason that the low economic status of most Egyptian women makes it difficult for a divorcee to survive. The judges are always men and they are known to be prejudiced against women who petition for divorce. The second way to obtain a divorce is for the husband to exercise his right under Egyptian and Islamic law and divorce her without her consent. The husband goes before a divorce registrar (mazun) and simply registers his divorce before two witnesses while promising the mazun that he, and the registrar, will

notify the wife. No reasons have to be provided although the mazun is supposed to try to persuade the husband to consider possible attempts at reconciliation. But if the husband insists... the divorce is granted. The third process of divorce involves the mutual consent of both parties. Husband and wife go before the mazun to express their desire to separate and register their divorce.

The second option is the commonest..."

An actual example is included of how the divorce might proceed:

(p. 144)

"Lovelaw filmed a divorce application in a Cairo court. It concerned an old lady who was seeking the court's assistance in her efforts to persuade her ex-husband to pay her alimony. After forty-five years of marriage he had left her for another woman and was now paying her nothing. The old lady revealed that she was fifteen years old when she married and that she had known no other men,

'I stayed married for twenty years and gave birth to four children. His family hated him and boycotted him. I mean they isolated us. I, therefore, sold my jewellery and fixed him a job in a factory. The marriage lasted forty-five years... I sold my property and supported him and he climbed over my head. Later when he got a pay rise from the factory, he went and got married to another woman and she gave birth to a child. Then he sent me the divorce paper. I never saw the person who ratified the divorce. I never attended anything. I looked and there was the postman telling me, "Take this, it's a letter." I open the letter. I find it is a divorce.'

The old woman's lawyer explained that in Egypt the wife can claim alimony but the precise amount is based on the circumstances of the case. She had already obtained a judgement whereby her former husband had to pay her a sum of five hundred Egyptian pounds in a lump sum but he promptly appealed on the basis that he was a poor man and owned nothing. The lawyer insisted that he was a rich man who owned two properties but had arranged to have the properties registered in his second wife's name so that he could appear in court as impoverished. The case had already lasted a year and seemed certain to last at least a further six months. Meanwhile the old woman remained penniless and was losing hope."

For a woman to sue for divorce can be a humiliating experience. She has either to prove that her husband has failed to provide for her financially, or that he has failed to fulfil his sexual duties.

"The wife who is materially provided for but whose husband is physically abusing her or is promiscuous can only argue sexual failure as grounds for divorce. She has to show that they did not make love for a certain period of time and there are different interpretations of what constitutes an appropriately frustrating period of abstinence. Seeking a divorce on such grounds is shameful for most Egyptian women who have to provide evidence of a highly intimate kind for a judiciary which is entirely male."

125) Al-Wajh, p. 154.

126) Ibid., p. 155.

127) Ibid., p. 157.

128) Ibid., p. 157.

129) Minces helps us to see the situation of the modern educated career woman within the total framework of women in Egypt and the Arab world, and helps us to keep a sense of proportion in relation to Sa'dawi's discussion of modernization through legislation and education. (House of obedience, p. 107)

"The modernization has mainly affected those few women in the towns who have had access to genuine education and information, in other words those who belong to the so-called privileged classes. These

women know the rights they have recently acquired and have been able to exercise them. But they still constitute only a tiny minority, a sort of display window that hides the misery of the rest, with whom they have little contact. The privileged few can lead a satisfying personal life and engage in the complete range of professional activities, but most women are still subject to the full weight of the tradition. Their lack of knowledge about the outside world, and the difficulty they have in imagining a different status and different social relations mean that they hardly ever struggle to improve their lot. They still accept the heavy burden imposed upon them by tradition. By the generally established norms of human rights, they are the most oppressed women in the Third World."

130) Al-Wajh, p. 160.

131) *Ibid.*, p. 161.

132) *Ibid.*, p. 163.

133) *Ibid.*, p. 163.

134) *Ibid.*, p. 164.

135) *Ibid.*, p. 73.

136) *Ibid.*, p. 164.

137) *Ibid.*, p. 178.

138) *Ibid.*, p. 190.

139) *Ibid.*, p. 167.



140) Ibid., p. 167.

141) Ibid., p. 165.

142) Ibid., p. 164.

It is necessary to spend some time examining The Hidden Face of Eve which was published in English in 1980 with the Western reader in mind. A large proportion of this work contains material directly taken from Al-Wajh. There are sections too from Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins and Al-Rajul wa'l-Jins. The Hidden Face of Eve was translated and edited by Sherif Hetata. Taken as a whole, (which includes a special preface) the tone of this work is noticeably more political and strident than any of Sa'dawi's unaided works. With the close collaboration of husband and wife over this work, one can take it for granted that the sentiments expressed are Sa'dawi's own. The emendations, though, very often betoken a greater maturity of expression and political understanding, or make the point more forcibly than the Arabic. For example, in Al-Wajh, Sa'dawi says:

"It is money which imposes morals.. and yet it is assumed in religion and in Islam, that morals are based on human values rather than money."<sup>1</sup>

The hasty generalization of the Arabic is tempered in the English version: (words underlined denote those edited into HFE)

"Money is therefore the foundation of morals, or at least of the morals prevalent where property, exploitation and inheritance are the essence of the economic system. Yet in religion it is assumed that true morals are dependent rather on human values."<sup>2</sup>

On the subject of women in the National Assembly, a new dimension is added to Sa'dawi's analysis of their reluctance to stand up for women's issues:

"Moreover, some of the women leaders who have become members of the people's assembly.. have assiduously kept away from discussions and activities related to these laws. They thereby sought either to avoid the accusation of being narrow-minded and giving their attention to limited 'women's problems' or did not have the courage to face the orthodox religious and reactionary forces strongly entrenched in many sections of society."<sup>3</sup>

As a supplement to Sa'dawi's criticism of Aqqad, we find the stinging psychological comment:

"Sadism and masochism are two faces of the same coin, and therefore it is not surprising to find substantial doses of both in Akkad's writings and poetry. However, he attempted to exaggerate the sadistic and aggressive aspects of his attitude towards women, probably as a compensatory mechanism born of a secret inferiority complex and as a tendency more in keeping with the outer form of an inflated, yet hollow masculinity."<sup>4</sup>

The aim of the preface to HFE seems to be to convince the Western reader that it is his government which is to blame for the internal weaknesses of Egypt and various other Islamic states, one manifestation of which is the deplorable situation of women. The tone is far more radical and full of socialist rhetoric than anything Sa'dawi has written in Arabic. It has probably contributed a great deal to the Western impression of Sa'dawi as a 'militant feminist', a label which

she personally rejects. The following few quotations should suffice to illustrate that:

"Imperialism continues to fight back viciously and often effectively in defence of its interests in the Islamic and Arab world. In this conflict any and all weapons can be used to contain the rising movement of peoples fighting for their rights.

Among these weapons is the use of religion, the 'sword and the words of Islam'. Any ambiguity in Islamic teachings, any mistake by an Islamic leader, any misinterpretation of Islamic principles, any reactionary measure or policy by Islamic rulers can be grist to the mill of imperialist conspiracy, can be inspired by CIA provocations, can be blown up and emphasized by Western propaganda, and can be manipulated or born of intent in order to be used in fighting back against the forces of progress."<sup>5</sup>

"The essence of American policy in this regard is to strengthen the reactionary, obscurantist and fanatical wings of Islam, and to divide, weaken and distort those movements that mobilize the masses in the Arab world to take an anti-imperialist, anti-feudalist or a socialist position."<sup>6</sup>

"The present Sadat regime in Egypt did everything in its power to help in the revival and strengthening of conservative Islamic movements since 1970, in order that they might be used against progressive and socialist tendencies within the country."<sup>7</sup>

"It is necessary to understand that the most important struggle that faces women in Arab Islamic countries is not that of 'free thought' versus 'belief in religion', nor 'feminist rights' (as understood sometimes in the West) in opposition to 'male chauvinism', nor does it aim at some of the superficial aspects of modernization characteristic of the developed world and the affluent society. In its essence, the struggle which is now being fought seeks to ensure that the Arab peoples take possession of their economic potential and resources, and of their scientific and cultural heritage so that they can develop whatever they have to the

maximum and rid themselves once and for all of the control and domination exercised by foreign capitalist interests. They seek to build a free society with equal rights for all and to abolish the injustices and oppression of systems based on class and patriarchal privilege." 8

and finally,

"Our past experience has always shown that any strengthening of the links that bind the Arab peoples to Western interests inevitably leads to a retreat in all spheres of thought and action." 9

\* \* \*

References to The Hidden Face of Eve

- 1) Al-Wajh, p. 65.
- 2) HFE, p. 143.
- 3) Ibid., p. 181.
- 4) Ibid., p. 169.
- 5) Ibid., p. v.
- 6) Ibid., p. vi.
- 7) Ibid., p. vii.
- 8) Ibid., p. ix.
- 9) Ibid., p. x.

## CHAPTER 5

### SA'DAWI'S SHORT STORIES

Sa'dawi's short stories have been left until this juncture for discussion because in spite of their priority in terms of being her first published works, their content very definitely relegates them to a position of secondary importance when her whole output and its impact on Egyptian society is taken into account. To have begun this work with an analysis of these early efforts with all their naivety and technical imperfections would have been to mislead the reader over the far greater achievements of Sa'dawi as a writer in the sociological field. Before discussing the short stories it is worth remembering that the short story genre was originally a Western importation for the Arabic reading public. Although prose narratives can be found in Arabic literature, the short story in the sense of the unfolding of a psychological predicament within an individual has never been part of the classical Arabic heritage.

The short story has, since the 1940s, enjoyed considerable popularity amongst budding and established writers in Egypt, probably aided by the ease of finding an outlet for circulation of individual stories in the newspapers and journals. Many of Sa'dawi's early stories appeared in the magazine Rose al-Yusuf. Sa'dawi's stories will be seen to cover a broad range of subjects in a wide range of styles: the one

thing which they share is their peculiar Egyptian character. One could not envisage them as having been written by anyone other than an Egyptian about and for Egyptians (and one is frequently conscious of it being an Egyptian woman). It is worth examining these stories in detail for what they reveal about Egyptian psychology.

\* \* \*

1. TA'ALLAMTU'L-HUBB

Sa'dawi's first published volume was a collection of short stories entitled Ta'allamtu'l-Ḥubb (I learned love) (1961). The book contains fifteen stories of, on average, seven pages each. It is worth looking closely at the stories of this unsophisticated volume to see to what extent they bear any traces of the themes for which Sa'dawi has become renowned. I shall briefly consider these early stories from the aspects of setting, characterization, language, technique and tone.

The setting is clearly Egyptian daily life, whether it is the dirt road and maize fields of the countryside described in the title story, the stifling atmosphere of the college campus in "La'allahu'l-Ḥubb" (Perhaps it was love), the restrictive home life in "Nisyān" (Oblivion) or the doctor's surgery crowded with T.B. patients. One can detect a definite preference for the countryside and its people, in the title story:



"I breathed calmly feeling all the cares of the world slipping away from me gradually with my gentle breaths.. and Cairo.. with its noise and hubbub, with its lifeless citizens like machines or statues.. vanishing from my thoughts, and the huge hospital where I'd worked there fading from my memory. Even my love, the one I'd left behind in Cairo, had now become as nothing in the vastness of that powerful calm which engulfed me.."<sup>1</sup>

Elsewhere she describes Cairo as:

".. that overwhelming, clamorous city, lying upon the ground, above it a thin black cloak, like a penniless beggar spending the night on the pavement; wretched, weak and unconscious."<sup>2</sup>

Characterization is straightforward. Here are the first pictures of some of those male types which Sa'dawi was to explore more fully in her later works: there is the simple, devoted, hard-working Amm Mahmud, an embodiment of the noble Egyptian peasant; the shallow, promiscuous intellectual or clever young man who lures women to his bachelor flat, in "Shay' Jadīd" (Something new); the depressed gambling addict who drifts in life, in "Al-Muqāmīr" (The gambler); there is the male chauvinist attracted to a strong woman, who loses his self-confidence in the face of her direct gaze, in "Du'f" (Weakness), there is also a picture of that rare mature man, in "Al-Mādī" (The past), who follows his heart rather than trying to live up to the expected social standards. One doctor, in "Hādhihi al-Marra" (This time) is pictured as having a comfortable lifestyle; he can afford to seduce young nurses and cast them aside, while another is too overworked in a depressing hospital environment even to stay awake to meet his girlfriend, in "Shay' Ākhar" (Another thing).

Among the range of female characters one finds: the forceful, intelligent, positive, single woman, Sa'dawi's 'real' woman, who knocks men off balance: these latter either wither internally on encountering such a female, or develop an aggressive instinct to dominate and intimidate her.<sup>3</sup> There is the young girl who is tempted to go on a date or become involved with a young man and the dilemmas which she faces as a result. She has far more to lose than he.<sup>4</sup> As for the young woman who does become involved with a man, she may lose her illusions of love and exploit her femininity in the search for excitement, or develop a tolerance and certain sympathy for men, like the prostitute in "Taḥt al-Milā'a" (Under the sheet). There is also the wife who rebels against her situation, resenting having been deprived of education and married off against her will and then subjected to her husband's domination, as in "Zaujī Lā Uḥibbuk" (I don't love you, my husband). It is interesting to see how these basic character types are used by the author to give a suggestion of her own attitudes to life. It is only a suggestion here in this first volume: Sa'dawi is not yet speaking as a feminist or socialist nor as one whose thought and judgement are coloured by reading the political or psychological theories of others. Nevertheless, the essence of her later work can be traced to the impulse behind these earliest attempts.

One refreshing aspect of these stories is their lack of moralizing and dogmatism which becomes a feature of Sa'dawi's later style. This is, however, at the expense of that dramatic intensity and heavy irony for which she is also known. One can detect her gently poking fun at the promiscuous batchelor who feels so confident about seducing women

in his luxurious flat, that he even calculates where to put a statuette of a naked woman so that it will have the maximum stimulating effect on his lady friends.<sup>5</sup> Yet elsewhere, she treats the man's lack of confidence in the face of a mature woman, with understanding, not scorn, as long as he realizes that his harshness is a defence mechanism to hide his weakness:

"Don't be shocked Su'ad.. you were always accusing me of being severe with you, but my harshness was only a cover-up of my weakness before you."<sup>6</sup>

This shows Sa'dawi becoming aware of the false values of masculinity and femininity as they prevailed in her society, which can have such destructive effects on those who fail to live up to them. It shows too, one problem facing the strong, direct woman, that of finding a mature mate capable of returning her love. Here is the man speaking:

"If only you were weaker and less strong, then I could be your powerful other side.. I imagine what it would be like living with you: my feelings of incapacity would be increased and confirmed day after day.. and the more you dedicated yourself wholeheartedly to loving me, and the more you gave me what you had, the more I would feel that your resources were richer than mine and your soul deeper than mine."<sup>7</sup>

The strong, active woman who takes the initiative is Sa'dawi's favourite, and quite clearly a reflection of herself. Such a woman is always characterized by a piercing gaze which unnerves men.<sup>8</sup>

Sa'dawi is not a man-hater, a charge frequently made against any woman who sincerely supports women's rights, though she finds much to condemn in the traditional chauvinist Egyptian male. There is definite approval for the emotionally mature man who can overcome social barriers to his love and trust his own feelings. In the story "Al-Māḍī", the man has finally married his beloved after ten years of waiting, during which time she had been married, had a child and divorced. His mother is appalled at the prospect of his marriage to such a woman and exclaims:

"There are lots of girls, my son.. why on earth do you want to take one who has already been married before? Marrying her would be like eating stale food!"<sup>9</sup>

The author's optimistic picture of masculine maturity in her society is a rare one and only to be found in her youthful works.

In these stories women are not shown particularly as victims, even Nafisa has gained materially from her short love affair with Dr Rashid before being cast aside (in *Hādhihi al-Marra*). Nevertheless, Sa'dawi does outline two pictures of women who have been trapped by the social system; the young girl in "Lastu Anā" (I'm not myself), and the wife in "Zaujī..". Sa'dawi touches on that tragic theme which runs through the lives of so many Egyptian women, that of being deprived of education. A typical reason for this is that the girl has been married off by relatives against her will "like a beast to the slaughterer".<sup>10</sup> The bitter resentment felt by the intelligent wife who has been so deprived, is no basis on which to found a happy marriage, Sa'dawi asserts.

Another reason, especially in the case of the eldest daughter, is because she has to take care of the family in the event of her mother's death.

"There was another catastrophe for me as bad as the death of my mother. I loved school in spite of the matron. I felt it was the only opening in my life through which I could poke my head and look out on the world and breathe the scent of life.. but I had to stay at home against my will to bring up my brothers and sisters, preparing their food and washing their clothes, being patient with their problems and having to put up with harsh treatment from my conceited elder brother who would practise flexing his manhood on me. He used to force quite ridiculous rules on me which I knew he'd been taught at the religious group.. and I was only nineteen at the time."<sup>11</sup>

(It is interesting to note Sa'dawi's early criticism of the young religious fanatic, with this passing reference.)

The unusual conversation between the man and woman in "Lan Akūn Rakhīṣa" (I won't be cheap) involves his trying to persuade her into a sexual relationship as the confirmation of their love, and her trying to dissuade him by insisting that the mental and spiritual dimension of love should be the touchstone. It is probably the nearest example one finds in Sa'dawi's work of an intellectual argument between a couple. Any portrayal of a direct and developing communication between two people is strikingly absent from her works, an absence which itself leads one to speculate on what manner of communication actually exists in Egyptian educated circles. It is perhaps ironic here that this long duologue is aimed at illustrating the typical lack of understanding

between men and women. They argue at cross purposes; the lustful man here, with everything to gain, and the inhibited girl, with everything to lose.

In "Aḥlām" (Dreams) Sa'dawi tries to show how the psychological conflict in the mind of a young girl can only come to the surface to find expression in the form of a dream. The girl suffers mentally from wanting a relationship with a man but at the same time having to struggle against the social customs which prevent her from exercising her sexuality. In her nightmare, her subconscious enacts the whole catastrophe of an unwanted pregnancy resulting from a first sexual encounter. Her dilemma is exacerbated by the social taboos on sexuality which are derived from religion, which she has been brought up to fear. Paradoxically it is to God that she prays for hope of deliverance from her situation.

It seems clear from these examples that Sa'dawi was beginning to feel strongly about the disadvantages suffered by many of her countrywomen as a result of the society in which they lived. Sa'dawi does not adopt a moralizing stance towards sexual subjects here: neither the promiscuous man nor woman is condemned, nor is extra-marital activity. Sexuality is taken for granted by the author as a part of life, but one which leads usually to unhappiness, simply because of the obstacles erected by Egyptians themselves in the way of its healthy fulfilment. It is quite possible that sexual morals were more relaxed in Egypt among the middle classes in the early 1960s when Sa'dawi was writing, than they are today. In his survey, conducted in 1986, on social

patterns of love and marriage in various parts of the world, Anthony Clare noted:

"The freedom which many middle-class Egyptians enjoyed and which permitted them to experiment sexually over the past decade shows signs of being constrained. Yes, there is infidelity in the Egyptian middle classes, concedes psychologist Dr Muhammad Sha'alan, but much less of it than a few years ago and it is strongly disapproved of."<sup>13</sup>

As far as language is concerned, Sa'dawi adopts a simple style. Her prose is more journalistic than classical Arabic. Most conversations are in colloquial with dialect words adding an Egyptian flavour. This use of colloquial gives a natural rhythm to the speech of the lower-class characters, while it is used to good effect in conveying the sardonic humour for which Egyptians are renowned. The overworked doctor meets his succession of wretched patients in a claustrophobically small room which is filled with T.B. germs. When one of them coughs directly in his face, he exclaims, "For heaven's sake man, couldn't you find anywhere else to cough except in my face!"<sup>14</sup>

Sa'dawi seems to have struggled with technique right from the start. Few of her stories are artistically satisfying from this point of view. It is the other aspects of her work, like humour, poignancy, insight into Egyptian life, her original ideas, intensity and sincerity, which are usually more than enough compensation for stylistic defects. What gives a story its value is not its technical maturity but its potential for impinging on the minds of its readers, in this case those Egyptians for whom it was intended, and altering their perception of life. This

being so, it is all the more exciting when one discovers the occasional instance where form and subject blend successfully, for example in "Hādhihi al-Marra". Nafisa, a young nurse, is seduced by Dr Rashid. Three months later when their affair is over, she feels deflated. Having developed a taste for a comfortable lifestyle and excitement, she becomes even more depressed by her own miserable accommodation and realizes that she has been spoilt for marriage with any of the local lads who could never boast the suavity of Rashid. She looks enviously at the laughing couples in cars going past the bus stop on their evening dates and decides to pursue this style of life for herself, but 'this time' with eyes wide open to the reality of love affairs. She has lost her romantic illusions about love. After a pause in the story, marked by asterisks, the scene shows a new nurse, just as naive as Nafisa had previously been, waiting at the same bus stop, watching the cars pass. In one of these cars is Nafisa, sitting beside a young man, apparently having a good time on her date. It is, Sa'dawi suggests, a symptom of their times; a scene that is likely to be repeated over and over again. The effectiveness of the ending here is chiefly captured by harking back to the story's beginning, only a new layer of understanding has been added to the reader's awareness. Sa'dawi frequently attempts to use this as a way to round off her stories: she will try to echo a scene or theme at intervals or at start and finish, to contain within it the development of her story. When she captures the essence of the story in a new final twist, as in "Hādhihi al-Marra", it is pleasing indeed, otherwise, endings pose problems for Sa'dawi.

