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RESISTING PATRIARCHY THROUGH LITERATURE: THE FEMINIST WRITINGS OF NAWAL EL SAADAWI AND HANAN AL-SHAYKH

by

Donya Tag-El-Din

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
Through the Department of English Language, Literature, and Creative Writing
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
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ABSTRACT

With renewed Western interest in the Middle East and Middle Eastern women since September 11th 2001 the discourse surrounding Arab women's oppression, and their supposed inability to resist that oppression on their own is becoming prevalent in the West. Through an examination of the novels of Nawal El Saadawi and Hanan Al-Shaykh, this paper seeks to reveal Arab women's writing as an avenue for resistance to male domination. I examine the issues of cultural translation and readership as well as the narrative strategies these authors utilize in their novels. I examine the body as sensual site of reclamation for Arab women. The paper also discusses the authors' criticisms of religious oppressions faced by women in both East and West, and how these oppressions can be linked.

To my parents, Colleen and Abdul Latife Tag-El-Din, for all of their love and support over the years, and to Travis Terrian for believing in the worth of this project when even I doubted it.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: WHAT MY GRANDMOTHER TOLD ME

My earliest recollection of being an Arab was when I was six or seven years old and the first Gulf War occurred. My father watched CNN news casts and videotaped them. He watched the news footage of war in the Middle East religiously, and he cried. I cannot remember seeing my father cry before then, but when I asked him why he was crying, he said he was crying for the war and for our people. "Our people." In some way, these people on the news were connected to me, and for some reason, my father felt their pain. He admired Saddam Hussein for resisting America and its constant demands. During the war, there were no cartoons or soap operas or cooking shows playing on our television set in Southern Ontario. There was only the war and its aftermath. My father was fixated on seeing every piece of footage because they were our people even though my father was from Egypt and not Iraq.

As I grew older, I began to realize that "our people" meant two different things for my father. As Muslims they were my brothers and sisters before God and for that my father felt a connection to their pain, but they were Arabs like my father and like me. When they spoke in Arabic, he understood what the rest of us could not and felt connected to them as I did not.

As a child, I played into the frenzy surrounding the war and told my mother and father that I would marry Saddam Hussein one day. My father laughed. My mother, a Roman Catholic, White, Brit did not. Her response was that no daughter of hers would marry Saddam-Bloody-Hussein. Even at that age I had no intention of ever marrying any

Saddam, let alone an old man like Saddam Hussein but I knew that I was meant to be married. At the time nothing seemed strange about these expectations, and while I never looked forward to marriage, I hadn't resisted the idea altogether.

My grandmother, who had always disliked me most among her many grandchildren because I looked the most European, was the one to give me perspective on this subject. She felt that everything should be put in perspective right away, and in her broken English she told me that weddings, marriage and children were not important. They were nowhere near as important for an Arab woman as an education and a degree. "Become a doctor," she told me, "or a lawyer, a judge or a professor. Become anything but a housewife. Men will marry you to control you," she told me. "They will marry you to own you, and if you have no degree and no education, you will be like all the others and have nowhere to go and nothing to do but take it. If you have your own money and your own education, you can choose who to marry, who to take as a partner instead of just a husband, and if he does not treat you right you can divorce him." Divorce?! I had never heard anyone suggest this, and my religious education had taught me that God did not sanction divorce. Why would my grandmother tell me such a thing? She was speaking from experience and I know now that what she spoke was the truth. I eventually learned that my grandmother had been married twice and had divorced my grandfather, a high-ranking Egyptian officer. She had then traveled the world, become an actress, immigrated to Canada and opened up a business.