Perhaps the most obvious weaknesses of Sa'dawi's style are due to her trying to express too much within the short space she allows for



each story. By attempting to capture such complex psychological states as in "Shay' Jadīd" and "Ḍu'f", within a few pages, means that only the barest outlines of the problem can be touched on in what seems like a rapidly condensed fashion. The ideas and emotions with which she is concerned demand more space for explanation. In "Zaujī.." the wife is trying to describe eight years of a wretched marriage; the reader wants to know more than is conveyed by the often banal, general statements. The build up of suspense in "Al-Muqāmīr" seems to demand a dramatic resolution, but Sa'dawi does not sustain the tension: the story peters out in an unsatisfying anti-climax, the gambler has tentatively admitted his need for friendship, but one feels that the really interesting part is yet to come, and left unsaid.

One typical trait of Sa'dawi's stories is the appearance of a flow of energy in the final sentences, which mark a new beginning, the resolution of a problem or triumph over a difficulty. <sup>15</sup> The answers always come to her characters from deep inside them, it is their subconscious reaction to their circumstance and quite often a renewed contact with their real selves.

The story "Ahlām" is weak on several counts: its events are too ordered and realistic to be the product of deep psychological conflicts; they are not bizarre enough to be a real dream. Despite the title, the reader is carried along gasping until the girl seems set to commit suicide because of her fears at being an unmarried mother. When we are told that she wakes from her nightmare, our heightened concern is rapidly deflated. When such a promising story could have resulted from these

events if placed in a realistic setting, what, we may wonder, prevented Sa'dawi from tackling this subject?

The most satisfying of all the stories here is the title story. Here Sa'dawi herself is talking as the new doctor who has left the capital behind with all its hubbub, the big hospitals and even her beloved, to work in the countryside. At first, she finds it difficult to identify with, that is to love, the poor ignorant peasants, but easily becomes concerned for the welfare of the appealing Amm Mahmud, who helps organize her clinic, when he falls ill. By extension, she suddenly sees the other villagers as linked to him in their need for attention and compassion and finds that having 'learned' to love one of them, she can now love them all. The largely autobiographical nature of this story overflows with sincerity; it is this, allied to the simplicity of story which produces a more coherent effect.

The final story "Kullunā Ḥayārā" (We are all confused) is likewise effective, but to a lesser extent than "Ta'allamtu'l-Ḥubb". It too is narrated by a woman doctor, and again one would conjecture, Sa'dawi herself. It deals with a struggle that the author has faced in her own life, that between the different vocations of creative writing and medicine.

"I knew after a lot of thought that my interest in medicine, sickness and pain was a false one, not genuine, and I recalled my former passion for literature, acting, and singing.. and realized for sure that I had been mistaken when I had chosen medicine. I should have been an artist, poet or writer..

So I smiled, then laughed. What had I to lose?  
I gripped my pen and wrote a story, then two  
stories, then three.. and I found that writing  
was more enjoyable than just thinking and contem-  
plating, more rewarding than examining the sick,  
for writing allowed me to portray life and death,  
joy and sorrow, happiness and pain..<sup>16</sup>

The doctor here manages to reconcile the two just as Sa'dawi herself  
was doing at the time she wrote these stories.

If we turn our attention to Sa'dawi's tone, we will see that  
humanitarian concern is the underlying emotion in her work right from  
the beginning. Although she depicts here mostly middle-class characters,  
her pity for the poverty and sickness of the peasants is noticeable, as  
is her feeling for those who have been disadvantaged in some way.<sup>17</sup>  
There is also the theme of love in its various forms running through  
this volume. One might say that Sa'dawi was trying to explore the ways  
in which people find love, or at any rate, strive for it, in her society.  
For some, the class barrier is insurmountable; others may have to give  
up their illusions about love or their emotions in return for superficial  
sexual relationships which at least afford some excitement and contact  
with the opposite sex; others are forced into love, like the wife in  
"Zaujī.."; others may be too inhibited psychologically, or too much  
dominated by the pressure of having to live up to society's stereotypes  
of masculinity and femininity, to be able to respond in a healthy way,  
and others may be too drained by their work to have any energy left  
for their own needs. Only two characters seem to have found love and  
they are shown as having overcome certain difficulties: the man in  
"Al-Mādī" has reasoned himself out of jealousy for his new wife's former

husband, and the doctor in "Ta'allamtu'l-Ḥubb" has had her eyes opened to the humanity of the peasants and learned to overcome any barriers of class which separated them.

In general, Sa'dawi's tone here could perhaps be classed as one of subdued optimism. There is not much in the way of exuberance to match the young girl's outburst:

"How beautiful a thing to have a free heart and how enjoyable to have a free, unrestricted life without any chains or fetters."<sup>18</sup>

It is important to keep in mind that the love with which Sa'dawi is so preoccupied here is not just romantic or physical, but rather a total heart, mind and body response to those with whom one is involved, whether it is the doctor in "Ta'allamtu'l-Ḥubb" or the man in "Al-Māḍī". It has a lot to do with tolerance, understanding and selflessness, as she explains in the dedication.

Perhaps one of the most touching sentiments to be found in all her writing occurs appropriately enough, in the dedication to this her first published work:

"To everyone who sees with each new morning that rises upon the world a fresh opportunity to love and be compassionate, I dedicate this book."<sup>19</sup>

It is this apparent sincerity which gives the Egyptian reader emotional satisfaction, and makes Sa'dawi's work compulsive reading.

It is interesting to observe several ideas raised in this volume, which the author is to explore as major themes in her non-fiction, for example, the link between the position of the wife in marriage, and that of the prostitute. Here is the wife writing to her husband in "Zaujī..":

".. what is respectability? Is it that the woman sells herself to the man in return for the marriage certificate and three meals a day? And what is the difference between her and what you refer to as a 'fallen' woman? They both sell themselves.. only the price is different."<sup>20</sup>

There is also the realization that moral principles can be flexible. The author remarks, for example, that after the nurse has been rejected by the doctor, she reassesses her position with regard to men and 'love'.

er new way of thinking  
"Thus she developed stretch a long way."<sup>21</sup>inciples and virtue became, in her new way of thinking, something elastic that could stretch a long way."<sup>21</sup>

There is too, the awareness that society is biased in men's favour (again from the wife's letter):

"I imagine you now, my friend, overcome by anger, your small, soft feet shaking with irritation, saying to yourself, 'But she owns nothing.. not even her freedom. Everything is in my hands. I'm the man!' I know that. I know that the law is on your side and the people back you up just because you're the man."<sup>22</sup>

Sa'dawi is not showing herself here aware of the conflicts between Western and Eastern lifestyles, the problems raised by imperialism, nor

the stresses between tradition and modernity which are common themes in Third World writers. Nor is Sa'dawi writing from a socialist stance, nor yet as a feminist. She refrains from suggesting answers to problems or even posing problems with clarity. Her characters are not even aware of having an alternative to consider; they react unconsciously to their limited situation. This gives the reader various sketches conveying an impression of the psychological climate in Egypt.

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References to Ta'allamtu'l-Hubb

- 1) Ta'allamtu'l-Hubb, p. 15.
- 2) Ibid., p. 38.
- 3) Ibid., p. 68.
- 4) See "Nisyān" and "Lan Akūn Rakhīṣa".
- 5) Ta'allamtu'l-Hubb, p. 27.
- 6) Ibid., p. 69.
- 7) Ibid., p. 70.
- 8) Ibid., pp. 29, 73.
- 9) Ibid., p. 74. The comparison of a divorced woman to stale food is proverbial.
- 10) Ta'allamtu'l-Hubb, p. 102.
- 11) Ibid., pp. 98-9.
- 12) Ibid., p. 91.

- 13) Anthony Clare, Lovelaw: love, sex & marriage around the world, BBC Publications, London, 1986, p. 124.
- 14) Ta'allamtu'l-Ḥubb, p. 62.
- 15) See for example, "Taḥt al-Milā'a", "Shay' Jadīd", "Al-Muqāmir" and "Ta'allamtu'l-Ḥubb".
- 16) Ta'allamtu'l-Ḥubb, p. 108.
- 17) For example, the students in "La'allahu'l-Ḥubb".
- 18) Ta'allamtu'l-Ḥubb, p. 39.
- 19) Ibid., p. 5.
- 20) Ibid., p. 104.
- 21) Ibid., p. 44.
- 22) Ibid., p. 105.



Hanān Qalīl (A little affection), Sa'dawi's second volume of short stories, was first published in Cairo in 1962. Sa'dawi's themes here are unquestionably more ambitious than in the previous volume and we see the first evidence of her feminist concern. This collection of seventeen stories deals more with the moral questions raised by her society as they affect the lives of individuals. There is more awareness too of the injustices of society: two stories each involve a young woman from a poor peasant background having to migrate to the city to earn a living in order to support relatives back home. Both these stories, "Ḥanān Qalīl" and "Sausan" (Susan), also centre on children, which highlights another of Sa'dawi's concerns: the problems suffered by children is a recurring theme in Sa'dawi's later works, fiction and non-fiction.

We see here that Sa'dawi is writing very much in the style of the short story as it evolved during the 1940s-50s under the pens of Egyptian writers; there is that concern for social issues, that pathos which is very reminiscent of Chekov and the Russian story, and that sentimentality which is intrinsic to the Egyptian character. There is also that didactic moralizing tone which is an essential part of the author's justification for writing fiction in the face of discouragement from those ultra-conservative religious sectors which have always decreed that fiction is at best irrelevant, at worst corrupting, for the

faithful Muslim, who is expected to find all his literary needs met in the religious heritage.

"Ḥanān Qalīl" relates the experience of a ten-year old girl, Bahiya, who leaves her mother and baby sister behind in the village, to work as a nanny for a rich woman in the city. Bahiya's mother has reluctantly had to send her away to earn a living, this being the only hope left for the survival of the family. Sa'dawi shows her talent for capturing the tragedy of Egyptian life, even if it is frequently tinged with sentimentality, when she describes how Bahiya lost her father, her hunger, her sad farewell to her family, her confusion and fear in the new household, her simple need to find someone to love, and her undeserved punishment by her mistress. The girl transfers her love for her sister to the mistress's baby. She cuddles and kisses it with a little display of tenderness. For this, she is scolded by her mistress and slapped in the face. Bahiya unconsciously transfers her new emotion of hatred for her mistress to the child, wondering:

'Was this to be her reward? She had done nothing. She hadn't done anything wrong. She hadn't broken a cup or plate.. she'd only kissed the little child, that was all, and only because she loved her and felt tender towards her. Was this the reward for showing love and affection?"<sup>1</sup>

There are vivid pictures contrasting the extreme differences between the girl's home background and new life: the harsh mistress who lives in a luxurious apartment, has a fat breast full of milk to feed her spoilt child; Bahiya's mother has only a skinny empty one, to feed her baby. The mistress's child is pampered, clean and deprived of

affection, while Bahiya's sister is dirty and hungry, but loved. Striking contrasts of images are a typical feature of Sa'dawi's writing. Bahiya is so wretched and out of her element in the city, that she runs away, back home to her mother and a joyful reunion.

Another story which deals with the expression of the maternal instinct is "Sausan".\* Susan is a four-year old who desperately misses her mother whenever the latter goes out on a date with her boyfriend. This story focuses on the dilemma which Susan's mother, as a single parent, faces: how to balance her own need for love with that of her daughter's. At first, she spends much time away from home while Susan's nanny, Dada, herself a mother, tries to pacify the girl with excuses. Dada, has had to leave her own daughter behind in the village to be cared for by her invalid husband. This separation only strengthens her maternal bonds and makes her very critical of Susan's mother for leaving her daughter. Dada eventually takes Susan to see where her mother is staying, and the girl takes an instant dislike to the man. Susan's mother is forced to see the effect of her behaviour on her daughter and to sort out her priorities. She decides, in a scene of great anguish, that she has wronged her daughter and must give up her lover. The poignancy of the women's problems, one deprived of her daughter, the other choosing to desert hers, results from the inequalities of the social system. Sa'dawi shows herself understanding of both positions, but comes down in greater sympathy for Dada whom she uses to teach Susan's mother the 'meaning' of motherhood.

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\* I prefer to anglicize this name for ease of reading.

This type of subject matter derives from a woman's pen. One noticeable aspect of Sa'dawi's work is the way in which she will tackle an embarrassing problem from an unexpected viewpoint. In 'Laysat 'Adhrā'' (She isn't a virgin) Sa'dawi considers the delicate subject of incest, its repercussions on the girl, her future husband, her neighbourhood and on the man who committed it. The novelty of her approach here is that she sees it all through the eyes of the man, Al-Hajj Badawi. He knows it is all his own fault and, because he is particularly sensitive, he suffers in various ways. Sa'dawi deals with his difficulties with such understanding that the reader ends up far more sympathetic to the man, the perpetrator of the crime, than to the victim, Sa'diya, his niece.

Ten years of marriage to an ugly, unresponsive wife, has made Al-Hajj desperate for a physical relationship, and the beautiful child, Sa'diya, is a constant feast to his eyes. After deflowering her, he is sufficiently remorseful to rush to the market to buy her some sweets. The event occurred once only. It must be said that Sa'dawi treats this subject delicately; nothing is explicitly described which could cause the slightest offence. The unimaginative reader could even fail to grasp what has happened. As Sa'diya's nearest male relative, Al-Hajj is responsible for arranging her marriage. He finds an apparently naive young man, whom he hopes will not notice that the girl is not a virgin, but the new husband proves not to be so dim. There is a scandal and Sa'diya's dowry is returned. Al-Hajj unable to hold his head up in the street for shame, feels under pressure from the custom which

dictates that the 'dishonour' Sa'diya has caused him must be avenged by her death.

Another story adopting the male point of view is "Sūsū al-Coiffeur" (Susu the hairdresser), which is essentially a description of sexual harrassment as suffered by a man. Susu is a hairdresser who, dressed in flowery shirts, titivates his female customers' hair, at the same time supplying them with the only male touch that is socially acceptable outside the bounds of marriage. He possesses, however, a strong leonine sense of his masculinity and the time duly comes when he feels that it has been slighted; he has been taken advantage of by his customers and their husbands. He closes his salon and a few days later it is opened as a butcher's shop. It is left ambiguous as to whether Susu has become the new proprietor. This story is successful from the aspects of style and form, its images are colourful and not without a tragi-comic flavour. It also suggests an additional importance to the hairdressing salon in the life of an Egyptian woman.

The majority of stories in this volume deal with extra-marital affairs and the problems of male-female relationships in Egyptian society. In "Karāma" (Dignity) a young woman rises to find new strength and self-respect after she has been rejected by her lover. When she meets him again two years later it is obvious that she has grown psychologically from her suffering and developed more than he, during that time, even though she has not fully recovered from the initial shock of reading about his marriage in the newspaper.

"Al-Ṭarīq" (The road) shows that persistent type of suitor who will use all his guile to persuade the woman into marriage. No argument is too hackneyed or insubstantial to be excluded. The woman here argues from a more realistic position, revealing that she is well aware of her own needs and emotions, the pitfalls of marriage, and the nonsense of his arguments. The setting here is a nightclub beside the Nile, the usual venue for a romantic encounter.

"Al-Shay' al-Ṣa'b" (The difficult thing) shows a woman overcoming her understandable reservations about loving a married man. She suggests that they separate, but neither can bear it. She feels a definite antagonism between her mind and emotions: her reason tells her not to get further involved with him, while her feelings tell her that she needs to enjoy his love. The story ends with her realizing that he does not experience the same conflict; his strength of purpose apparently comes from the harmony between his heart and mind. She decides to let him, as her acknowledged superior, teach her about love. The reader may wonder whether it is really because he is so well integrated emotionally, or whether it is just that socially he is in a stronger position, that he can allow himself to have an affair, propose to his new love and ignore any responsibilities to his wife?

"Wa Māta al-Ḥubb" (And so love died) begins with a woman's grief at her father's death. Although it numbs her senses, the tragedy puts a new perspective on her relationships and forces her to take a more positive attitude to her emotional life. Several truths can be detected in this story which are valid for all cultures. Here is the

woman emboldened to admit her need for her male friend:

"'I want to see you,' I told him simply.. and it was the first time that I'd said it. I had sometimes felt a desire to say it, but something deep inside held me back, and I would say something else, or the opposite, or nothing at all. But after I had witnessed death, life seemed too trivial, too insignificant for me to keep inside me the words that I wanted to say."<sup>2</sup>

Through the help of her friend, she begins to glimpse the truth that love can triumph over death. Earlier she had recalled her father's words when she had broached the subject of love; his answer is all the more unusual when one considers the typical alarm and prohibitions which express the Egyptian parent's reaction on learning that his or her adolescent daughter is falling in love:

"One night I'd asked him, 'What would you do, Father, if you knew that I was in love?' He was sitting beside the stove but looked at me attentively and said, 'Nothing.. the important thing is that he is a person who deserves that love.'

So I asked him, 'How should I know if he deserves it?' And he replied, 'As long as you don't know, then he doesn't.'<sup>3</sup>

"Mujarrad Şūra" (Only a picture) gives us an idea of what the young liberated Egyptian lady might reasonably fear as she settles down to married life. Despite a first class degree and a year of relative freedom dating men, which Sa'dawi stresses was only in innocent adventures, Hind has not yet matured emotionally enough to cast aside her guilty conscience about her sexuality. She and her husband as newly-weds

return to the beach at Alexandria where she had enjoyed herself so freely the previous year. One of the beach gigolos recognizes her and imagines her still an easy prey. When she rejects his advances, he threatens to show her husband a photo of them together which he assumes will cast a blight over her marriage for ever. Hind goes through a turmoil of doubts as she wonders how her husband will react. Fortunately for her, he is one of Sa'dawi's rare mature breed of Egyptian men who is magnanimous enough to overlook any pre-marital encounters Hind may have had. What could have been a very unpleasant scene for her, that of having to face a husband in a frenzy of jealousy, is thus avoided by Sa'dawi. The author rewards the husband with even greater devotion and respect from his wife. In this lies the moral, for Sa'dawi is promising any other mature man who does the same a similar grateful response from his wife. Here is the final scene with Hind's husband explaining his attitude:

"'What does a photo mean? Even if there were something in it, you know that I can't make you answerable for anything that happened before you met me..'

Hind looked into his eyes with tears of joy in her own. She hadn't been mistaken after all, when she recognized him at the very first moment as the man of her dreams. He was a man with confidence in himself and in her."<sup>4</sup>

The most interesting 'story' here from the point of view of Sa'dawi's ideas, is not in fact a story, but a one-act play, "Lan Tajidīh Yā Laylā" (You won't find him, Layla). Sa'dawi gives the first indication of her militant feminist stand in the arguments of Layla. It shows the tension within the young woman as she struggles for control over her life. The



whole duologue exemplifies that lack of communication which exists between couples where the woman is becoming newly aware of her strengths and aware of the forces that limit their development, and the man sticks tenaciously to traditional concepts of gender which constitute those forces. Both husband and wife are arguing from opposite positions and both believe themselves to be in the right. Sa'dawi tactfully leaves the play open-ended, and the reader can choose for himself whether to side with the husband or wife.

The first dilemma raised is that of Layla's pregnancy: she feels it is her right alone to deal with the child, simply because it is within her. Osama, with society's backing, claims his right to ultimate control over them both. The second, is that Osama objects to Layla's working: it is worth noting how he uses the traditional criticisms against her, i.e. that she is unfeminine, that education has spoiled her, that she should be content simply to look after him and the home, while she argues fiercely for a measure of independence and recognition as a human being. She comes across as having more strength of character than he. His strength comes from the secure position of husband and prospective father, he knows to be his in Egyptian society. It is worth quoting several examples of their discussion to illustrate how Sa'dawi envisages the struggle for women's rights inside marriage. Here is Layla, depressed with the state of her marriage and wanting to leave, pleading for her work to be taken seriously:

"Layla: You don't understand me.. I don't work just for the £20 a month salary. I love my work.

Osama: Your work? Your proper work in life is your home.. your husband.. me!

Layla: You?

Osama: Yes, me.. aren't I enough?

Layla: But you don't fulfil me. You fulfil yourself that's all. What am I, except for an object that bears your children, whom you call by your name, and the person who makes your food which you digest and turn into waste. I live for the sake of your existence.. my existence is non-existent." 5

Osama puts his finger on what he sees is to blame for her attitudes, which happens to be for her the very means to life as a full independent person, viz. her education.

"Osama: Education and work have corrupted you. If you hadn't been to college and had a job you'd never have been able to leave the home. You'd have lived quite happily with me.. Life can't go on if women become men.

Layla: (sarcastically) Women becoming men? Who said that a woman becomes a man just because she's been educated and goes out to work and becomes a human being with a life and name of her own. Were women just created to cook and wash?"6

Osama tries to justify his stance by arguing that women were created to be mothers. Layla retorts that women are not inferior simply because they have the capacity to bear children. "Nature is innocent", she protests, in one of Sa'dawi's slogans.<sup>7</sup>

"Layla: Pregnancy and childbirth are one of the many functions performed by the woman's body. Why do you accuse a woman of being weak when her

womb expels its contents for example? The peasant woman has her baby in the open air and puts it on her head in a carrier and then goes back to her work in the field, in just the same way as her husband squats down behind a tree to empty his bowels and then returns to his work. Why on earth does a man have to dominate a woman, deprive her of her real identity and make her his slave for the rest of his life?"<sup>8</sup>

The reader may find that he is in agreement with Osama, when he answers:  
"Your logic is crazy.."

Layla's (or is it really Sa'dawi's?) comparison between childbirth and defecation is correct in that they involve, for the peasants, something done behind a tree during an interval from work, but the end result of the woman's act is the creation of a new life, and hence a potentially lifelong responsibility for her. Although this simile misfires, it is important for illustrating the 'basic' (some may feel 'coarse') nature of Sa'dawi's reasoning. This is typical of the instances where she argues from anatomy or medical facts.

Layla's argument goes on to illustrate Sa'dawi's anti-Western feeling; our first indication of the prejudice she undoubtedly harbours against the English. What might appear to be a rather unusual figure of speech to a Western reader, has a proverbial ring about it to Egyptian ears.

"Layla: Must a woman be anyone's subordinate? Can't she be independent? Your logic is like that of the English when they occupied Egypt. They said that it was weak and needed protection.

But protection against whom, when it was they who were attacking it? Protection against themselves then! Women aren't weak as you make them out to be. Their emotions don't override their thoughts." 9

The arguments in this play are sufficiently detailed, with a logic of their own, to be not only food for thought for Sa'dawi's readers, especially the women, but fuel for their own struggle against society's restrictions on women.

"Osama: But a woman loves to have a man for her master. She loves to be at his feet.

Layla: No she doesn't. She's just been brought up to have a man for a master. She's been indoctrinated since childhood that she is inferior to her brother, and her mother to her father. They kill her personality and individuality and consider her just something for men's enjoyment. What else do you expect of a woman who has had this kind of upbringing, apart from her making herself up, putting perfume on, pampering her legs and crawling before a man's feet?

Osama: A normal woman is one who does that. What value is a woman in life if she can't attract a man? What is she worth if she doesn't use perfume and make-up, or do you expect men to make themselves up for women?

Layla: Why does either of them have to be made up? Why can't they just be natural?"

When Layla says she is not the type of woman to go around smothered in make-up like the majority, Osama replies:

"Osama: Of course you're not like them. You're not a woman. And if you're not a woman, what are you then, a man?

Layla: I'm neither a man, nor a woman, according to what you call a woman. I don't acknowledge your definition. I'm a woman deep inside, but a new type that you don't know about and can't know about. It would seem to you something weird, like a third sex.

Osama: I've never in my life seen a woman or even a masculine type, like you. Anyway, it's the man who judges a woman's femininity.

Layla: (mocking) I think you have to do fifty years of reading and study before you can judge my femininity and fathom it out."<sup>10</sup>

The play ends with Osama being gentle with Layla, admitting that he loves her and saying that he is willing to carry on even if she does not return his love. He also tells her that she is unlikely ever to find the kind of man who will be able to accept her ideas. One cannot doubt that his love for her is genuine to him. Unfortunately, Layla can neither accept his version of love, nor adapt herself to it while she is battling against the current social attitudes towards women, which have moulded Osama's mentality. All this has been brought to a crisis point because of her pregnancy. Without being judgemental, Sa'dawi brings out the woman's legitimate frustration and feelings of alienation from her husband and society.

"La Shay" (Nothing) poses some more of the difficulties of personal relationships in Egyptian society, this time from the point of view of an attractive woman who appreciates her independence, economic and sexual, who even takes pleasure in exploiting her femininity to the degree of deceiving men in a series of affairs. She grows disillusioned with her single life, and tries marriage, which she finds boring and restrictive.

She leaves her husband and begins life again as a single working woman. Despite her many varied experiences and self-confidence, she still feels that life has no meaning, that she has no real self inside her. Here we see Sa'dawi describing the negative aspects of marriage for women, in a realistic tone. She writes critically of men and marriage, neither of which lives up to the woman's expectations in this story. Sa'dawi describes the life of a married woman as:

".. that life which degrades millions of women like her and which tethers them to the home like cattle; they have to wash their husbands' socks, let their delicate skin get scorched before the hot stove. And when every husband has devoured his delicious food, he changes his filthy socks, with either a shout or a grimace, before he flees from the home and his wife, into the world outside."<sup>11</sup>

The young woman finds that the reality of men, their smell, breaths and sweat, are offensive, a poor substitute for the illusion in her imagination.

Medical subject matter crops up in several stories. Sa'dawi can now be seen to be concentrating on the ethical approach of the doctor and some of the problems she encounters. In "Qissa min Ḥayat Ṭabība" (A story from the life of a lady doctor), a young girl has withdrawn into illness at the prospect of being married against her will to someone she does not love. Her elder brother high-handedly insists that the doctor examine her to see if she is still a virgin. The doctor recognizes, when they are alone together, that the girl is in fear of her life. (If she is not pronounced to be a virgin, her brother will

take vengeance on her.) This story has such a ring of truth about it that it could well have been lifted straight from Sa'dawi's own memoirs. The doctor in this story decides to let her conscience dictate her action, even if it means not telling the complete truth, in order to save the girl's future. This she feels is legitimate, based on the fact that, "Medicine can only distinguish between sickness and health.. but can never distinguish between what is honourable and what is dishonourable."<sup>12</sup> Brother and sister are happily reconciled and the doctor returns to compose a new version of the Hippocratic oath for herself. "I swear that my humanity and conscience will be my guiding rule in my work and in my art."<sup>13</sup>

"Al-Dōsia al-Dā'i'" (The lost file) can simple be taken as a metaphor for the difficulties involved in getting hold of information from official sources.

"Farāgh" (Emptiness) contains another flight of fancy, like "Aḥlām" of the previous volume, that is too coherent to be a convincing product of the subconscious mind: the reader only discovers at the very end that the woman has been under anaesthetic. Until her dream takes her off on a spaceship to Venus, there is nothing to suggest that what is being related is not meant to be taken as true. The dream reflects the woman's fruitless search for a satisfying personal relationship and a meaning to life on earth, i.e. in Egypt. The woman travels in her unconscious to Venus, only to find that life there is as boring as in Egypt.

One point which must be raised in connection with this volume is that of the underlying acceptance of violence as a part of life. There are at least four references to faces being slapped,<sup>14</sup> with another indirect mention.<sup>15</sup> To have so many within such a slim volume might suggest that it is a routine enough occurrence for Sa'dawi to include it in her portrayal of all social classes.

"Min Ajli Man?" (For whose sake?) is both a cautionary tale, that even doctors make mistakes, especially in the early hours of the morning, and an indication that even in her professional capacity as doctor, a woman is under suspicion and her word is not believed.

It is also interesting to see that Sa'dawi shows the young single working woman as not wholly satisfied with her life, and subject to various pressures. In "Hīnamā Akūn Tāfiha" (While I am insignificant) the young doctor envies her neighbour, the actress Fifi, for her wealth and apparently easy lifestyle: her own work seems unrewarding in comparison and she even pauses for a moment to speculate on the comfort a well-kept wife could enjoy.<sup>16</sup> When Fifi falls ill, the doorman summons the doctor who learns that the actress is suffering from exhaustion. It seems that her life is not as easy as the doctor had imagined. As she waives the matter of payment for her services, the doctor satisfies her own conscience on the unethical nature of peddling medical aid, especially to a neighbour, and earns the respect of the doorman at the same time.



Sa'dawi consistently uses colloquial language for the speech of peasants or characters of lower class origin, for example, dialect words like 'kūsha' (kiln) and 'siwān' (cupboard) appear in 'Laysat 'Adhrā''. The play's dialogue, however, shows more classical constructions, such as the accusative ending and the particle 'inna' for emphasis at the beginning of a sentence; this is probably because it is more in accordance with dramatic conventions, because it suggests that the couple are educated people, because it is expected to be read as literature and because the subjects of the argument do not lend themselves readily to transcription into colloquial.

In terms of style and form, there is much less to criticize in this collection than in the former. Some stories, though, still try to cram too many elements into one short sketch, thus detracting from the force of the real message. Sa'dawi achieves a better unity between form and subject here. This may be chiefly due to the greater dramatic quality of the subjects she is exploring: they are certainly bolder, and more controversial than in the first volume, even though they were written only one year later. One can clearly see here the seeds of her psychological works, besides evidence of Sa'dawi's moralistic tone.

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References to Hanān Qalīl

- 1) Hanān Qalīl, p. 10.
- 2) Ibid., p. 85.
- 3) Ibid., p. 83.
- 4) Ibid., p. 74.
- 5) Ibid., p. 36.
- 6) Ibid., p. 36.
- 7) "Nature is innocent" is used as the name of a chapter in Al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins.
- 8) Hanān Qalīl, pp. 37-8.
- 9) Ibid., p. 39.
- 10) Ibid., pp. 39-40.
- 11) Ibid., p. 104.
- 12) Ibid., p. 120.

13) Ibid., p. 121.

14) Ibid., pp. 10, 71, 93, 99.

15) Ibid., p. 103.

16) Ibid., p. 116.

Sa'dawi's third volume of short stories, Lahzat Sidq, first published in 1965 in Cairo, shows her continuing preoccupation with the nature of male-female relationships in Egyptian society. Sometimes she explores this from the man's point of view, sometimes from the woman's. Most of the characters here have a very shallow conception of love: it is unavoidably confused with the issue of sexuality, which is itself made unnaturally dependent on the polarized standards of masculinity and femininity current in her society.

The story "Hīnamā Yanhazim al-Rajul" (When the man is defeated) contains a convincing explanation of what it must feel like to be a male chauvinist rake. The sadistic man described here is an example (extreme, or normal?) of the product of a culture that accentuates male superiority and aggression. Sex and love are inextricably linked in his mind with violence and cruelty. It is little wonder that Sa'dawi refers to his women friends as his 'prey' (farīsāt).<sup>1</sup> His elaborate toilet arouses the reader's mockery when Sa'dawi describes his anxiety over balding and bags under the eyes. Having derived his self-confidence as a 'real man' from seducing and humiliating women, cuckolding his friends and siring children for them to bring up as their own, he now deserves a taste of his own medicine which he receives from the nib of Sa'dawi's pen. One day he meets his match in a woman who refuses to abase herself for the sake of his attentions.

After a comic scene, heavy with mockery of the frustrated man, in which he tries to force himself upon the woman, he finally surrenders to her by admitting his love for her. He feels the bitterness felt by all those women whom he had conquered over the years, and the pain of having given oneself in return for nothing. He leaves, only to be beset by doubts about his masculinity, which for him is equivalent to his self-confidence. It is now his turn to feel rejection as he phones her, desperate for her attention which alone can restore his morale. Sa'dawi is implying here that a man's selfish, sadistic attitude to sex may end up causing his own downfall. He must be prepared one day to receive the treatment he has been meting out to others, and face the consequences.

It is the well-to-do, educated couples in Sa'dawi's works who have the leisure and awareness to devote time to worrying about their love relationships, for example, as found in 'Min Ajli'l-Ma'rifa' (In order to know), 'Sharāra Min al-Dākhil' (A spark from within) and 'Amm Uthmān' (Uncle Uthman). 'Min Ajli'l-Ma'rifa' shows a confused young woman trying to understand the nature of sexual attraction; what exactly is it that makes her feel she is dissolving in the arms of her beloved? She goes away to Helwan for a night with another man, to find out if she responds to all men in the same way. She finds herself unmoved by his, even stronger, even more manly, arms, and returns to her beloved in Cairo; though it is stressed that she still feels no release even with him, from the violent emotion imprisoned inside her. Sa'dawi's characters can often be found to be

suffering such violent emotions along with an inner paralysis. This, we are told, is the result of a division between the feelings and the reason, which then produces a sense of alienation from one's surroundings and oneself.

The man in "Sharāra Min al-Dākhil" shows a genuine emotional vitality whilst remaining paralyzed through psychological repression, into doing nothing. Since it is not made particularly clear, by the author, why the man should be so inhibited, the reader is obliged to make his own deductions from the peculiarities of the text. He may also wonder if Sa'dawi was fully aware of the effect various descriptions of the woman (with whom the man is in love) have on the totality of the story. For example, Sa'dawi describes the woman like this:

"She was silent.. but her eyes would express joy at one moment, pain at another. One moment they would blaze with frenzied emotion, and at another be doused by cold reason. One moment they would drown in a torrent of love and at another dry up in harsh defiance."<sup>2</sup>

Captivated by these unvocalized extremes of mood, the man watches helplessly as his beloved drinks glass after glass of wine. He is only upset that she feels the need to loosen up through alcohol before she can respond to him. And yet in the very next moment, he is shown to be thinking of laying his head upon her bosom and crying, that the love in her eyes makes him cry. Understandably, he is having difficulties interpreting her intentions solely from eye contact,

hence his hesitation, but one also has the impression that Sa'dawi had not thought prior to writing, what mood and effect she was trying to create. Trying to exploit the dramatic intensity conveyed by the use of antitheses in this manner, is one of the less successful aspects of Sa'dawi's style and crops up throughout her fiction. As a stylistic device antithetical images are common in modern Arabic poetry, but in Sa'dawi's works they almost always fall short of the intended effect by irritating the reader with superfluous vocabulary and confusing the issue. Thus when the climax comes it has been ill-prepared. The man here feels that part of the problem is that he detects traces of what he considers, masculinity in the woman. Sa'dawi is always stressing in her factual works, that both sexes contain elements of what are commonly held to be the traits of the opposite sex, even from the point of view of anatomy.

".. his desire to be united with her and his desire to flee from her.. bound him tightly to her. Was he bewitched, like her? Did his existence contain a contradiction? Did he, like her, combine a powerful masculinity with a gentle femininity? He's never before met a woman who contained such a paradox. A woman either had a femininity he found attracted to or a masculinity he found himself repelled by.. but what was he to make of this simultaneous attraction-repulsion which was of equal intensity? This was the awful struggle that had produced deep inside him that spark of hesitation.. a mental spark that wouldn't die.. an emotional spark that wouldn't calm down."<sup>3</sup>

Even Sa'dawi's imagery here is off beam: how apt a simile exactly is 'spark' of hesitation? One can only imagine that Sa'dawi must have felt that she had roused the reader's sympathies for the man, up to this point, as being a sensitive victim of his own repressed emotions,

for it is suddenly made clear when he does manage to speak, when he in fact proposes marriage, that it is the woman who is hesitant, on account of knowing that he is a married man. She rejects his proposal because she feels it is not right for him to leave his wife and daughter for her sake. He sadly accepts what he considers to be her 'noble-mindedness' and decides to leave. We are then told that she is incredulous at his departure and that he had been the only man in her life. Their total lack of communication extends right until the last moment: both had been unable to contact their real selves. If Sa'dawi was trying to capture on paper the feeling of loving, as felt from inside, it remains an unconvincing essay.

"Qalbī Alladhi 'Aṣaytuh" (Having disobeyed my heart) poses a certain amount of confusion for the reader at the outset: it takes a while for him to work out who exactly is the subject of the opening. The story centres on the problems of conflict between the heart and the mind. Following the heart, as the woman does here, has led to sadness, suffering poverty and hunger. She decides to follow her reason instead, in her next relationship, to see if it brings happier results. She forces herself to marry a businessman whose presence, personality and lifestyle disgust her heart, until she can no longer bear it. We are told that she ends up feeling estranged from her real self because she has ignored her emotions. She decides to leave her husband to try and regain her peace of mind, even if it causes her grief and poverty. Sa'dawi seems to be suggesting here that one cannot be happy if one has 'disobeyed' one's heart, yet to rely on the heart as one's only guide, would be to have to go from one falling-



in-love to another. Sa'dawi's psychology here is oversimplified. Many readers would find this division between heart and mind naive and exaggerated, since neither function in the isolation which Sa'dawi describes here.

"Amm Uthmān" opens with one of Sa'dawi's romantic encounters between lovers, drinking at a nightclub beside the Nile. Like Cinderella, the young woman feels a sudden panic at the strokes of midnight, and realizes that the time is late and she must go home. The problem here is that, although she is supposedly 'liberated' (i.e. has a university degree and a job) the young woman is not yet mentally independent enough to act according to her views of emancipation. She is afraid to be seen returning late by the doorman Amm Uthman. He is a symbol for Egyptian society. The woman's attitudes to him unconsciously reflect her attitudes towards her society. He stands for the simple, uneducated lower-class citizen: he stands for those traditional values which dictate that a single girl has no business staying out late at night with a man. His word as a man, irrespective of his social class, can ruin a girl's reputation, even if she is of a higher social and educational level. It is for this that the woman here does not want him to catch her out. What is significant also, is that she still wants to live up to her society's values. Why should this be, the reader may wonder, when she has supposedly embraced new attitudes? Perhaps it is because her 'liberation' is superficial, because her society's values hold some intrinsic importance to her own self-image, or because that society really poses a dangerous threat to one who does not respect its values?

The young woman's male companion does not share her anxieties since he is allowed more freedom from society. He has no danger to face, rather the contrary, his reputation is enhanced by his being seen dating late at night. Whilst politely suggesting ways for the girl to avoid feeling embarrassed, he makes it clear that he thinks it is she who has constructed imaginary obstacles to prevent herself from enjoying more freedom of behaviour. He suggests to her:

"'Then I'll come with you to escort you.' She said, 'No. Old Uthman will see you. He's going to think that I've been with a man, in any case, that's bad enough, but for his suspicions to be turned into certainty and for him to see the man for himself!' He laughed freely and she looked at him saying, 'You can't feel or share my awful problem. You can laugh with a clear conscience because you're a man. And you can go home at any time of night with your head up proudly, and the doorman will respect you for your adventures with women.' He said in surprise, 'I don't believe that old Uthman is the crux of this 'awful' problem of yours! You're acting as though you'd never had any education or believed in your right to behave freely. You're making imaginary obstacles unconsciously, to limit yourself.' She replied, 'You can't judge because you've never been a woman. Uthman isn't just old Uncle Uthman, but the whole society in which I live. Society judges me through the eyes of Uthman's empty head.'"

They walk back together until they are within sight of the building, when the young woman decides not to run the risk of being seen with a man. She walks tensely, bracing herself, only to find that Uthman is asleep. An anticlimax the reader has probably anticipated. How much more exciting and interesting a story it would have been if there had been a confrontation between the two! Uthman, still the symbol of Egyptian society, is now the object of her pity. Just

as she had previously checked herself from thinking badly of him by imagining some kind of disaster occurring to him, which might have saved her any embarrassment, she now at heart feels sorry for him, exhausted from his wretched job. Hence she both fears and pities her society.

Another story which touches on the common people as being likely to arouse both disgust and sympathy, is "Ibtisāma" (A smile). If the reader wishes to know, in only a few lines, what it is like to travel on a Cairo bus, the following captures the experience accurately:

"The bus came bursting with people as usual, and I was able to get on and make my way inside. How? I do not know. But I suddenly found myself inside a terrible furnace of hot, foul, depressing breaths. Some smelt of smoking, some of disease and others of onions.."<sup>5</sup>

"Thaman al-Dam" (The price of blood) is Sa'dawi's most vivid depiction of the problems of the poor in Egypt, so far. The tragic story of those who find giving blood the only way to earn a living, is common throughout the Middle East, where blood donation is paid for, not given voluntarily. The reader feels the full consequences of the unethical nature of paying for blood and the horror of receiving infected blood from the sick donors. Sa'dawi excels at this kind of story. She can convey the oppressive life of the poor family in very moving tones, reminiscent of Russian pathos. It is realistic and we know that such tragedies are happening in Egypt now. What Sa'dawi has done is to give this problem a human dimension. As the man queues to

give blood, he jokes with his fellows on the ease of forgetting one's name, or rather, the aliases which they all adopt to enable them to get away with donating more blood than they are allowed, by attending different centres.<sup>6</sup> This ability to joke in the face of dire straits is typical of the Egyptian peasant. After the man has given his blood, he receives his paltry fee, but realizes that he has no more strength and so hands over the money to his friend to pass on to his family. The story ends as he keels over and dies.

"Ḥubbī al-Waḥīd" (My only love) is an example of Sa'dawi's crowding too much into a single story. One has again the impression that she has left this unrevised after having written it without an overall plan before she started. This is unfortunate because some of her ideas here are worthwhile. The first section opens with a description of a woman's feelings of alienation from her own body, a description containing rather hackneyed images which appear to have been lifted from Sartre or Camus. The next scene shows her sudden return to humanity as a result of the apparent wealth of expression and sympathy for her which she detects in the eyes of a stray dog, as she feeds it a morsel of bread. It transpires that she has been informed of her husband's infidelity. When he readily admits to having a lover, she is stunned emotionally even to the point of losing her affection for her children, because she sees them as an extension of the love she had once felt for her husband.

To reassure herself of her attractiveness and to try and obtain some measure of revenge, she decides to be unfaithful too, and seeks

out one of her husband's friends. This particular man, had made flattering references to her some two years before, which had upset her at the time, because she had had the feeling that he was mentally undressing her: "I felt that his strange looks were almost undressing all the clothes from my body."<sup>7</sup> When she arrives at the man's door and meets him he looks somewhat dishevelled. There is something comical to the Western reader that this distraught woman should so naively rush to take revenge, and that the means to achieve it should prove to be so disappointing. The atmosphere of the man's flat is not conducive to any kind of romantic encounter, at least not with a married woman. He is also only too aware that she has come in order to 'use' him and is not content to be exploited as a sex object. We realize the full extent of her bad luck in singling out this man, who was the only one available to her for the purposes of adultery, when we discover that he is a homosexual. Does this, one wonders, also have a comic ring to Egyptian women readers? Or would they respond more with a flood of sympathy for the woman here, as they identify themselves with her plight?

What is one to make of the logic of the woman's speech on the question of whether a wife is likely to be unfaithful to her husband 'by nature':

"I said to him as he looked at me with a meaningful gaze, 'Not unless she knows that he has been unfaithful to her. In that instance, I don't consider her as unfaithful, because she is deceiving herself before she deceives him and she ruins her dignity before she ruins his. It is a kind of slow suicide

done by the cowardly woman, who is afraid of a quick death."<sup>8</sup>

As often in Sa'dawi, there are parts of the argument missing: the author has jumped from one conclusion to another and failed to give the reader sufficient information to enable him to follow, and hence understand, her train of thought. What is clear in Sa'dawi's mind is not clear to the reader. She is aiming to show here the effect the husband's adultery can have on his wife; how she can find herself shattered emotionally and psychologically and how difficult it can be for her to resist such a situation. What can the Egyptian wife and mother do when her husband boasts to her of his new love? Sa'dawi's answer is for the woman here to pour her love into her relationship with her children, for they are her 'lifeline'; to find in them emotional compensation and to forgive her husband.<sup>9</sup>

"Al-Jānib al-Ākhar" (The other side) touches on various areas of difficulty encountered by men and women in getting to know each other. Sa'dawi has left this story open-ended so that the reader can come to his own conclusion. The young couple here enjoying a summer's evening date, are cast as extremes, it is little wonder then that they fail to communicate in every way. The only thing they seem to share is the urgency for finding a mate. The moral to this tale is simply that appearances can be deceptive. The young woman proves to have another side, a heavily emotional and argumentative side to her which the man feels is at variance with the delicate, pretty girl he had imagined her to be on the basis of her features. He proves not to have the depth, strength or seriousness of character that she had imagined him

to possess judging from his demeanour in the workplace. It is actually easier for the reader to side with the young man here (probably not Sa'dawi's intention) because he comes over as someone possessing a sincere, realistic, straightforward approach to his own emotional needs even if a naive one, whilst the woman shows herself too confused mentally and emotionally, and too preoccupied with finding her 'ideal' man, to enjoy the simple happinesses of life.

"Don't think, Hikmat, that I'm playing about with you.. playing about is one thing, but happiness is something else. I don't want to make of my love a tragic drama with tears. I just want to make it a happy story full of laughter and smiles. I don't know why women are always looking for pain?"

Hikmat replied, looking at the sky, 'But you can't have love without tears.' And he burst out, 'But for Heaven's sake, I can't bear crying!' He pointed to a tree that was lit up, saying, 'Look at those lights.. see this tree.. look at the beauty of Nature! Life is beautiful, it wants to make people happy. Why does anyone want to look for suffering and pain?'

Still looking at the sky, she replied, 'But sometimes pain can make the soul and spirit happier.. and tears - sometimes there is a delightfulness in them that surpasses that of a smile or laughter..' He pressed his hand on the table gently and said, 'I don't understand that at all.'<sup>10</sup>

The problem becomes obvious when one considers exactly what each wants from the projected relationship: he wants something tangible, a wife and marriage; she wants the experience of emotional love.

"Lā Shay' Yafnā" (Nothing ends) shows a woman with cancer trying to come to terms with the prospect of her death. It is suggested that

she finds some solace in the reviving power of nature and in the letter written to her by her beloved. Both she and the reader feel a sense of injustice at the realization that the piece of paper she is reading could outlast her:

"How could this small, flimsy bit of paper remain when she died? How could the tiny paper live for ever while she would vanish?"<sup>11</sup>

In conclusion to her thoughts she, perhaps rather unconvincingly, finds comfort in reasoning that, just as the paper would be reduced to ashes if burnt, thus only being changed in substance, so she too, on her demise, would only change her physical form to ashes.

"Laḥẓat Ṣidq" (A moment of truth) is another of Sa'dawi's stories which suffers from a lack of coherence. Even some of its ideas are familiar having already appeared in other stories: here is the dominating male chauvinist meeting his match, in a bold woman whom he intends to seduce. We are given a hint that childhood deprivation is to blame for his meanness of character. (This is Sa'dawi the psychologist speaking). When confronted with a self-confident, mature woman, he can only respond with a sadistic anger which makes him want to crush what he feels is her insulting pride.

"This woman must be crushed and I am the one capable of doing that. This stubborn, stuck-up woman, I shall teach her who I am! I shall make her remember me for ever. And whenever she recalls me, the poisoned dagger will plunge again into her heart. The dagger with which I shall wound her self-respect, her femininity and her character.."12



What dissuades him from action is the expression in the woman's eyes, one which contains sincerity and deceitfulness (another of Sa'dawi's paradoxical images). In a curious way he responds only to the sincerity he detects in her, and it evokes his own buried feelings. Suddenly, he wants an end to lying, hypocrisy and deception; he wants instead, real love.

Sa'dawi is giving the reader a complicated set of reactions to follow: the sincere look in the woman's eyes apparently struck a chord in the man, which made him aware of his own 'sincerity' (sidq might also be translated 'truth' or 'truthfulness'); he thus realized that his desire to crush her arose from his own basically insincere nature, and hence he abandoned the idea. He ends up leaving in a hurry, already realizing that the 'moment of truth', and all that it would involve in upright living, could never be integrated into his own life. Frightened by the power of truthfulness to incapacitate him, he escapes back into his old ways. One can raise the question though, does sincerity or truthfulness, if that is how we are to understand sidq, come to us in such moments of enlightenment? Is not an awareness of the truth a much more gradual process, one that develops over time according to one's understanding of life? For if it is not accompanied by thought, how is it recognized? We may justifiably feel that what Sa'dawi delivers to us here as 'psychology' is not very plausible.

'Nāma al-Rajul Ba'd al-'Ashā'' (The man slept after supper) is essentially a dream in which a middle-aged, henpecked husband enacts

his subconscious sexual anxieties in his sleep. Sa'dawi allows herself to create the most fanciful atmosphere she has attempted so far. With its strong echoes of "The Emperor's new clothes" and "Scheherezade", however, it shows itself to be more second-hand than original imaginative material. There is little of substance in this particular story and it is with as much relief for the reader as it must have been for the author, that the man wakes abruptly from his nightmare (which was all attributed to his heavy supper). We are spared any attempts by Sa'dawi to impose a climax or attach any meaning to this rambling episode.<sup>13</sup>

The final story "Nādiā Lam Astaṭi'" (Nadia, I couldn't) shows Sa'dawi sympathetic to the man, in what must have been an arranged marriage. She describes the newly-wedded husband as having left behind his real love, and finding that he is forced into a situation of sexual, and supposedly emotional, intimacy with a young woman whom he hardly knows, his new wife. Due to his strong feelings of attachment to his former girlfriend, he finds it difficult to adjust suddenly to a new partner and finds her uninhibited behaviour disturbing. The idea of a sexual relationship without prior emotional attraction, which he has just experienced as a married man, suggests to him the connection between the roles of prostitute and wife. An arranged marriage therefore might be detrimental to a sensitive young man, not only to a young woman as is more frequently the case. In contemplating his new wife, the husband wonders:

"Can a girl like this take off her clothes before a man in such a way, without knowing him or having a mutual understanding between them? What's the difference between her and a prostitute? Both take off their clothes before a strange man in return for a bit of paper as payment. The prostitute's money is paid straight away: the wife's later. Every woman has a price.. expensive or cheap.. which is paid sooner or later."<sup>14</sup>

Only Nadia, his previous girlfriend, he felt could not be bought in this way.

One can detect an eroticism in Sa'dawi's style which curiously does not appear to be allied to the genuine love experience. For the latter, Sa'dawi falls back on cliched expressions. We find this in the comparison between the man's different experience of lovemaking, with his wife, and formerly, with Nadia.

"He saw his wife with her arms around his head, as the strong smell of her scent wafted to his nose, mingled with the smell of her body and spirit. He felt a strangeness encircling him on all sides, but he surrounded her with his arms confidently. He knows what would satisfy her and that he would always be able to satisfy her without any fear or anxiety. He was aware of her writhing beside him like a piece of slippery soap.. the warmth of her body flowing into his. The woman's body was exciting him and satisfying. But Nadia, used to shake his whole being like an earthquake; she would move him body and soul."<sup>15</sup>

Sa'dawi captures well the atmosphere of reserve between the couple; although they are physically intimate, neither can bring himself to pronounce the name of the other. This indicates that they are not yet psychologically prepared for intimacy. In his case, we know it is

because another woman's name is on the tip of his tongue. Given the difficulties and social censure attending young women's pre-marital experiences in Egypt, one suspects that the girl's reserve here is not due to the same reason.

As in her previous volume of short stories, the most interesting and most overtly feminist work is in fact a one-act play, entitled here "Laylā Tatazawwaj" (Layla gets married). The ideas and issues raised here for the reader to consider give many clues into the psychology of women in Egypt. Sa'dawi creates her own stereotypes and we see here in Suhayr the first of her forthright young women; one imagines partly a self-image, an idealized reflection of how Sa'dawi saw her younger self. This asexual young woman is the embodiment of truth and high ideals, even if she lacks the most elementary experience of life and men. She is always portrayed as having a natural beauty and graceful form. She is often, like Suhayr here, and as Sa'dawi was herself, a medical student.

Layla, Suhayr's cousin, is some seven years older, and has a more realistic appraisal of a working woman's life, even if it is a pessimistic one. Layla is contrasted with Suhayr in every way: she is portrayed as less attractive, less sincere, more materialistic and less principled than her younger cousin. Layla is, however, to be credited with an acknowledgement of her own need for marriage which we might reasonably interpret as an admission of her own sexual needs. Even so, she does not find favour with the author for the simple reason that Layla has abandoned any feminist notions she might have had when younger because of their impracticability. Layla is shown excitedly making preparations

for her wedding. Didi, Suhayr's mother, is there to provide the conversation with the traditional attitudes of the older woman. So we have a scene which contrasts the ideas of three generations of women and provides some indication of how new attitudes need time to be absorbed through education, to gain acceptance. It also gives a picture of the different types of women to be found in Egyptian society, and the way in which they are pitted against each other.

Didi considers wealth all-important as the only means to ascend the social ladder. A successful marriage is for her, the proper and only legitimate way for a woman to achieve respectability and happiness. Layla's jaundiced perceptions of life are coloured by her experiences as a single working girl (she is a journalist):

"Life is something different from studying in college. I understand what life is about because I've lived it and suffered a lot from it, and because I know what people are like, I don't trust anyone."<sup>16</sup>

This reasoning is what makes her lie to her best friend Camilia, about her marriage, and not invite her to the wedding, on the basis that as a single girl more attractive than Layla herself, Camilia might pose a threat by tempting Mahmud, Layla's fiance. The women's attitudes to education are quite distinct: Layla has grown to resent it; for Suhayr, it is of vital importance as a means to gaining a job and living independently of a man, while for Didi it is irrelevant to a woman's life, if not a potential handicap. When Didi suggests that one day it will be Suhayr's turn to send out wedding invitations, Suhayr replies:

- "Suhayr: No! You know, Mother, that marriage is not what I aim for in life. My aim is to get my medical qualifications and then work.
- Didi: And then get married. A girl's destiny is marriage, isn't that so, Layla?
- Layla: Of course. That's what they were created for. I swear to you, Aunt Didi, that I used to sit in my office and think all the time that I had reached the age of twenty-six and no one had come to propose to me. And whenever I imagined reaching thirty without being married, my head would spin and I'd feel quite faint.
- Suhayr: No, Layla. Don't judge things just from your own point of view.
- Layla: I'm telling you plainly and truthfully. I often used to wish, if only I hadn't been to college and gone out to work but had got married when I was sixteen instead. Just imagine.. I'd probably have an eleven-year old child by now. What a thought!
- Didi: That's true. You waste your youth and most beautiful years of your life in studying and college.
- Suhayr: It's sad to see you're so ignorant Layla. Education isn't just graduating from college and becoming a journalist. Being educated means getting rid of the old-fashioned complexes of an ignorant woman who believes that she has no life of her own but must exist in the shadow of a man."<sup>17</sup>

Layla sees men as the root of the problem. A woman's life, her respectability, marriage, divorce, all rest in a man's hand. Suhayr, on the other hand, believes that being independent will allow women to be independent of men, the very sentiments argued out later by Sa'dawi in her sociological works. The reader may have noticed a certain ambiguity here: does Sa'dawi want us to believe that Suhayr and Layla both acquired their feminist ideas from the traditional Egyptian

education and college? Obviously this is not the case, for if the Western ideas of feminism and equality were freely available to young Egyptian women, then Sa'dawi would have felt no urgent need to write her factual books. But from where are we to suppose these young women absorbed such ideas: perhaps from private groups or from subversive literature? In short, if these feminist libertarian ideas are not part of the national curriculum, as we must deduce, Didi and Layla are hardly justified in blaming 'education' for being such a hindrance to women!

We wonder too why Layla had not enjoyed her period of independence as a young working woman (the clue is probably to be found in the different social status, and possibly salary too, connected with the professions of journalist and doctor, the latter being Suhayr's ambition). We cannot help noticing how Suhayr's idealist notions clash with Layla's experience. What other factors might there be which act to prevent women from realizing their youthful feminist ambitions, from whatever source they have been acquired? Mahmud enters to complicate the scene whilst shedding some light on the question. Oddly enough, he appears basically indifferent to the whole issue of women's liberation, but feels that the debate about work and marriage is a problem created and exacerbated by women themselves.<sup>18</sup> His attitude is that if women want to seize, what they consider, their rights, they should act positively. He blames women for acting as though they want a man as lord and master. If women want men to change, he says, they will have to change themselves first. Here is Sa'dawi clearly throwing some of the onus onto women for achieving their liberation.

Layla is one of those who believes that a woman has an instinctive nature. The oppressor here is not Mahmud then! There is more than a grain of truth in his view that women are creating their own problems.

"Suhayr: (addressing Mahmud) But what's your view?  
Is marriage a means or an end for a woman?

Mahmud: Only the woman can answer that. But judging from my own experience of life, however much she's educated, a woman's goal is marriage. She thinks of that before love!

Layla: That's because a man doesn't give a woman the right to love. He won't acknowledge or respect any emotional relationship with her apart from marriage.

Mahmud: Why doesn't she take her right to love in her own hands then? Why wait for the man to give it or acknowledge it or not?

Suhayr: That's right. The woman must seize her rights for herself. Men don't possess the right to give or withhold it, but the judges, rulers, lawyers etc.. are the ones invested with the rights; they have executive powers. Our society is a 100% male society, just as it was in the past.

Layla: And still is now.. the relationship between a man and woman is still governed by outdated laws which existed hundreds of years ago.

Mahmud: If that's so, then I blame women, for however educated they are, they always yearn for dependence on a man as a master and protector, just like a slave.

Layla: This is the female's nature, Mahmud, we can't deny Nature.

Suhayr: No, it's not 'Nature'. It's a question of habit. Women have been accustomed to finding their pleasure in weakness and servility, and men have been used to finding theirs in aggression and domination.

Mahmud: If women changed their habits, then men would have to change theirs too.



Layla: Women can't change their nature.

Suhayr: Of course they can!

Mahmud: That depends on the woman, whether she's strong or weak.

Suhayr: A strong woman can."<sup>19</sup>

Of the characters here, Layla evokes our sympathy the most, and Mahmud impresses us with his balance of character. But was that Sa'dawi's intention? It is obvious that she disapproves of Layla, especially for lying about her marriage and dropping Camilia, because she duly chastises the former in an embarrassing scene to show how her deceit catches up with her.

This volume then continues the themes and type of social situation explored in Sa'dawi's earlier two collections of stories. They show Sa'dawi trying to develop her ideas further, trying to convey greater complexity in the psychological workings of her characters, and bring to light the difficulties involved in communication between the sexes. We see more evidence here of Sa'dawi's artistic weaknesses, that lack of revision, that sense of underlying incoherence which suggests to the reader that Sa'dawi has not always planned her stories according to a clear initial vision, and on occasions, what she has obviously intended as the point of the story, as in "Laḥẓat Ṣidq", is unsatisfying to the reader. Her ambitious ideas about the psychology of men and women are to find better expression in her factual works.

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References to Lahzat Sidq

- 1) Lahzat Sidq, p. 8.
- 2) Ibid., p. 25.
- 3) Ibid., p. 28.
- 4) Ibid., p. 44.
- 5) Ibid., p. 48.
- 6) Ibid., p. 54.
- 7) Ibid., p. 60. This, incidentally, is the stock image to be found passim in works by feminists to suggest female disgust at men. It has also been adopted by those male writers who (and this includes Sa'dawi's husband Sherif Hetata in his novel Al-Shabaka) want to appear sympathetic to the position of women.
- 8) Lahzat Sidq, p. 62.
- 9) Ibid., p. 63.
- 10) Ibid., p. 73.

- 11) Ibid., p. 81.
- 12) Ibid., pp. 85-6.
- 13) There is a noticeable lack of imagination in Sa'dawi's fiction in general. Her characters tend to stand for ideas or principles and their physical appearance is related to the extent to which these find favour with the author. The heroines, for example, are characterized by a natural strength and beauty; their foils, are ridiculed for their plumpness, their gait, their taste in fashion or reliance on make-up.
- 14) Lahzat Sidq, pp. 109-110.
- 15) Ibid., p. 110.
- 16) Ibid., p. 99.
- 17) Ibid., p. 101. A popular Egyptian saying can be roughly translated as 'Better a man's shadow than the shadow of a wall', in other words, a woman who is married, no matter how bad her husband, is in a better position than one who is not.
- 18) Lahzat Sidq, p. 103.
- 19) Ibid., pp. 103-4

Al-Khayt wa'l-Jidār (The thread and the wall) was published in 1972 in Cairo. A more substantial volume than any of the previous three, it contains two novelettes of around fifty pages each and fifteen shorter stories.<sup>1</sup> As a collection, it shows greater maturity in ideas and a more developed artistic sense of technique and style in the writer. The 'thread' and the 'wall' referred to in the title, are used as leitmotifs running through each story. Sa'dawi's characters have either a wall that separates them from a better life, or they feel that the 'thread' i.e. the continuity, of their life is threatened by others: this may be that a change in behaviour and personality has been evoked in them, or that their very existence is at stake. Her characters here are all victims: but whether of poverty, ignorance, their job, their families or official investigators, they have in common that they are all victims of the Egyptian social system. Sa'dawi shows what their suffering feels like and what, if anything, they can do to escape it.

In "Kānat Hiya al-Aḍ'af" (She was the weaker one) we see the traditional defloration ceremony of the peasants, from the husband's point of view, and learn why it is such an ordeal for him. Since masculinity in his village is prized in terms of physique, his puny body does not entitle him for the respect accorded to a real man. Needless to say, his cleverness, the fact that he acts as scribe and

reader, even preacher, for the others, is not sufficient qualification to compensate.<sup>2</sup> The fact that his domineering mother is built like an ox is a daily reminder of his own inadequacies. Instead of describing the harrowing experience of defloration from the prostrated girl's point of view, we are shown the young man faced with her bared thighs parted, struggling desperately with his middle finger to prove his manhood. There is a touch of comedy as we are told that even the women supporting the girl on either side look away; partly to spare him embarrassment as he fumbles around, partly because they are blasé about it all from having seen it so many times before.

Since he feels no loyalty to his bride, or even interest in this girl whom he has never set eyes on before, he is unable to overcome his inferiority complex before her and transfers the hatred that he feels towards his mother to her. He imagines the girl to be a trap to expose his impotence. Our sympathies up to this point lie with the young man; he is only a victim of the crude mores of the villagers' and his mother's tyranny, but he shows himself to be as bad as them all, if not worse. His pressing situation brings out all his cunning and deceit so that he lies to them that the girl is not a virgin. The moment when he loses his integrity by lying is paradoxically the very moment that he gains his 'honour' and becomes a man in the eyes of his fellows. He has broken down the barrier separating him from manhood. Even though Sa'dawi gives the girl the final mention, as she is shown slinking off disgraced, we still fail to appreciate that she is worth our sympathy. Our feelings are more for her father now, whom we feel has to bear the greater humiliation. By reversing our expectations and

by showing the topsy-turvy nature of honour in the traditional village community, how it can be lost or won in seconds, Sa'dawi presents us with quite a different, novel slant on the problem of arranged marriage and virginity.

"Lā Aḥad Yaqūl Lahā" (Nobody tells her) describes an Egyptian girl on the verge of puberty. The relative unsophistication and attractiveness of this story is derived from the fact that Sa'dawi has chosen to see things through the girl's eyes. Since the girl does not have any idea about what exactly will be happening to her, i.e. that she will begin menstruating, her fears tend to be exaggerated and unspecific. Such a state of mind being a familiar female experience, makes it likely that this story will have greater appeal to readers of Sa'dawi's own sex, even though it is they who are the object of her criticism. Sa'dawi sees the older women and the mother as cruelly to blame for the girl's needless anxieties. It is they who envelop the natural phenomenon of adolescent biological changes with a mystery. Why this should be so is difficult to fathom, but Sa'dawi hints that it is because of the underlying depression at their own state of womanhood conditioned by their society, which she refers to as "an imperceptible shadow of sadness".<sup>3</sup> The girl herself senses that whatever they are hiding from her is something that saddens them.<sup>4</sup> Becoming a woman, with all its implications, must have been too traumatic for the older women to contemplate enlightening their daughters. Far from sparing the girls' anxieties, they only increase them. The irony is that here the girl herself desperately wants to know what it is that will happen. The physical and social restrictions are already apparent to her: she has had to give up

cycling, jumping around in the park etc., because she could not bear her mother's suspicious glances. Her simple child's underwear is replaced by more flimsy, less functional, feminine styles.

"Life outside the home also concealed a mysterious danger for her. There were her mother's eyes spying on her body, every part of it, its every movement and every quiver, whether she sat in her room, slept in bed, went to the bath, put her hand on her head or tummy. Something was going to happen, something terrible, which she didn't know about, but wanted to know about.. however terrible it was going to be. Not knowing was far worse. She had to know in order to prepare herself, but her mother didn't want to speak about it, and she couldn't ask.."<sup>5</sup>

The whole problem of becoming a young woman, which is only fraught with difficulty here because of the demand for virginity and an intact hymen, is condensed into the symbol of high heels. Sa'dawi captures the young girl's foreboding that something dreadful is going to happen by the frequent use of words denoting instability, vague fears and secrecy. She describes the older women's behaviour as being marked by suppressed laughs, whispers and strangled sighs. The girl's groundless fears are all occasioned by society. There is nothing she can do but await her fate, until the barrier is finally broken down with her first menstruation and she becomes initiated into the secrets of womanhood.

Still on the theme of individual sexuality in conflict with the values of a repressive society, comes "Al-Kidhb" (The lie). Although there is much that is contrived about this story, it contains an interesting blend of pathos and humour. A middle-aged married man and father of five, is sitting with his best friend's wife alone in her flat. They

are so familiar with each other, and his demeanour is so perfectly staid and respectable, that there is no sense of fear or embarrassment for them to be together without her husband present. Deep down, however, he is frustrated and anxious about his sexuality. He wishes to make a pass at her as a last effort to regain his sense of potency. She is described as a modern, educated young woman, as she sits in her short skirt totally engrossed in reading. As a contrast to her relaxed absorption, comes his growing unease, for he has decided to strip off and confront her with his nakedness. This is the only way he can imagine of seducing her, so convinced is he that his nudity alone will be irresistible. When he stops making polite conversation about dull topics, she switches on the radio to cover the silence, but the droning Qur'ān reciter whose voice fills the room, has an immediately inhibiting effect on the man's intentions. This humorous passage, where the naked man feels impelled to stand to attention out of reverence for the hallowed words, hides a deeper significance; the unconscious power of religious indoctrination to thwart one's spontaneous sexual urges.

"Perhaps if it had been another programme, not such a serious one, a play or concert, he might have moved from his place. But a Quranic recitation, and in such a sober voice, gave him no alternative but to stand still in his place, motionless."<sup>6</sup>

The naked man strikes us as a pathetic figure. He has absorbed his society's customary ideas on masculinity, which exaggerate the importance of the male physique and underestimate women's indifference to sex. Something naive about his intended gesture conflicts with his



uptight respectability and hints at the inner loneliness he suffers. The religious programme is followed by the news and then by a stroke of bad luck. Just as the woman is about to look up and see him, Sa'dawi's deus ex machina comes in the form of a power cut, which casts them into darkness. This may seem to the Western reader hopelessly contrived, that the author is stepping in too abruptly, unless he considers it in the social context, for power cuts are not uncommon in Egypt. The woman feels her way to the study, while the man gropes for his clothes. By the time she returns and the lights are back to normal, he is dressed and sitting sedately without a hair ruffled. It is the man who rouses our pity, for the fact that he has to look outside his marriage for love, and that he has approached the problem in the wrong way, imagining that sex and nudity were enough to make a relationship. The woman, on the other hand, one feels, would have been strong enough to deal with the situation even if she had looked up and found him naked.

The dehumanizing aspects of life as an office worker in the state bureaucracy are dealt with in the stories "Rajul" (A man), "Nuḥzir wa Yuḥfaz" (Case closed) and "Al-Maqāl" (The article). In "Al-Maqāl", we see an 'intellectual' whose talent and commitment are used by the bureaucracy to perpetuate oppression. He is a writer under pressure to produce an article on socialism for the newspaper, but he finds that the usual clichés are meaningless. He tears up several papers, dissatisfied with his expression. He tries to think what socialism really means, and what poverty has meant for him. It is easy to find words to romanticize both the ideals of the former and the humanity fostered

by a shared burden, found in the latter. His memories, however, show how his own experience of childhood poverty had engendered in him hatred for the poor, for their ugliness and ignorance, besides a hatred for the affluent who could afford a comfortable lifestyle. It is only when he rejects a sentimental approach to the subject, that he can write to his satisfaction: this time he writes on the need for the practical application of socialist ideology. As he leaves his apartment in his car, he spots a young street urchin whose features remind him of his own at the same age. Poverty has not been eradicated despite the writings of such as he and all the socialist slogans bandied about in the press.

"Rajul" begins with a wife's discovery of her husband's homosexuality. With Egyptian society being very sensitive on the subject of sexuality, Sa'dawi has naturally had to write with a certain ambiguity, which she achieves well here. Since nothing is explicit, the overall atmosphere of shame, humiliation and regret are all the more forcefully conveyed.

Khadija, the wife, surprises her husband, Ushmawi, in his office with another man, supposedly his boss, on the carpet, the whole of her relationship with him flashes through her mind for scrutiny. What she sees before her casts a different light on all that had gone before, and seemed so straightforward. She begins to see how his great efforts to please her had been to compensate for any sense of inadequacies he may have had and what it must have cost him to fulfil his obligations as a husband. One senses her sadness that she had not been really loved during that time and her realization that there had always been

a barrier between them.<sup>7</sup> A little of Ushmawi's background is sketched in so that we know how respectable, ambitious and hard-working he was as a personal assistant, how he adapted so well to the requirements of his superiors and gained promotion. The only way for him to climb the ladder of promotion had been always to give that extra dedication to his boss which had meant, acting as lover. Ushmawi had complied without realizing he was making sacrifices. He was always rewarded materially and the affairs were conducted in private. When he is caught out, he feels not only crushed internally, on the personal level because he has been taken advantage of for his sexuality, but also on the broader level, he feels the true weight of all the toadying and sycophancy that had gone into creating and perpetuating such a hierarchical and corrupt system, at work. Since we understand Ushmawi's situation, we feel reluctant to condemn him.

In Khadija, Sa'dawi shows a more attractive form of heroine than the confident asexual young feminists who mouth her ideas elsewhere. Here is a rare portrayal of a mature woman coming to terms with a difficult situation, potentially a breakdown of her marriage, by exercising overwhelming human sympathy and understanding for her husband's plight despite her own sense of loss. Khadija decides that on balance, their ten years of married life has been more sweet than bitter, which gives her the stability and strength to confront the situation without hysteria. Sa'dawi uses this story to show that there is more to marriage than sexuality, and that the unnatural demands made in one's working life can cruelly upset the home balance. From the technical point of view, the ending is emotionally satisfying

besides being artistically so. Khadija, full of loving concern for her husband, is shown helping him to dress. By mentioning Khadija gathering Ushmawi's clothes, Sa'dawi picks up the reference she made earlier to the all-important suit as being a status symbol of the respectable middle-class man and that which had initially attracted Khadija to him.<sup>8</sup>

"Nuzir wa Yuhfaz" shows Sa'dawi already interested in the subjects of interrogation and the injustice of the legal system. Here she describes the feelings of a man under questioning as he attempts to rationalize his final submission to his interrogators. It is supposed that these latter are not Egyptian, with the reference that at times they speak to each other in a language that is foreign to him. (Are we to imagine that they are British?) Whatever they are, they intimidate the man and he feels powerless to resist. We read what are to become Sa'dawi's typical adjectives to describe anxiety; a dry, bitter-tasting mouth and paralysis of the speech organs.<sup>9</sup> The case concerns the embezzlement of funds by a certain well-connected official. The lowly clerk who discovered the crime, has instead, according to the intricacies of Egyptian justice, become accused of it. The man is here to give evidence to the interrogators who are all supporting the embezzler; but inside him he knows the clerk to be innocent, and has promised to defend him. He thinks of all that he stands to lose by telling the truth and how his family of nine children would starve. Yet to defend the truth appears to be too difficult for him to do alone, and if he attempts it, he would be able to face his friends

but not feed his family. For an honest man, it is a difficult decision to take, but he finally capitulates to the pressure: the wealthy embezzler is to go free, the lowly clerk to be punished in his stead, and the case closed.

One could say perhaps that all Sa'dawi's stories in this volume concentrate on the alienated individual. On the whole, their situations are far more grave than those dealt with in the stories of the first three collections. In trying to adapt to the world, Sa'dawi's main characters here are brought to a point of crisis or decision. Sa'dawi shows that whether they rebel, or try to conform, either they or someone else will suffer.

"Al-Murabba'" (The square) purports to be a story about an individual under torture. Sa'dawi is trying to convey the way in which imprisonment sharpens one's sense of existence and alters one's priorities. The reader can see Sa'dawi straining to capture the essence of a passing moment, for a man in such a position. Unfortunately, this story contains too much that is vague and trite to make it meaningful to the reader. There is more substance to "Laysa Baghlan" (He is not a mule) which is also concerned with torture. Sa'dawi is acknowledging the man's strength of will to survive and not disclose the wanted information, a strength which can be developed under the most painful experiences. She claims that it is like a sixth sense, unrecognized as yet by the medical profession, only because doctors themselves have never experienced it.<sup>10</sup> The prisoner here feels that he can dissociate his mind from the intensity of pain in his body. He is aware of his

life stretching back continuously through time. Sa'dawi might have intended this to be an awareness of his soul. He wonders if they can really destroy this aspect of himself, his essence? The sadistic sergeant is trying to extract from him the address of a secret printing press, but the man refuses to yield. It turns out that his co-conspirator has already confessed and the torturer has known all along. When the sergeant admits to the prisoner that he knows the address, the latter breaks down, his capacity to resist has snapped inside him.

"Al-Şūra" (The picture) is another of Sa'dawi's successful depictions of the problems of the adolescent girl. Narjis is developing sexual awareness. This story shows how her innocence is lost and her illusions shattered. Narjis appears to adore her father, who is a respected official in an important position. He is authoritarian and she obeys his every command. She has no mother, and her father is incapable of enlightening her about any personal changes in puberty. The nearest he can get to this is to warn her to wash herself thoroughly before going to bed, so that she will have pleasant dreams. One day, Narjis happens to bump into Nabawiyya, the servant girl, who is of a similar age. The physical contact suddenly awakens Narjis's own sexuality and she secretly examines her body, as well as she can, in the bedroom mirror. At night, she finds pleasure in masturbating for the first time. Sa'dawi can only suggest this taboo subject by an oblique reference to the bed creaking and a touch of humour that the girl is so distressed about the noise it is making and her relief when she realizes that her 'wicked' i.e. sexual, thoughts, were all due to her having forgotten to wash before going to bed.

When Narjis reaches the kitchen to wash herself, she finds the door locked and hears a panting sound. She immediately imagines that the servant (who sleeps in the kitchen) must be engaged in the same act as she herself had been moments before. Her curiosity gets the better of her and she looks through the keyhole only to find her father having sex with Nabawiyya. Narjis returns shocked to her room and connects her own feelings of sexuality with what she has seen of the final act. She turns to look at a photo of her father on the wall and sees a spider weaving its web across the face. As she tries to blow it away, a blob of saliva fixes the insect to its spot, she attempts to brush it off with her hand, but the picture falls and shatters. This ending is satisfying from the artistic point of view: the broken glass symbolizes the shattering of her innocence and sudden loss of reverence for her father.

Another story with a woman doctor as narrator is "Al-Rajul Dhū'l-Azrār" (The man with the buttons). One feels Sa'dawi trying to mix fact with fiction as at the beginning and end of Imra'a 'inda Nuqtat al-Sifr. The doctor's introduction in this story seems superfluous, unless it is to remind the reader that Sa'dawi is both doctor and writer of fiction. The woman who is the subject of this story, tells us that she has written about her own experience of marriage which she has delivered to the narrator in the form of her own short story. One imagines too that this is autobiographical and hence not wholly fictional. It deals with her marital relations, which seem to have been particularly unfulfilling with her husband. Her tension arising from sexual frustration manifests itself in physical symptoms

such as tiredness, cold limbs and emotional paralysis. One day she meets an old man who lives with a neighbour in the same building as she. He ridicules her husband by telling her things she did not know about him, which causes her embarrassment. The two become sexually intimate and the woman experiences sexual enjoyment for the very first time. He is unwilling to enter into a relationship with her, although she shows herself willing to share his attentions with his other women. She ponders his motives, wondering why he should have acted thus, only to leave her to return to her husband. With a certain altruism, he suggests that he has initiated her into sexuality in order to save her life, i.e. to save her from permanent lack of fulfilment. She is left with the prospect of resuming married life with her husband, having now broken down the barrier cutting her off from sexual pleasure. Her task is to integrate her new awareness of herself into her dull marriage. The title here contrasts the two men: the husband, the one with the buttons, is sexually pent-up. He is as restricted sexually and emotionally as his body is restricted by the fastenings of his tailored clothes. The old man, on the other hand, has flowing robes without buttons, indicating his free, more casual attitude to sexuality.

"Balad Ghayr al-Balad" (Some other town) suffers from structural weaknesses which tend to blur the effectiveness of the contrast Sa'dawi is trying to create between the life of the ordinary citizens of Ismailia and their rich neighbours. The former feel the full impact of the bombardment, in human and material terms, the latter are cushioned by their wealth so that they can continue their lifestyle uninterrupted. Sa'dawi tends to overdevelop the detail of the first



section of the story with background about the heroine's life and marriage, her family and neighbours. The woman is seen cowering fearfully under the bed or in a cupboard at the noise of the shelling, beseeching God, with the usual Muslim formulas, to save them and prevent the infidel from triumphing over them.<sup>11</sup> She is stunned by an explosion which demolishes her neighbour's house, and while her husband goes off to try and find a lorry so that they can evacuate their belongings, she finds her attention caught by a huge house surrounded by a flourishing garden which she had not noticed before. She peeps through the fence and observes the gardener watering the plants. She then hears the rich owner complain to the gardener about the red roses for their lack of colour. The cruel incongruity of the situation strikes her: how could someone be concerned about the precise shade of the red petals, when the blood of an injured man flowed crimson only yards away? In a land like Egypt with so much desert, and water a luxury, it is a telling image that Sa'dawi uses when she describes the rich man's garden being watered; the rich may squander freely, even that which could sustain the life of the poor. For the woman to look into the garden seems as unreal to her as if she were looking at another place altogether.

The theme of social injustice is continued in "Al-'Aṭash" (Thirst) On a scorching day, a young servant girl is off to market to buy meat and vegetables. She spies her friend Hamida relishing a bottle of fizzy drink at a roadside kiosk, and instantly wants one for herself. Fizzy drink, in Egypt, apart from being a status symbol of American culture, is a luxury only the well-off can afford. The girl knows

that she cannot afford one and that her mistress would know if she tried to short change her on the shopping. Being only a simple, truthful girl, she has been threatened into honesty by her mother's warnings of hell fire.<sup>12</sup> She debates with herself whether she can afford to take the risk of buying a drink. So strong is her desire that she overcomes her guilty conscience at skimping on the food prices. The fires of hell seem too far off to be a real threat, and the more immediate punishment of slaps from her mistress, seem worth enduring for the sake of a few sips of fizzy drink. This is a pleasing short story with a strong Egyptian feeling to it. Sa'dawi gives a touching description of the dilemma of the poor in the face of Western capitalist luxury goods. The whole tone of the story takes on an ironic twist when one considers the irony (unintended by Sa'dawi) that the fresh orange juice which the girl could make from buying a few cheap oranges, would be far more nutritious and thirst-quenching than the expensive artificial gaseous variety!

"'Ayn al-Ḥayāh" (literally 'the eye' or 'source of Life', but also a girl's name) is the shorter of the two novellettes, and the only story which Sa'dawi has set outside her native Egypt. It begins with an introduction from a woman doctor, (Sa'dawi herself again?) who has been posted temporarily to the Palestinian camps in Jordan to help with the casualties from the fighting. There is a dig at the Cairo medical authorities who refuse to renew the intrepid doctor's contract, thus preventing her from continuing her job. Their preference is for male doctors to be sent to such a location; female ones only as a last resort.<sup>13</sup> The doctor in the story finds on her return to Cairo,

that she is dominated by thoughts of a strange, deaf-dumb woman, called Ayn, whom she had observed, going around the camps examining every casualty.

Ayn's life story begins before her birth, which allows Sa'dawi to conjecture about the nature of life in the womb. Her expression is appropriately vague, so as to be inoffensive, but the imaginative reader can make out the foetus's fears as it clings to the wall of the womb during intercourse.<sup>14</sup> Ayn's birth, with details of her mother's labour pains, is also included, followed by an outline of her childhood; how she negotiated the dangers of her surroundings, familiarized herself with her family, played with the other children, and developed physically. Ayn recalls how her sisters had been married off and how she had awaited her own turn with some impatience. It is best not to complicate matters too much by considering Sa'dawi's viewpoint here, which is that of the doctor-narrator seeing Ayn's life through Ayn's eyes. What Sa'dawi is aiming for here is possibly an impression of the typical life cycle of an ordinary, uneducated peasant woman of the region.

Ayn is disappointed with her husband, but grows to tolerate his sweaty hands, his cursing, coughing and kicking. One day Ayn's life changes, for she meets an unusual woman, called Nun, who attracts her simply by smiling. The two become acquainted during a curious conversation. In this series of short exchanges, Ayn parrots the last word interrogatively of Nun's every sentence. According to Nun, Ayn's name is short for Ayn al-Hayah. This happened to have been the name of

Nun's best friend (and possibly lover?) to whom the present Ayn bears a strong resemblance. The text is somewhat vague here, vague enough to hint at a previous lesbian relationship between the former Ayn al-Hayah and Nun, and a developing one between Nun and the present Ayn. The fact that Nun opens the eyes of Ayn to life and a full awareness of her self, is conveyed by the symbol of Ayn's name. After she has met Nun, Ayn feels that she has become a complete personality; it is as if she has regained something she had lost, or acquired something she had lacked once she has been made aware of her full name.

Ayn adopts the persona of Nun's previous friend almost as if by a process of transmigration of souls. Now Sa'dawi's characters, the present Ayn and the former Ayn al-Hayah, blur together and the remainder of the text which deals with Ayn, can possibly best be understood as a repetition of the previous Ayn's life-story.

Nun is certainly a peculiar woman. She is credited with a knowledge of life, despite being unmarried and having never given birth. Sa'dawi suggests that Nun exerted a fascinating effect on the men of the area who would queue up to ogle at her naked body as she exposed herself. Even though they were allowed up to four wives, the men seemed even more deprived and desperate for a woman.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps it was the harsh law, the narrator suggests, which prevented the men from enjoying their wives; she does not elucidate or explain this comment any further. In a passage of erotic writing, Sa'dawi describes Nun's vibrant body overflowing with vitality.<sup>16</sup> Quite probably, Nun is a prostitute. She does not love men, but only her friends, the

two Ayns, in turn. Nun has her own estimation of sharaf (respectability) we are told. She considers the honourable woman to be one whose sexuality attracts flocks of men, which is the very reverse of Middle Eastern custom.

At this point, the reader is aware of losing sight of the 'thread' of the story. He has had presented to him thus far, the doctor-narrator, Ayn, Nun and Ayn merging into the original Ayn al-Hayah: the focus has shifted too often because Sa'dawi has become carried away with inessential background information, or filling out space with banalities. Even Sa'dawi, the doctor, obtrudes to remind the reader how learned she is in medical science:

"Perhaps she was dead? But it wasn't a real death, just that kind of death that precedes real death and is called in medicine 'clinical death', when the breaths stop completely but the heart continues to resist with a faint beating..."<sup>17</sup>

Ayn is initiated into heterosexual sex and becomes pregnant. This alters her relationship with Nun. Ayn now feels complete in herself, as if she has realized the meaning of life inside her with the growing foetus. Giving birth is somehow a rebirth for herself: she feels her former pains and troubles to be behind her.

We imagine that she has to flee to escape the prurient indignation of the menfolk who pursue the unmarried mother and child, panting after vengeance, for the crime of illegitimacy.<sup>18</sup> Ayn, however, abandons her baby by the canal and escapes. It is supposed that this event

traumatized her into speechlessness and undertaking a constant search among the rocks for her own lost child. This returns us to the story's opening view of the strange woman running after the ambulance to see the casualty.

Amidst a certain amount of mawkish waffling, the ending shows the author as omniscient. She is not only urging, but commanding us to believe the veracity of her tale. Of Ayn she says:

"But she was a real woman. Her reality was not like that which, when a person gets near it, is real no more, but it was a real realness, such that it may not have seemed real from a distance, when one came closer, it took on a perceptible reality, that one could see with one's eyes, touch with one's hands or smell by the nose."<sup>19</sup>

and

"She had desired life and rejected death. Not an ordinary type of rejection where a person can accept something or reject it. She had no choice. In the beginning she was rejected, and so she had no option but to reject rejection."<sup>20</sup>

See how Sa'dawi strains to convince us with 'real realness' and 'reject rejection'! We may well ask: who is speaking here? If it is Sa'dawi herself, and she is speaking sincerely, then this is not fiction. If the narrator is not Sa'dawi, then it is fiction and we are under no obligation to believe that it is true. If further evidence were needed of Sa'dawi's struggle to express herself in Arabic, apart from the vagueness and contradictions, there are phrases such as "but it wasn't forgetfulness in the usual meaning of forgetfulness."<sup>21</sup> Either the

problem is because Sa'dawi's thoughts are not sufficiently clear to present themselves in a communicable form, or that the Arabic language itself is deficient in the necessary words to convey those ideas effectively.

Despite the technical inadequacies of this volume, there is considerable evidence that Sa'dawi's literary ability has advanced in certain areas, which makes the standard of the text patchy. She writes best in a descriptive mode, where her simplicity of expression results in an artistic blend of subject and language.<sup>22</sup> One notices, for example, the pleasing sentence structure in the Arabic (which is not conveyed so precisely in an English translation), of the following passage from "Kānat Hiya al-Ad'af":

"But he didn't stop.. he carried on trying and struggling.. the abundant sweat running in channels down his face, pouring into his mouth so that he licked it with his tongue, while casting a surreptitious eye over the two women sitting beside him. Each one of them was bent with her body over the leg which she was in charge of, but turning her face away to the wall.. out of courtesy so as not to witness such a scene. or out of boredom about having seen it before so many times.. or out of a disinclination to make herself an observer of a man's masculinity on his wedding night.. or out of embarrassment or pity.. or whatever.. The important thing was that they weren't looking at him."<sup>23</sup>

(Note how attached Sa'dawi is to what must be her favourite grammatical construction, those two dots to convey a pause.)

One very important aspect of such a straightforward style and simple vocabulary, is that it widens the appeal of such works to those who have not enjoyed a high level of education, and to teenagers and young people in general, providing them with an introduction to adult ideas and problems in an unintellectual form. Despite previous criticisms about the lack of revision which can justifiably be levelled against the writing here, this collection of Sa'dawi's remains of some value and interest for the new directions taken in themes: for example, tackling such taboo subjects as defloration, masturbation, puberty, torture, homosexuality etc.. and Sa'dawi's attempt at original viewpoints such as that of the child in "Lā Aḥad Yaqūl Lahā", the prisoner in "Al-Murabba'", the husband in "Kānat Hiya al-Aḍ'af" and the foetus in "'Ayn al-Ḥayāh".

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References to Al-Khayt wa'l-Jidār

- 1) These stories were later divided into two volumes and published under separate titles: the two longer ones in Al-Khayt wa 'Ayn al-Hayāh in 1981, and the remainder in Kānat Hiya al-Ad'af in 1979. The novelette "Al-Khayt" is of sufficient interest to warrant a section to itself. It will be discussed in the following section.
- 2) Al-Khayt wa'l-Jidār, p. 233.
- 3) Ibid., p. 216.
- 4) Sa'dawi tries to explain the cause of this sadness in her book Al-Unthā Hiya al-Asl (1974), p. 139. She attributes it to repressed anger against the husband or against society as a whole, which the woman has stifled within her.  
  
"I realized at last why I'd always felt bewildered by that peculiar smile on the faces of most wives. I hadn't realized the mystery behind it, but now I can understand it. It is that sad smile, that fragile smile which betrays an underlying distress, which the woman may or may not be conscious of, and because it is something born of conflict, it seems at times to be incongruous, like the smiling face of a child upon the wrinkled face of an old woman."
- 5) Al-Khayt wa'l-Jidār, p. 217.
- 6) Ibid., p. 98.

- 7) Ibid., p. 184.
- 8) Ibid., p. 183.
- 9) *ibid.*, p. 242.
- 10) Ibid., p. 83.
- 11) Ibid., p. 225.
- 12) Ibid., p. 254.
- 13) Ibid., p. 104. It is critical comments such as this which indicate that Sa'dawi's writing is partly for psychological relief, a catharsis for her resentments and frustration.
- 14) Al-Khayt wa'l-Jidār, pp. 107-8.
- 15) Ibid., pp. 133-5.
- 16) Ibid., p. 136.
- 17) Ibid., p. 139.
- 18) A similar scene is found later in Maut al-Rajul pp. 176-8, where Fathiya is pursued to the river bank only to be torn apart by the rabid mob enacting their collective justice.

19) Al-Khayt wa'l-Jidār, p. 151.

20) Ibid., p. 153.

21) Ibid., p. 153.

22) The allusive style of writing required for shielding the unimaginative Arab reader from explicit sexual detail, or the author from criticism, does not constitute artistry when allowed to pervade the whole text. I am suggesting here that in the various instances where Sa'dawi relies too heavily on this allusive style it is being used rather to exempt the author of the strenuous intellectual effort of devising a plot.

"Al-Khayṭ" comes as a contrast to Sa'dawi's realistic mode of fiction. It progresses mostly on a subconscious or dream level with occasional more lucid surfacings. Latifa al-Zayyat, an Egyptian writer, provides an introduction which prepares the reader for what she calls, "a new artistic experience: a strange, exciting and daring one."<sup>1</sup> Al-Zayyat notes that the 'thread' of the title "Al-Khayṭ" is that which has bound Daulat, the woman around whom this story centers, to her father throughout her life, and from which she struggles to get free.<sup>2</sup> This bond was tied, during her childhood, in their incestuous relationship. This seemingly innocent and affectionate relationship left its mark on her adolescence, prevented her from maturing psychologically and inhibited her contacts with the opposite sex. Some of the unusual instances which occur in the story, such as the phantom pregnancy, the drying up or flowing of breast milk, birth in the open air etc.. are interpreted by al-Zayyat as symbols pinpointing an Electra complex. Even so, she stresses the artistic side of the work: psychological suppositions are all very well and may help to clarify some of the content, but ultimately, the reader must draw his own conclusions from the totality of the work.

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The story begins with a straightforward narration by a lady doctor concerning a bothersome female patient. She has received a letter from the patient which contains a bizarre journey into a sick mind. It becomes clear later that the doctor and patient are in fact two

self-contained aspects of the same person. On the surface, the doctor is efficient and cool but her deeper emotional life is feverish and desperate. The hidden aspect of her mentality, so well suppressed by the professional woman in her, has erupted into a nervous breakdown, triggered perhaps by the stress of her father's death. Throughout the story, there is a sense of great mental struggle and a clear progression towards an integration of Daulat's personality. There are four important areas of her being which need reconciliation: her life as a professional doctor, her sexuality, her maternal instinct and her creative talent. Until her breakdown, the last three aspects of her self have been suppressed: by not being allowed to surface to her conscious mind, where they would have been the subject of thought, they have atrophied.

As a girl, Daulat had loved her father and had tender memories of him taking her to school and reading her stories. She had identified him as the source of her life and feared lest something happen to him or that he might die.<sup>3</sup> Her sense of her own worth seems to have been minimal: her only gratification was to see her father's appreciation for whatever she achieved. He became ill and bedridden. The night that he died, she saw herself pressing her finger on his jugular vein. Al-Zayyat regards Daulat's idea of killing her father as a buried desire to break the thread that tied her to him. Daulat was well aware that his death would signify the moment of her liberation. Until that time she had only lived in accordance with someone else's wishes, never her own. So powerful was the feeling of released energy, emotional, sexual and creative, after her father's death, that she

refers to it as her birth. Her senses immediately came to life.

"It was as though there had been a thick layer like a stopper over my ears which had suddenly fallen and I became able to hear sounds for the first time in my life."<sup>5</sup>

Bursting with physical energy, she imagines herself rushing out to seek in the doctor facet of herself, congratulation on performing her task, that of ending her father's life and giving birth to herself, but because she is on the way to integrating her personality, the doctor aspect is no longer distinct and she receives no appreciation. Her rational side is submerged by her turmoil.

Now comes the first in a series of what I referred to as 'more lucid surfacings'<sup>6</sup>: Daulat becomes aware of the relationship between pain and birth. Sa'dawi here, in a philosophical mood, indicates that becoming one's true independent self, able to act according to one's own direction, especially for a woman, involves pain but is well worth the effort. Since the father is traditionally the pillar of authority in the Egyptian family, his absence in real life can often have a truly liberating effect on a daughter. Daulat goes to her work at the newspaper office armed with her fragile "new-born will".<sup>7</sup> Due to her awakening mind, she finds herself incapable of writing the usual trivia to fill the column. Daulat had previously imagined her father and herself to be a sex apart, but now she is startled into an awareness of men and women as sexual opposites. The only available man is the one in her office whom she is unable to regard as a human

being. He is variously referred to by part of his footwear, for example: "the one with the small feet and checked shoes.."8 When he calls to her, Daulat's sexuality is aroused. As he touches her she feels the colours of things around her intensify. Their sexual encounter, implied in suitably veiled language, leaves her with a sensation of something bitter-tasting, the semen, within. She "wouldn't have believed that children could be created in a sea of bitterness".9

Time is of little relevance in this work: Daulat now feels heavy with her pregnancy. Its attendant backache, knife pains, the breaking of the waters etc.. are all evidence of a woman writer's touch. Daulat gives birth in the open air. The bitter taste in her mouth that had accumulated over the years from buried aversion to the opposite sex is replaced by the sweetness of nectar. Daulat is elated by the event and stretches out her hand to the baby girl. Her elation turns to despair as she finds her breast contains no milk for the infant. She finds herself tearing at her clothes and herself, till she is naked. This is a reflection of her fear at not having sufficient resources inside her to cope with her situation, a fear of not being able to live up to the possibilities of her liberation.

At various points she has a dialogue between her newly-awakened self and her doctor self: the former reproaches the latter for lack of human feeling.<sup>10</sup> She returns to her lucid self with a variation on her theme of new realizations. This time she progresses from the

knowledge that physical birth entails pain, to the new knowledge that thought too is born with pain. This refrain which echoes the previous one and is in similar language, gives structure to the work by representing both progression and regression. Whilst it marks Daulat's rapid mental development, it also shows her need for approval from another person which was a trait from her past.

Alone in her office, she reads from a book, this time not automatically, but deriving meaning from each sentence. It is an exciting and energizing experience. This magical process of reading, puts her in contact with the deepest currents and age-old joy of human knowledge. She recalls feeling humiliated by the indifference of the man in the office towards her. She tries to communicate with him by a written note but he does not respond except for a speechless, frenzied sexual encounter on the winding stairway. The scene of their writhing bodies as they struggle to balance on the cramped stair, each one compelled to fulfil his passion, striving to get the upper hand, and not to fall, is not without humour! Sa'dawi's language throughout this passage is ambiguous and heavy with sexual suggestion.

Daulat passes on to the joys of motherhood, almost boasting to her doctor-self, which is now reduced in her esteem, of the wonderful sensation of holding a soft warm child and the creeping flow of milk through her breast. It is significant that the maternal pleasures are essentially physical, something she has not experienced as a doctor. She gets frustrated with the doctor and sees herself pressing on her neck vein (the doctor's) until all goes white in unconsciousness. Her inner self has triumphed over the professional facade which she



showed to the world. Now she realizes that true freedom also is not born without pain. Her development has encompassed so far: the re-birth of her physical senses, her sexuality and maternal instinct, the awakening of her thought and the gaining of her freedom through eliminating those factors in her life which had oppressed her. The fact that she sees herself in her vision consciously putting an end to her father and the doctor, suggests the active nature of her struggle: she has acted according to her own internal impulse to self-fulfilment.

She goes to the newspaper office, relishing the freedom to swing her limbs as she walks. Next she discovers the joy of writing, the fascinating process of using the familiar words of common coinage but transforming them into her own original message. She feels her composition as something with its own vitality welling up from deep within. Daulat shifts from satisfaction at her own creativity to self-appreciation, which for her, feels as rewarding as breastfeeding her baby. The child symbolizes her creativity besides representing a real child. The 'thread' of ideas comes from the back of her head to flow into her writing where it builds her composition just as the milk flows thread-like through her breast to nourish the child.<sup>11</sup>

It seems that she sees herself in the new-born baby: its features are her own. What is significant here is that she no longer depends upon approval from another. She values herself because of what she has achieved. She guards her creation with care, when she takes what might be called her 'book-baby' to the office. He escapes,

however, from her bag and she rushes to catch up with him. The interpretation is ambiguous here, being partly her fear of losing control over her creative activity and fear of letting go of her newly-born personality. She is afraid too, of losing control over her child (who is now referred to as a boy!) and is thereby condemned to repeat the possessive and over-protective relationship between the single parent and offspring of the opposite sex, from which she herself suffered!

Despite her efforts to control things, her writing and her child grow out of hand, perhaps because she had let it (or him) dominate her life. She is imagining the frightening possibility of losing sight of herself as an individual after having made such progress. She begins to age rapidly, still pursuing the same course, afraid to change. When she collapses, however, she is delighted to see the face of her son coming towards her through the mist. Everything turns white and a sound of birdsong is released into the air as she loses consciousness.

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Although real time does not exist in "Al-Khayṭ", Sa'dawi gives the sensation of duration by her use of parallel passages; for example, the father's ageing and Daulat's ageing<sup>12</sup> and the themes of Daulat's growing consciousness that pain and any worthwhile achievement is linked and the gradual assertion of her inner self over her doctor self. Unless the reader is particularly perceptive, a third or even fourth reading of "Al-Khayṭ" is likely to be more rewarding, since

more of the 'threads' of its closely-woven structure will become apparent. It is interesting that Sa'dawi has shown Daulat unable to develop her own creative talent: it demands prior fertilization from a dehumanized male! Sa'dawi's use of the child as a symbol of creativity is somewhat unconvincing: birth is essentially a passive creative act, taking place regardless of the mother's mental state; though special to each woman, it is a common occurrence. The act of creative writing demands the active engagement of the person's total mind, it is a rarer event and requires talent.

Sa'dawi's "Al-Khayṭ" seems to represent an extreme dilemma of the intelligent, creative Egyptian woman struggling to get free of the mental barriers erected throughout her past, in order to exist as an independent person with a mind liberated enough to fulfil its talents. The mental barriers were caused by her upbringing and the lack of integration of her sexual, creative and maternal instincts with her conscious mind. Although she sees herself achieving a release through her breakdown, she is fearful of the consequences of her liberation.

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References to "Al-Khayṭ"

- 1) "Al-Khayṭ", p. 3.
- 2) Ibid., p. 5.
- 3) Ibid., pp. 12-15.
- 4) Ibid., p. 19.
- 5) Ibid., p. 18.
- 6) Ibid., pp. 20, 33, 49.
- 7) Ibid., p. 20.
- 8) Ibid., p. 23.
- 9) Ibid., p. 27.
- 10) Ibid., pp. 23, 32, 38, 44.
- 11) Ibid., p. 51.
- 12) Ibid., pp. 16 and 56 respectively.

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MAUT MA'ĀLĪ AL-WAZĪR SĀBIQAN

Maut Ma'ālī al-Wazīr Sābiqan (Death of an ex-minister) is a collection of short stories published in 1980. The prevailing mood is one of pessimism, disappointment and bewilderment. The themes are various, but all seem to hinge on the problem of the individual Egyptian's adaptation, or lack of adaptation, to society. In these stories, Sa'dawi criticizes politics, family relationships of a kind that frustrate healthy emotional expression, inequality between the sexes, and the stereotyped images of a polarized masculinity and femininity to which her society still clings. Sa'dawi is concentrating here on the problems of the educated middle-class. All her characters show some degree of emotional confusion or mental anguish because an inner impulse to be sincere conflicts with the outward behaviour that is expected.

The title story gives a clear example of the tension caused in the professional man who has apparently successfully adapted to his working role but in doing so has completely submerged his real self. By playing the political game all through his career, the minister has risen to his responsible position. He proved himself adept at giving the answer required by his superior even when this conflicted with the truth. This story is in the form of a long monologue addressed to the man's mother: her unspoken but implied questions, are simple, and

draw out his explanation of the situation, his feelings about it and the workings of politics:

"Yes Mother, this is the ABC of politics which we learn in the first lesson, that the correct answer isn't always the desired one but the desired one is always the correct one, and men like us have to be constantly on the alert, physically and mentally, to glean the correct fact from the incorrect."<sup>1</sup>

Trying to be one step ahead and ever alert to danger had caused him permanent tension. One day, however, his 'real self' emerges enough from its repressed state and answers truthfully; he has unaccountably forgotten that first lesson of politics. He notices how easy and simple it had been to do because it had not required any prior deceitful thought. He notices too the profound relief of a great weight, the burden of fabrication, being lifted from his chest. Of course, he loses his job as a result, but at least he has made contact with his real self.

How does Sa'dawi prepare the reader to accept the ex-minister's sudden awareness of his situation? The train of thought can only be described as curious. His self-consciousness is sparked off by meeting a young woman junior employee who boldly looks him in the eye and refuses to play the deferential role that he expects in a subordinate. The fact that she is a woman, further inflames his outrage because of his excessively male-chauvinist views. There is an element of jealousy in his anger at the young woman for, by her direct gaze, she had done what he had never dared to do; because she was a member of the 'inferior' sex, this lowered himself in his own eyes even further.

Her behaviour pinpoints his weakness. He puts it down to his upbringing and tells his mother that perhaps if he had seen her look up to his father, he might have followed her example, for she had been his model of behaviour when he was young.<sup>2</sup>

Several important points are worth noting here: where the individual derives little self-esteem from doing his job, because of the corruption of his personal values, necessitated by a corrupt bureaucracy, excessive importance is attached to titles and showing deference to rank, hence the minister feels insulted when denied that which alone gives him a sense of worth. That self-esteem which should flow naturally from pride in one's achievements never develops. It is also strangely revealing of a society that what is essentially a gesture of honest communication and concentration, i.e. to focus one's attention on the eyes of the other, while speaking or listening to him, is given the opposite interpretation as being impolite! The minister's instinctive reaction is to try and humiliate the junior employee in return.<sup>3</sup>

In his attitude towards women, the minister displays exactly that ambivalence which men commonly feel in Egyptian and Arab society, towards the female sex. In trying to humiliate the young woman he shouts at her:

"How dare you?! Who are you? Don't you know that whatever you might be, you're no more than a junior employee and I'm the Minister, and however high you get, in the end you're just a woman whose place is in bed under a man?!"<sup>3</sup>

Later, however, he does not seem to be aware of the fact that he has bracketed his mother whom he venerates, along with other women whom he considers should have an inferior place in society and who are fit only to lie under a man!

"Yes, Mother, she was like any other woman, and like you Mother. Yes, like you, but I never in all my life saw you, Mother, raise your eyes to anyone else's as this woman raised hers to mine. Perhaps if I had seen you do it once, I would have been able to tolerate this young woman office worker. In fact, if you had raised your eyes once to my father's, perhaps I too would have been able to raise my eyes to his, and perhaps I would have been able to raise my eyes to those of another man in a position of authority. But I didn't see you raise your eyes to his once, Mother. If you had done it once, then I could have done it like you, for you, Mother, were my only example when I was a child. I used to copy you, in all your movements, I copied you.. I learnt everything from you.."<sup>4</sup>

One cannot help feeling that Sa'dawi herself is completely unaware of the impact of this glaring contradiction which she has created, otherwise she would have drawn attention to it as an important point. Whether it is as important as the main theme of the corruption of the individual by conforming to corrupt society, is of course, debatable; it is certainly more complex. One is not entirely convinced about whether the ex-minister appreciates what has happened to him, that he has liberated his real self and found the relief of being true to himself, surely no mean discovery?! If he does so, then why should he refer to his truthful reply to the president which caused his dismissal as something insignificant?<sup>5</sup>



"My real tragedy is not that I lost my position as Minister, but the tragedy is how I lost it. Perhaps the tragedy would have been somewhat slighter if I had lost it for a significant reason, or an important reason or even a reasonable reason."<sup>6</sup>

This story is interesting for illustrating in fictional form some of Sa'dawi's arguments from her factual book Al-Unthā Hiya al-Asl.<sup>7</sup>

In this collection Sa'dawi is particularly concerned at demonstrating the connection between adult behaviour and attitudes, childhood experiences and the example of parents. Her characters reach a crisis point when they are forced to question the automatic responses that had served them so well before and which they trace to childhood intimidation or imitation of their parents' behaviour. An example of this is how the man character in "I'tirāf Rujūlī" (A masculine confession), again in the form of a monologue, realizes that his sense of male superiority has caused him to deny any gentler traits in himself, those facets of his personality which he refers to as his 'feminine side'. This repression of part of his personality causes him severe mental stress, prevents his enjoying marriage or even communicating with his wife, and all as a result of the way in which he has been brought up.<sup>8</sup>

Since the man's parents had encouraged him to believe that his masculinity was a distinguishing feature, he did his utmost to develop it and bring it to the attention of others. He learned from his father never to show emotion or pain. His inner compulsion to prove his masculinity became an eternal struggle in the form of constant

rivalry with other men. Since he suppressed his anger before other men, such as his boss, he needed to release it somehow. The purpose of marriage, he told himself, is for the man to have a convenient outlet for his anger which he is entitled to vent at his dependent wife and children. He had not, however, understood his urgent need for his mistress until the night on which he experienced failure, which came in the form of his defeat in the election, a violent quarrel with his wife and the shock of seeing her naked in his friend's arms. He had found great relief from a sea of tension in crying to his mistress; she was the only person with whom he felt he need show no restraint in his emotions. Paradoxically, he feels it was the happiest night of his life.

"Everything changed that night. The false mask which they call masculinity fell, and I began to see myself as I really am. I discovered for the first time, that I'm not obliged to prove to myself or anyone else that I am a man. What does the word 'man' mean anyway?"<sup>10</sup>

He admits that he had felt ashamed of revealing that suppressed part of him, his feminine side, which he says all men hide as if it were something disgraceful. Yet he continues to frequent his mistress because he needs an emotional safety valve if he is to survive as a man in the public world of work and social life to which he still feels drawn. It seems as if Sa'dawi is writing here chiefly for male readers, trying to show them the destructive consequences of the traditional male chauvinist upbringing. Perhaps she is encouraging them to identify with the character and alter their attitudes for the sake of their

own health and happiness. She is also suggesting a reason for men's frequenting prostitutes and mistresses, namely, that society does not allow them to express their true feelings at home or work. One particular instance shows how difficult it can be on occasions to follow Sa'dawi's brand of psychology: for example, what are we to make of the reasoning behind the man's statement that his wife is unfaithful because she loves him so much, or that her infidelity causes him to desire her even more, and then consider it a deep peace of mind that he has discovered he is not the only man in the world, a peace which he imagines other men would enjoy if they could only be persuaded to get their wives to be unfaithful too?!<sup>11</sup>

This type of passage is one of the disappointing aspects of Sa'dawi's writing and can be found regularly. It is basically a lack of coherence in the way the character reveals his thoughts. The puzzled reader is left wondering how on earth the character reached his particular opinion out of its being a consecutive thought to the previous one. Perhaps something has been left out or he is up against a mind that does not seem to mind if there is little connection in meaning between his thoughts? This may be less of a weakness in Sa'dawi's writing than a typical trait of Arab character and an unavoidable concomitant of the struggle to give meaning to the Arabic language.

One of the male character's final conclusions in this story, is that as a man, he imagines that he understands what women have known all along, namely that they are dispensable. Such knowledge he believes has excused them from the pressures of living up to an image

of themselves as a unique species. For the attentive reader this trek of self-exploration by the man is completely spoiled by his peremptory orders of the last two lines to his mistress to pour him another drink with plenty of ice, to leave him to 'die' between her arms and not to interrupt him. It recalls the opening of the story and is presumably used to round off his monologue. However, it suggests that his view of women and his mistress in particular is unchanged. He still views them as functional beings, of value only in relation to what service they can perform for him! There is no indication either, that he sees his self-discovery as having any relevance to improving his marriage, else why is he addressing all this to his mistress and not his wife?

Three stories reflect the emotional confusion felt by women contemplating an extra-marital affair: "Al-Qinā'" (The mask), "Risālat Ḥubb 'Asriyya" (A modern love letter) and "Risāla Khāṣṣa ilā Ṣadīq Fannān" (A personal letter to an artist friend). Though obviously sensitive, intelligent and educated, the women are all inhibited from expressing their true feelings for the men. This is essentially due to the fact that they are unable to ascertain what their feelings are in the first place.

In a society where free extra-marital relationships are not encouraged and are certainly fraught with difficulty, emotions deprived of normal development tend to get stunted on a fantasy plane. The imagination begins to construct what is not there. The tiniest casual gesture is endowed with the greatest significance. These women are

reduced to that time-worn test of trying to commit to paper whatever comes to mind related to the beloved, in the hope that something will be clarified: for example, here the woman has trusted her daydream, which is chiefly born of loneliness, and is searching for its proof in real life.

"Is there anything that can remove doubt? Is there proof of anything? There isn't a single definite point between you and me that I can grasp hold of. There is no word, language, movement or touch that could serve, nothing at all between us that could confirm anything. But there is one thing I am sure of (and this too can't be proved), which is that you feel towards me exactly what I feel towards you, by the same destiny, in the same form and at the same moment. Am I mistaken? I may be and I may not."<sup>12</sup>

She has taken the initiative of inviting him to her place, safe ground where she had hoped to make her love more obvious. When he does not come, she imagines it is because he prefers their relationship to be ambiguous. Is it her fear of him or his of her, she wonders, that prevents any unambiguous physical demonstration of deeper affection between them?

Sa'dawi's style reflects the tentative nature of the feelings the letter writer is struggling with and the confusion in the character's mind by such contradictory statements as, "You may be surprised and you may not be surprised."<sup>13</sup> and "When a person loves and doesn't love, gets angry and doesn't get angry."<sup>14</sup> Too much of this is irritating to the reader who can sense that it is a useful filler and poor substitute for thought from the author. The tension of the young

woman's dilemma mounts until readers receive a shock which gives them a better perspective on her emotional state. She recalls how she had been about to confess to her friend one day, that he was the reality and certainty in her life, when they had been interrupted; perhaps it had been the telephone, she wonders, perhaps the doorbell, perhaps one of his children had looked out and seen them! So we learn that he is not only married, but a father as well! No wonder the young woman feels so insecure in this delicate position. However, she proceeds to defend herself against his charge that she was fleeing from life, incapable of loving and suffering from the "twentieth-century disease".<sup>15</sup> Far from it, she says, her senses are too acute to listen to the news or read the papers. Other people, she feels, are blind and deaf in comparison. After spotting him driving anxiously one day, she had started to question his lifestyle: what drove him, the quest for money, power, fame or love? She begins to see him in a different light. Sa'dawi has now reversed their positions and the young woman begins to appear as the saner of the two characters, with the more worthwhile values. The story ends with the young woman wishing that she could wipe away the fatigue from his eyes, and gently caress his face, wondering if she did so, would he still accuse her of being unable to love, of not understanding and lacking intelligence.

The woman in "Al-Qinā'" is thinking over her past encounters with men and realizes that she always feels an aversion to a sexual relationship if it is not accompanied by love. Her explanations of the reasons for women's aversion to men in general, show another example of that strange juxtaposition of ideas mentioned above, which pretend

to a logic they do not possess:

"I knew the reason for the aversion, for it is a natural aversion that has no relationship with the body but rather with history. The more man worshipped his masculinity, the more woman fled from it. Women's aversion is the other side to worshipping a male god. There has been no power in the world that could remove women's aversion except for love triumphing over the male gods and history turning back six thousand years to when the gods were female. Does love conquer? And is the relationship between us love? I didn't know. I had no proof. Does love have any proof?"<sup>16</sup>

From being so certain that love was the only thing which could overcome patriarchy, she goes on to wonder if love is no more than a fairy tale illusion which will one day lose its mask. The man she is with continues to fill her glass with wine and tries to attract her attention to his body, but in vain, for she does not lose her inhibitions. It is past three o'clock in the morning and he gives up hope of seducing her. She leaves for home and next morning expects the illusion of love to have shattered, but instead she replaces the fallen mask. The ending is ambiguous: is it that she prefers to see love as an illusion, i.e. masked, or that she cannot yet do without it? As in the previous story, the woman appears isolated with her feelings. Positive communication between the couple is again non-existent.

'Risāla Khāṣṣa ilā Sadīq Fannān' is a more complicated story. Perhaps the reason that it lacks coherence is that Sa'dawi has not given herself sufficient room to develop the complex personal philosophical ideas which she chooses for her themes. As before, it is not always possible to agree with Sa'dawi's logic nor with the similes

she employs. For example, the woman ponders:

"Is it my destiny to be something other than what Fate intended me to be, not to be a woman (in the usual sense of female) and not to be a doctor (as I had graduated from medical college to be)? Is it my fate to be a human being before being a female, and to be an artist before being a doctor?"<sup>17</sup>

After reading this, one starts to ask oneself whether her premises are correct, why does the character imagine being a doctor, a woman, a female and an artist, so problematic and mutually exclusive? The tensions between a job and vocation, between being feminine and human could probably have been phrased more convincingly and without giving Destiny the final say.

Certain images also hinder the reader from understanding, for example: "I lived for years like something pulled between two fates, like a piece of meat caught between a pair of fierce jaws",<sup>18</sup> where the idea of being pulled in opposite directions is missing. Next, the woman grips her pen ready, as she puts it, to "pour out my soul upon the paper, as truthfully and spontaneously as death"! Truth (ṣidq) is now referred to as a "rapacious beast" and reality (ḥaqīqa) has become "like death or more than death"! Such powerful symbols as death, life, truth, reality need to be used sparingly for greatest effect. Sa'dawi has no objection to repeating the hackneyed image of the drop of water being lost in the ocean.<sup>19</sup> To follow this philosophical mode, we are treated to an arithmetic lesson in which the author spells out the number of heartbeats in a minute, an hour and a month (on average, she says!). As for the concept of that rare true heartbeat, whatever can Sa'dawi



mean by that? It is not easy to ignore the involuntary pumping mechanism of the human heart to which our attention has been drawn, to switch to the idea of the heart as an emotional centre. This story also suffers from the author's intrusion. It is Sa'dawi herself speaking such phrases as, "I am by nature an artist not a doctor. Rejection came as easily and naturally to me as the air I breathe."<sup>20</sup> Especially when it follows a dig at a senior medical man who prides himself on his paper qualifications. Here is Sa'dawi writing for psychological relief.

The woman in this story recalls how her artist friend had believed her explanation of her anger against her boss and how she found the joy of writing surpassed that of life's other pleasures for being totally absorbing, and how she had rejected femininity because it was created by a male-dominated society. Yet strangely, she has difficulty in recalling what if anything happened between herself and her lover years before.<sup>21</sup> This story is also concerned with the problem of the individual's adaptation to society. We are given a view of the inside of a character who experiences moments of feeling that she alone is right and the rest of the world is wrong, and who has the sensation that she has another mind, body and pulse deep within, she asks:

"Is there another complete woman inside me? And which of them is me? Which is the real one and which the false?"<sup>22</sup>

She had also felt that the world had torn everything apart except her: men were divided into masters and slaves, the human being into body and

mind and the body itself into respectable and unrespectable parts. The scene in which her male writer friend contacts her and accuses her of not bothering to phone him, shows that lack of communication between the sexes, almost as if they were living in separate spheres, and an inability to interpret those ordinary gestures of sociability. Given that they are both writer-artists with a keenness for the truth, the reader may find it a rather unconvincing ending.

The complexities of a corrupt judicial system and its inhuman torture of a young girl political offender, are the subjects of "Al-Jalsa al-Sirriyya" (The private session). The resilience of the individual under torture is by now a recurring theme in Sa'dawi's work.

"Al-Jarīma al-'Uzmā" (The greatest crime) is interesting for its unusual viewpoint which is that of a soul after death looking back with clearer vision on events in his childhood. Its subject is unhealthy emotional relationships within the Egyptian family. Sa'dawi is criticizing the repression of feelings and shows how anger, for example, festers if never expressed, and will erupt eventually with dangerous consequences. The subject of the story recalls how as a boy he had noticed that his father was, "a civilized man and like all civilized men in our modern times, able to control their true feelings and hide them".<sup>23</sup> Sa'dawi suggests that if the father had shown his hatred for his son it would have given them both relief. The boy has sensed his father's jealousy of the loving relationship between mother and son. He faces a dilemma when told to recite at school and for his homework, "I love my father as I love my mother".<sup>24</sup> Again there is the child's

inability to look his father in the eye, so characteristic of a relationship that is based on fear and lack of honesty. This quality of being able or unable to look the other in the eye, is one of the trademarks of Sa'dawi's characterization.

One distinguishing feature of Sa'dawi's writing is her sympathy for humanity and her awareness of the immanence of human tragedy:

"The tragedy is that human beings do not know what will happen, I don't say tomorrow, but in the very next moment."<sup>25</sup>

In this story, the mother and son are pictured as trapped victims of the father's violence. Their common situation brings a touching closeness between them. The boy becomes hysterical and begins to shout that he hates his father. The father then accidentally kills the mother as she tries to intervene between them: the boy is blamed for her death. The scene of the child with his dead mother is full of poignancy and is typical of Sa'dawi's style.<sup>26</sup> The 'greatest crime' referred to was that the father had killed the mother because she alone enjoyed their son's love. There was not only a breakdown of paternal love but of marital love too. Sa'dawi's verdict is that the father did not love his wife either. In her book Al-Unthā Hiya al-Asl, Sa'dawi mentions how maternal feelings develop more spontaneously than paternal. She also refers to the great strength of the mother-child bond and the deep-seated envy felt by some men towards women for their childbearing capacity. Here we see her transposing these ideas into a real life situation which impresses on the reader the destructive nature of such a buried grudge.<sup>27</sup>

Despite its technical inadequacies, this volume of short stories is worth exploring for what it has to say about the failure of human relationships and the way in which the author tries to account for this failure. Sa'dawi gives an inside view of the tension resulting in the individual from the attempt to live up to the stereotyped behaviour expected in a corrupt male-dominated society where the polarity of the sexes is stressed and free expression of the emotions is discouraged. She is not afraid to tackle the taboo subjects of extra-marital affairs and political corruption. Although she takes both male and female viewpoints, it is her women here, who emerge as the stronger, more honest characters.

These stories complement the social criticism of her factual works because the broad, generalized topics of the latter, such as the difficulty of communication between the sexes and the problem of adaptation to society's values, are applied to the daily situation of individuals and are worked out on the level of family life, where the consequences are all the more vivid for the reader.

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As we have seen, Sa'dawi's short stories cover a wide range of subjects within her community. Some of these themes are typical of the mainstream of Egyptian short story writers, such as the depiction of poverty, the tragedy of the poor, love of the countryside, an

individual's sense of alienation, corruption in public affairs, distorted sexuality, the search for love etc.. Yet Sa'dawi has found her own distinctive voice amongst the many writers of the Egyptian short story.

In order to try and define Sa'dawi's contribution to the short story genre in Arabic it will be helpful to draw a few broad parallels between her work and that of other writers.\* We do not find, for example, in Sa'dawi that preoccupation with the clash between modernism and tradition, typically worked out in Arab fiction as a conflict between an inhuman, immoral Western lifestyle and an authentic spiritual Eastern one, which the reader can find in the works of Yahya Haqqi, Yusuf Idris and Ghada al-Samman. This is perhaps unusual, given Sa'dawi's keen interest in Western feminist ideas and psychology and in view of the fact that she spent a year in America and has travelled in Europe. Sa'dawi's focus of interest is on the plight of the individual Egyptian, which means that we do not find her struggling with symbols to account for international political issues, for example, such as the humiliation of the Arab defeat, as found in the works of Yusuf Idris, or the Palestinian problem, in the works of Ghada al-Samman. Sa'dawi does not show the technical attributes of rich language and concentration of Mahfuz, or the imagery and stylistic innovation of Idris and al-Samman. While the works of the last two can at times be so recondite as to defy comprehension, in their attempts, for example, to suggest the disintegration of consciousness through drugs, or the

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\* All writers mentioned are Egyptian except for Ghada al-Samman who is Syrian and Layla al-Ba'labakki who is Lebanese.

absurdity of existence, in the style of Camus, we find that on the whole Sa'dawi's stories are very accessible. At times their straightforward style and unadventurous vocabulary make them ideally suited to a young readership, perhaps teenagers gaining a first taste of adult ideas in fiction. Where Sa'dawi does become abstruse it is in the treatment of sexual themes or in the depiction of an individual under torture. Sa'dawi's stories can be moralistic, we are often only too aware of the author as omniscient and high-principled. This, fortunately, is not thrust upon the reader in conjunction with a particular ideology. We therefore do not find in Sa'dawi examples of the Egyptian woman finding her identity and true happiness through conforming to her traditional role of obedient Muslim wife and self-sacrificing mother which form the linchpin of Sufi 'Abd Allah's work. Another woman writer whose work is confined within an Islamic framework is Alifa Rifaat. Rifaat's picture of Egyptian women is almost the antithesis of that found in Sa'dawi. Rifaat conveys the resignation passivity and languor of those who live restricted lives, who have never acted positively for themselves but only moved in reaction to others or force of circumstance. The sorry state of inertia and anticipation of death as the goal of the Muslim woman's life as found in Rifaat, are antipathetic to Sa'dawi's own vision of women which concentrates on the tremendous potential for growth and activity within the individual. Sa'dawi is urging young women to work and engage in productive relationships in order to avoid the very feelings of unfulfilment, lonely isolation and preoccupation with sexuality from which Rifaat's characters suffer.

It is in Sa'dawi's portrayal of women here that she contributes to the Egyptian short story (and for that matter the Arabic short story too) by presenting a more positive picture of women's capacities, through a wider range of female characters. She shows them as able to stand up for themselves, act decisively, refuse to be restricted. Sa'dawi's women are not trapped in the role of wife or mother and struggling to find their identity through sexual liberation, or escaping from reality as we see in the stories of Ba'labakki and al-Samman. Although Sa'dawi's short stories are but a minor part of her work they provide the Western reader with useful insight into Sa'dawi's own psychology and that of her fellow countrymen, while for Egyptian readers, they supply a panorama of colourful sketches, many of which overflow with provocative ideas about the nature of male-female relationships.

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References to Maut Ma'ālī al-Wazīr Sābiqan

- 1) Maut Ma'ālī al-Wazīr Sābiqan, p. 8.
- 2) Ibid., p. 17.
- 3) Ibid., p. 12.
- 4) Ibid., pp. 17-18.
- 5) ibid., p. 25.
- 6) Ibid., p. 18.
- 7) It is worth quoting two lengthy passages here because the presentation of ideas will help us to see the type of Egyptian psychology which Sa'dawi is attempting to introduce to her readers.  
Al-Unthā Hiya al-Aṣl, pp. 230-231:

"For a human being to think and express his thoughts freely is essential for psychological health. For thought, as I have said before, is one of the three mental activities that go to make up the fundamental spirit of the human being. Repression holds back thought inside the head, and fear of expressing an opinion, makes the individual tense deep down, where the true part of his mind struggles with the false part: the part (of him) that wants to express himself sincerely, and the part which wants to pretend he is something else, out of fear of being hurt. The father who punishes his son or daughter because they have expressed their thoughts truthfully, or the society which penalizes the individual for doing the same, creates an atmosphere of fear before the people, which makes them repress their thoughts and causes



internal strife. If the real part of the person triumphs, he lives in anxiety, waiting from one moment to the next for the punishment to fall. If the false part triumphs, the person lives more securely, from the point of view of society, but from the point of view of his mentality, he is disturbed because of losing an important part of himself.

Among the thoughts which are quickly suppressed, are those relating to sensitive issues in society. Each society is different from another in its degree of sensitivity and its peculiarities, but most societies in the world feel a sensitivity of varying intensity (according to the kind of society) in regard to three issues in life: religion, sex and politics. Therefore, most of the thoughts that are repressed are those related to one of these three matters."

Ibid., pp. 214-5.

"The problem is that of the authorities trying to exploit the majority, which results in their being unable to apply the principles of justice, freedom, truth and love. They can, however, cloak their actions with high-sounding language and brag about justice, freedom, truth and love. As for what happens in practice, it is the exact opposite. From here, double standards arise and spread to all departments of life; to homes, schools, mosques, churches, offices and the marketplace. Most people adopt double standards for the sake of conforming to society and feeling socially secure, not liable to the force of the authorities. Success at work and in society depends on the extent to which the individual acts against his own conscience, to keep on the right side of the authorities and the extent to which he adjusts to these double standards. He thus develops a public life, in which he makes claim to the four previous humanitarian principles (truth, freedom, love and justice) and a hidden, secret life, in which he practises quite the opposite to what he declares before other people.

Failure at work and in society, depends on the extent to which the individual is honest with himself and others, and on his refusal to conform to double standards. He thus develops a single lifestyle which is his public life in which he practises the four principles... This may not only lead him to failure, but may lead him to prison or to a mental hospital."

- 8) See what Sa'dawi has to say in Al-Unthā Hiya al-Asl on this subject: p. 167.

"Many husbands puff themselves up like cockerels to make themselves look bigger than they really are. Their external harshness hides a violent desire to cry on the shoulder of a woman - providing that it is not that of their own wife. This is why most husbands slink off in the night from beside their wives to find refuge in another woman. In most cases the impulse to do that is not sexual deprivation, but rather the deprivation of not being able to be a natural man and show his weaknesses. These he is supposed to hide for ever from his wife. Some of the women whom I've met in the Qanatir prison jailed on charges of prostitution admitted to me various facts and told me of experiences that they had gone through."

- 9) Maut Ma'ālī al-Wazīr Sābiqan, p. 68.
- 10) Ibid., p. 70.
- 11) Ibid., p. 71.
- 12) Ibid., p. 53.
- 13) Ibid., p. 45.
- 14) Ibid., p. 46, also pp. 49 and 54.
- 15) Ibid., p. 54.
- 16) Ibid., p. 61.

- 17) Ibid., p. 74.
- 18) Ibid., p. 75.
- 19) Ibid., p. 76.
- 20) Ibid., p. 78.
- 21) Ibid., p. 82.
- 22) Ibid., p. 82.
- 23) Ibid., p. 34.
- 24) Ibid., p. 36.
- 25) Ibid., p. 39.
- 26) Ibid., p. 42.
- 27) Al-Unthā Hiya al-Asl, pp. 89, 92 f.

## CONCLUSION

After looking closely and critically at Sa'dawi's written works, it remains for us to take a much broader view of her work and see it in its national and international context. We will then be better able to assess Sa'dawi's considerable achievements. I propose briefly to consider Sa'dawi's importance in Egyptian society as a pioneer in the sociological field, her achievements in Egyptian literature, and her place within the world feminist movement.

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It was Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid<sup>1</sup> who believed that the start of a real reform of Egyptian society was the reform of the national character. He was the first to attempt to introduce secular European ideas, such as the concept of individual freedom, into his society. Sa'dawi with her uncompromising demands for honesty in all human dealings, whether public or private, is continuing that struggle envisaged by Lutfi al-Sayyid, to raise the quality of all relationships in Egyptian society. It is, as we have seen, with the relationships within the family and particularly with those between men and women that Sa'dawi is chiefly concerned. Various reformers in Egypt as far back as al-Tahtawi,<sup>2</sup> writing one hundred years before Sa'dawi, had urged the cause of greater freedom for women and their education. This was predominantly viewed as a prerequisite for a more productive

society, or to enable women to be better mothers and housekeepers, rather than a means to greater fulfilment for women as individuals. It was these early thinkers who laid the foundation of ideas upon which Sa'dawi could base her work.

Whilst we can see Sa'dawi to have been influenced by trends begun by earlier secular-minded reformers in Egypt, what draws attention to her campaigns is that this time it is a woman speaking out loudly on the most unmentionable topics; sexuality and the position of women. No other writer before in Sa'dawi's culture has dared to deal with the sexuality of women in such an outspoken and public manner: none has ever seen it within the context of the women's psychological and physical health, which Sa'dawi's experience as a doctor allowed her to do. (Sa'dawi is herself of course a product of that education for women so earnestly desired by far-sighted Egyptians over the past century.) Furthermore, no other writer has attempted to show as Sa'dawi has, how conventional attitudes towards women are shaped by economic and political factors rather than inherent, divinely-ordained, and hence immutable, masculine or feminine characteristics. Sa'dawi also tries to show how these traditional values have been cemented by religious and legal sanctions over many years. Sa'dawi sees the way forward for her society as being through the development of the individual's innate abilities and the healthy creative use of every facet of his or her being, which includes his or her intellectual curiosity and sexuality. It is these areas of life which Sa'dawi perceives as being most underdeveloped within the Egyptian population in general.

Sa'dawi's ideas on the position of women in Egyptian society were, and still are, revolutionary. What she provides her readers with is essentially an interpretation of Western feminist thought and libertarian philosophy made more palatable to Arab audiences by being dressed up in local garb, tailored to Egyptians' specific needs and brought to their level of understanding. To be sure, there are references to religion and various attempts at arguments designed to exempt Egypt's national religion, from which so much of Egypt's popular culture is derived, from any blame for the backward position of its women, who are still amongst the most oppressed in the world, but Sa'dawi's message is basically socialist, humanitarian and secular: there is no room for religious dogma in her ideal society. Another feature of Sa'dawi's style which marks it as following in the tradition of early Egyptian reformers, is her very style of argument, which revolves around constant reference to the past as a means towards justifying any progressive measures for the future. While this may seem, to a Westerner, a bizarre way to argue that women today should be allowed to work, enjoy a sexual relationship, use their intelligence and create their own lifestyles, it is the traditional way, and the only legitimate way open to a reformer in a conservative Muslim society to try to induce a sense of security within the nervous Egyptian reader which will convince him that what is new is only a gentle extension of that to which he is already accustomed, or, alternatively, that the familiar had somehow been mistakenly construed as correct and that the proposed reforms will once more set him upon the right path. The reason for Sa'dawi's apparent adherence to those generalized humanitarian ethics which she puts forward as the essential thought

of all the main religions is obvious when the censorship and reactionary currents of thought present in Egypt, a conservative and sexist Third World country are taken into account. Sa'dawi has had to put not only her whole reputation, but also her life, at risk throughout her career.

Sa'dawi's opposition has come mainly from the political and religious authorities who have seen the potentially destabilizing aspects of her work as a threat to their own entrenched chauvinist opinions. This also holds true for the frightened religious extremists who are filled with fear at their awareness of their own sexuality and that of the opposite sex. Perhaps surprisingly, (for it is partly to dethrone the Egyptian male from his exalted position that she writes) many men are amongst her keenest supporters, who welcome the new facts Sa'dawi brings to them about women's individual and sexual potential. Many women, on the other hand, have found her ideas too revolutionary to cope with, and asking for too much in the way of personal change in terms of the necessary defiance of one's immediate society, and the effort to develop oneself and assume responsibility for one's person. Even so, the terrific demand for her sociological works throughout the Arab world reflects the dire social need for such elementary information about sexuality and women's place in society.

We have seen that Sa'dawi has played the role of educator by providing a complementary and relatively more modern education which attempts to provide a comprehensive picture of human interaction within society, as well as introduce recent findings from Western medical

science. As part of her didactic approach, Sa'dawi provides her readers with the very moral arguments which they will need to defend their own behaviour if they choose to follow her prescription for liberation. It is the individuality and independence which Sa'dawi so fervently advocates and which are at the base of her thought, which mark it as fundamentally Western-derived. We have observed the culture lag between East and West not so much in terms of material things. An Egyptian woman can after all obtain university education, birth control, create her own business, become a politician etc., but in terms of morality, tolerance and intellectual understanding. Arab feminists and those who profess to be liberated intellectuals invariably see sexual freedom as an essential part of human liberation within their society, yet frequently find difficulties in coming to terms with their own sexual emancipation or that of others. They are swift and unanimous in their condemnation of what they imagine Western or Scandanavian sexual morality to be without appreciating the deeper implications of partnership without marriage, such as commitment, personal responsibility, the maturity needed to take a risk and face possible rejection, admitting the need of personal change in oneself and others etc. This reflects that while they may be ready to embrace new ideas on an intellectual plane, this can only ever remain at a superficial level until the concept of illegitimacy is eradicated along with the stigma attached to sex outside of marriage, and any hankering for men to be masterful and women submissive. Emotionally, such Arab feminists are still tied to the need for security within their own cultural framework. It is this shallowness of thought which underlies the deep anti-Western



prejudices so obvious in 'liberated' Arab intellectuals, Sa'dawi included. There is throughout the Middle East a widespread ignorance at every level, of the world outside. This stems both from distortion of events and ideas by official propaganda, and an inherent complacency derived from Arab culture which limits the intellectual and spiritual horizons of so many who could benefit their countries by developing a breadth of vision on moral issues and tolerance.

We see Sa'dawi at her most iconoclastic when she praises a communal lifestyle which would do away with the family, nuclear and extended, as the basic unit of social organization. This is what many in the West would see as the logical progress of a humanitarian socialist society, the ultimate goal of any social progress, towards which only one kind of modernity, i.e. an egalitarian, classless and secular society can reach. While it might appear that Sa'dawi's task of trying to liberate her people and help her fellow countrywomen to enjoy a less oppressive lifestyle than their mothers and grandmothers, might be facing more obstacles under the current trend towards favouring traditional sex-role stereotypes and stricter sexual morality as the panacea for all social and national problems, Sa'dawi has optimistically observed that in a reactionary period there is always an enlightened group striving for progress. A phase of social progress, (by which I mean one in which institutions and individuals are more effective in raising levels of human awareness of all types of human need,) may therefore be preceded by a reactionary period which provides by the very oppression it generates, exactly that impetus for the progressive 'leap' towards the future. If there is indeed only one kind of modernity, that egalitarian, secular society where humanitarian values

govern all interaction, which Sa'dawi at her most utopian envisages, then Egypt will not reach this level until the sexist, discriminatory and intolerant patterns of behaviour are expunged from their prominent place in the country's cultural ideal. Sa'dawi's written works constitute an important foundation point upon which such a modernity might be constructed.

Egypt is experiencing a period of rapid social and economic change. Sa'dawi is correct in pointing out the economic motives which have forced changes in morality in the past, and herein lies the key to the future acceptance of those ideas she herself upholds. Inflation and the availability of tempting, status-giving consumer goods are already making it respectable for Egyptian women to work. Higher education has made it possible for them to acquire a veneer of professional prestige in certain fields such as teaching, politics and medicine. Inevitably as women become more aware of their own potential, more conscious of their invaluable contribution to society, they will automatically demand better recognition from social institutions, the media, government and their families, and fewer restrictions. The arguments for their greater liberation are already available in Sa'dawi's works to justify their demands. Ultimately, Egyptian women may even demand a better deal from their religion, just as Western women are doing by challenging the Church.

On the whole, Sa'dawi's thought tends to be neither original nor intellectual. She is a transmitter of borrowed ideas. Where she is original, however, is in her use of casebook material to argue her

points. The tragic accounts of the physical and mental suffering of women and girls in Egyptian society are truly harrowing. The deprivation of education, stifling of physical needs, the incest, fear for one's virginity, fear of men, of sex and of social opprobrium and the sexual and financial exploitation suffered by Egyptian women, is painstakingly exposed by Sa'dawi. What is further disturbing is that this suffering is frequently caused by male relatives in their attempt to satisfy personal lust, or a selfish desire to dominate, both of which arise from a deep feeling of inadequacy, inculcated since birth, in a society where suspicion, corruption and insecurity are the norm.

By inviting her readers to take a more critical look at their society and reassess their personal attitudes, Sa'dawi is preparing them to recognize the spurious, the unjust and the unnatural, in their own sphere of life. She is attempting to introduce totally new concepts of love and marriage, in the form of a deep enriching emotional attachment, and respectability, in the form of a sincerity and responsibility in all one's personal dealings. But perhaps most dangerous of all, Sa'dawi is obliquely asking Egyptians to challenge the moral basis of their religion.<sup>3</sup>

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With an awareness of Sa'dawi's pioneering work in the sociological field already in our minds, we can now focus our attention on her contribution to Arab literature. Sa'dawi has a special place in

Egyptian fiction for being the first writer to portray females as independent and individual in their own right. For the first time an Arab woman is writing about the genuine female experience of life and showing all the sordid details of the degradation and oppression which a poor woman or a prostitute can suffer. Her novels are highly critical of her society and its traditional attitudes towards women: it is this which makes fascinating, but at the same time upsetting, reading for a Western reader, for he can glean much of the stifling prurient atmosphere of Egyptian society from those works of Sa'dawi's which have been translated into English.<sup>4</sup>

Sa'dawi gives a prominence to hitherto unmentionable subjects such as masturbation, menstruation, orgasm and rape, as seen from the woman's point of view: they are dealt with discreetly in veiled language. From Sa'dawi's pen we see too a succession of young feminists who challenge their society and try to achieve their own style of liberation. We observe Sa'dawi's heroines ridiculing, and rejecting men; this defiance is carried further by their determination to live alone, or to reject marriage, to pursue a career or be engaged in political activity. Furthermore, Sa'dawi rewards her intrepid heroines with happiness for taking their destinies into their own hands or, at the least, a greater awareness of the injustices and corruption in Egyptian society. Previously, Arab women who rebelled in novels, either had to be killed off by the author, or be made to subordinate their lives to that of a man, or emigrate. Sa'dawi has tried to solve this problem by showing possible options open to a young woman who rebels and remains within her society, without having to renounce

her principles, or conceding to social pressures. Sa'dawi has thus effectively broken the pattern of bourgeois female writers depicting tame and ineffectual rebellions by middle-class young women, which only provide fuel for the debate that females are unstable, that rejection of society's sexist mores is symptomatic of mental disorder, and always abortive.

Sa'dawi has shown great commitment to women at the lowest levels of society when she speaks out for those who would otherwise have no voice. In both her fiction and factual works, Sa'dawi urges women to respect themselves, to reject any passive acceptance of their worthlessness, which has resulted from centuries of prejudice against them. Whether the female Egyptian reader approaches Sa'dawi's ideas through her fiction or sociological works, she will meet a potential way out of the vicious circle of ignorance. The sensitive male reader will be confronted with the violence which his fellows have so often exerted upon their dependent women. He will also find arguments rejecting male dominance and sexual prowess as inherent traits in men. If he can accept Sa'dawi's recommendations for new moral standards, he will begin to see a way out of his anxieties over his self-esteem and impotence.

In the context of Egyptian fiction (or Arabic fiction as a whole for that matter), Sa'dawi's works stand out for their feminist awareness, for their indignation at social evils, and as being novels of a writer committed to improving the lives of her fellow Egyptians of all

strata in society. In assessing Sa'dawi's contribution to Arabic literature we must constantly keep in mind that the novel in Arab culture has only been a respectable literary genre since the Second World War. Writing of Arabic literature, H.A.R. Gibb has said:

"Arabic literature is not to be judged by French or English literature, but by the temperament of its own people, and by its success in expressing their minds, visions and desires. The journalistic literature of Egypt even now illustrates many sides of their intellectual, spiritual and emotional crises, and is only hindered from fuller discussion by the censorship of the government and the reactionaries."<sup>5</sup>

This state of affairs is still true some twenty five years after Gibb was writing. In view of this, we can consider Sa'dawi's literary achievements as considerable indeed, for they accurately mirror the temperament of the Egyptian people, and reflect the intellectual and emotional crises, the frustrations and desires of its women as never before. If, however, we pause to compare for one moment the novelistic output of Sa'dawi with the English feminist strand of fiction, we can develop a greater appreciation for our own culture and greater humility in our approach to Third World efforts to improve women's rights, from our awareness of being privileged with the intellectual and artistic heritage we have received. Half a century before Sa'dawi's works, English readers were well acquainted with examples of young women struggling to determine their own lives, choose their partners and careers, or campaign for the vote, whether from the pen of a man or a woman.<sup>6</sup> One cannot even begin to compare the complex substance of such classical Western novels with their highly sophisticated language,

style and sentiment, with the brief, unrevised, emotional tales that burst with spontaneity, from Sa'dawi's pen. Yet it is only by holding our own cultural heritage in our minds alongside our exploration of Sa'dawi's work that we begin to sense from a different perspective the dearth of culture and the prohibitive intellectual and moral climate in Egypt during the 1960s-70s and the difficulties which this presented to women.

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Having assessed Sa'dawi's importance in Arabic literature, we come now to examine her place in the worldwide feminist movement. One of the exciting aspects of life at the end of the twentieth century is the emergence of women, the world over, into the wider spheres of work, education and positions of influence and policy-making, bringing a flexibility of approach and a spirit of diplomacy to many a male-dominated institution. The entry of women onto the world stage has not been an overnight phenomenon, but the culmination of decades of struggles during which civilization as a whole has begun to reach a high enough level of general social awareness of responsibility to underprivileged members of humankind, to allow women to break out of the bounds imposed the world over by patriarchal cultures. Obviously this is happening at different rates according to different societies. In the West, the movement to allocate women independence, recognition and opportunity, has preceded that in the Middle East, because the patriarchal and sexist traditions of the latter need still more time to be broken down further. Such intellectual and moral barriers to

women's progress in the West were more easily eroded because of the separation between Church and State centuries ago, and because of the very different concept of the individual which is the legacy of the Classical Greek and Roman heritage and the Christian Church.

The twenty-first century may well see a more satisfactory balancing of human life, simply as a result of the woman's vision of life, her experiences, and her greater influence in the ordering of society being integrated into civilized culture and acknowledged as essential to its future vitality. From playing secondary roles or, more often, waiting in the wings, women are already growing accustomed to seeing themselves and others in the leading parts. Lerner's words may clarify these optimistic predictions:

"The system of patriarchy is a historic construct; it has a beginning; it will have an end. Its time seems to have nearly run its course - it no longer serves the needs of men or women and in its inextricable linkage to militarism, hierarchy, and racism it threatens the very existence of life on earth.

What will come after, what kind of structure will be the foundation for alternate forms of social organization we cannot yet know. We are living in an age of unprecedented transformation. We are in the process of becoming. But we already know that woman's mind, at last unfettered after so many millenia, will have its share in providing vision, ordering, solutions. Women at long last are demanding, as men did in the Renaissance, the right to explain, the right to define. Women, in thinking themselves out of patriarchy add transforming insights to the process of redefinition."

Sa'dawi is helping to unfetter the Egyptian mind. She is the pioneer whose vision has allowed her to glimpse the future potential



of her fellow countrywomen and recognize the deficiencies in Egypt's social system which stand as barriers to the inclusion of women into its public life. It is this which has made her campaign unflinchingly against the abuse of her own sex by men, and the denial of women's right to individuality. Sa'dawi takes those more advanced ideas which will serve her didactic purposes from the societies where they have been more widely accepted over a longer period by both sexes, and are being put into daily practice. Sa'dawi has had to borrow from another culture to introduce the ideas of equality between the sexes, and women's basic right to selfhood, because these concepts have not been circulating freely in a meaningful form in her own cultural heritage. Of course Sa'dawi is not by any means the first or only one to achieve the beginnings of a feminist consciousness in her society. Feminist ideas have been voiced over the last century in Egypt by both men and women,<sup>8</sup> but what makes Sa'dawi's achievements outstanding as a reformer is the sheer volume of her writings, her personal popularity throughout the Middle East, and the immense demand for her works, which suggests their timely nature. The fact that Sa'dawi appeals to Egyptians to examine their history, question the validity of their society's conventional ethos and redefine a set of more tolerant and humane principles to guide their attitudes has also become highly relevant today in view of the recent calls from organized religious groups for Egyptians to return to original Islamic values and reaffirm their importance. Another factor that stresses Sa'dawi's position in her country's feminist struggles is the individuality of her style. By not subscribing to any particular political ideology or party, least of all the government or the official women's groups,

Sa'dawi has preserved an independence. As a leading opponent of the Establishment,<sup>9</sup> she has sought to lead by her own example, as a professional woman and as the founder of independent organizations for women. Her practical work for women, as a doctor and educator, her commitment to working among her people at the lowest levels of society, those in prison, mental hospital, and through her most recent venture, the village projects, forms a separate sphere of influence which deserves much recognition in itself. By taking such an active role in Egyptian life, Sa'dawi has maintained a high profile for herself. Her criticisms of the ruling regime have been persistent despite the ban on her broadcasting, the censorship of her lectures, books, and her short imprisonment.

It is never easy to try and assess the impact of an author's written work in a particular society. It is even more problematic for an outsider to try and estimate the influence of Sa'dawi's work in Egypt and the other Arab states, which are all, to varying degrees, closed societies built on a very different culture. During the Sadat era, when Sa'dawi's works were most censored, they found their way from hand to hand, smuggled in secret as subversive literature, especially among students. In Saudi Arabia, all her works are still prohibited, but they are read nevertheless. As we have seen, Sa'dawi's arguments are frequently deficient in scholarly detail and accuracy, or marked by hasty generalization and bias: her books are not the product of an intellectual mind, but what they lack in this respect is compensated for by the energy, infectious enthusiasm and overwhelming compassion for victims of society, shown at all times by Sa'dawi.

Sa'dawi's personal resilience, the aptness of her message for Egyptians today and the absence of any clearer, more satisfactory vision of productive human relationships within her society, will guarantee a sustained interest in her written work for many years to come.

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## References to the Conclusion

- 1) Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid (1872-1963) was a prominent Egyptian intellectual, Rector of the National University, and editor of the newspaper Al-Jarida. He basically wanted Egyptians to learn from European philosophical ideas whatever would help lead them to modern progress in the technological field. He believed that:

".. the start of a real reform of society was reform of the national character. To raise the intellectual and moral powers of the people should be the prime aim of all public activity - alike of education and legislation."

Jamal Mohammed Ahmed, The intellectual origins of Egyptian nationalism, London, 1960.

- 2) Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi (1801-73) was an early social reformer who, as a member of one of Muhammad Ali's training missions to France managed to imbibe a certain amount of French ideas on nationalism, government, education, and the main currents of the French Enlightenment. These he endeavoured to fit into an Islamic framework on his return to Egypt. He was the first to introduce the idea of education for girls and even work for women, in his society, though this was only envisaged in very modest terms compatible with their seclusion.
- 3) Since Islam is the religion of the majority and the official religion of the country, Egypt's social progress or lack of it has been linked in the minds of Westerners and Easterners

specifically to Islam. The arguments have only ever been concerned with whether Islam has been a barrier to social development or the cause of women's oppression etc. Whether Coptic Christianity has similarly hampered the sizeable Christian minority has not been the subject of debate.

- 4) As far as 1987, the following works by Sa'dawi have appeared in English translation: Imra'atān fī Imra'a, Maut al-Rajul, Maut Ma'ālī al-Wazīr Sābiqan, Mudhakkirātī fī Sijn al-Nisā', Imra'a 'inda Nuqtat al-Sifr and The Hidden Face of Eve. The Hidden Face of Eve has also been translated into French, German, Dutch, Portuguese, Persian and Danish. Imra'a 'inda Nuqtat al-Sifr has also been translated into French, German, Italian, Dutch, Swedish, Danish and Norwegian. Maut al-Rajul appears also in a German and Dutch version.
- 5) H.A.R. Gibb, Studies on the civilization of Islam, London, 1962, p. 297.
- 6) I am thinking here of such works as H.G. Wells, Ann Veronica (1909) and Virginia Woolf's Night and Day (1919). More recently Western readers of the 1960s would have been aware of the frank and detailed exploration of an intelligent, liberated Western woman's consciousness as depicted in Doris Lessing's The golden notebook (1962).

- 7) The creation of patriarchy, p. 228.
- 8) Radical feminists were paradoxically more active during the 1940s-50s in Egypt, than in the '70s. They were usually motivated by Marxist dogma and had the backing of Communist groups. The most prominent of these were Inje Aflatun, Latifa al-Zayyat and Soraya Adham. Their efforts and those of other women foundered due to government suppression and lack of popular support. For an account of the aims of such women and the harrassment which they suffered see "Women's participation in radical Egyptian politics, 1939-1952" by Salma Botman, in the volume Women in the Middle East, Khamsin, London, 1987. Soraya Adham remembered, for example: (p. 23)

".. Everyone of the (leftist) girls used to walk circled by our male comrades and friends so that the Muslim fundamentalists would not obstruct us... In 1948, I was beaten by some of them for participating in political activity."

Latifa al-Zayyat, recalled that as a political activist and student leader in the 1940s, (p. 23)

"I fought against the Muslim fundamentalist groups which tried to defame my reputation - they called me a prostitute and other such things. I remember I went home and wept. But I said: 'This is public work, this is not the last time I will be defamed.' This turned me into a puritan. Really, because they said that.. communists were immoral.. communists became puritans, to maintain their image with the public, especially those who were working in close connection with the masses."

- 9) For an excellent survey of the main women opposition figures in Egypt over recent years, not necessarily socialist, nor specifically

feminist, see the chapter entitled "Opposition women" in Women in Egyptian public life by Sullivan. This focuses on women from various persuasions, and besides Sa'dawi, includes those who have worked within the Egyptian political system such as Olfat Kamel and Amina al-Sa'id, and those who campaign for reforms as spokeswomen for Islamic groups.

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