I soon learned that it was unusual to encounter women as outspoken as my grandmother, not only among Arabs and Muslims, but in general. At the mosque I attended I began to understand what it meant to be a woman in my culture. My mother

never attended mosque with me because she was Roman Catholic, and so I clung to my father in this new place, where women and men were to remain segregated, but I knew that there was nothing for me beyond the doors that read "women." My father was my only companion, but I was a foreigner among the men and I did not belong. When I asked my father if he wished that I was born a boy he nodded but said that we must be happy with what Allah grants us, and so I knew from a very young age that a boy was something to rejoice at while a girl was something to make do with. Luckily, my father was forced to make do with me since he was "gifted" with five daughters and no sons. I benefited from my father's misfortune and became like a son to him. He allowed me to go places and learn things that he would never have shared with me if he had been blessed with a boy. I do not hold resentment towards my father for this because I know that he too was taught these values and that he has always loved me regardless.

For a short time while I was still very young, I was able to find a place among the men as they watched me follow my father and copy his actions. When he made ablutions for prayer I did so as well. When he prayed, I prayed, and when he went to have his dinner in the men's lounge I entered with a bare head and sat cross legged among the men eating from my father's plate. As I grew I began to feel things changing. What caused all the change? I had grown taller, my body began to mature, and the elderly men would more frequently chase me out of the men's lounge, so that I would have to send a young boy to call for my father to come to the women's entrance and speak to me. I began to wear the *hijab*[1] and the doors to the men's lounge closed forever. I no longer ran

[1] A *hijab* commonly refers to the Islamic head covering for Muslim women, *hijab* actually refers to the full state of Islamic dress for women wherein the entire body is covered, leaving only the face, hands and feet uncovered (depending on the school of Islamic law one adheres to). In terms of my thesis I am referring to

races in the prayer room while the *Imam*[2] read evening prayers or ate with the men or washed or talked or laughed with them. I was relegated to the women's area not by any spoken rule or physical enforcement but by an unspoken set of rules of difference which classified me as female and therefore "Other." It was not only this unspoken set of rules which separated me from my father but also the shame I felt at being seen by the men. At one point I had run and skipped and caused all kinds of trouble in front of these men, but now I began to feel ashamed of myself and of my body. I made sure that I was always covered and was embarrassed and ashamed if the men saw my hair or saw me laughing or acting unladylike.

At eleven years old, when I began a formal Islamic education in lieu of public schooling, I met other girls like me. At the Islamic school I learned more about being a Muslim, an Arab and a woman. I learned quickly that the rather arbitrary age at which a girl begins menstruating is, according to her elders, the time she enters adulthood and becomes accountable for her actions. At the Islamic school it was easy to tell which girls were "truly" women and which females were still children. Since menstruating females are considered unclean and therefore unable to touch the holy *Qur'an*,[3] these girls were always exempt from Qur'an classes which took up half the day, and many girls would not attend school at all that week. The girls who attended school during their menstrual cycles remained segregated from the other students while the boys and purer girls were memorizing God's word.

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the former rather than the latter-mentioned definition of hijab, although I later adopted an Islamic dress code in line with the latter definition in my adolescent years.

[2] An Islamic religious leader.

[3] The Islamic holy scripture; it is believed to be the words of God sent to the Prophet Mohammed through the angel Gabriel.

The older girls would congregate inside the English classroom and spend half of the day doing things which they never shared with the rest of us. Admittedly, I was very jealous of them. Their time in the English classroom was like being part of a secret society and I longed to know what happened behind closed doors. Month after month one girl after another would be ushered into this secret society, and when I finally made it past the closed doors of the "girls club" I realized that it was nothing to be envied. We played board games and gossiped. We talked about boys and about marriage. It seemed as though every girl recognized that this was her place in the order of things, to become a wife and mother. Our bodies were designed for the purpose of reproduction alone. I began to realize that for most of my friends prioritizing a career and education over marriage and motherhood was not an option. Within the teachings of Islam, marriage is said to complete half of your religious obligations, and my friends were being raised to understand their place within not only the superstructure of the Islamic religion, but also in the male-dominated cultures of which we are all a part. The eldest of us were schooled in more important tasks, which included the arranging of bake sales, or sanitizing the mosque bathrooms and kitchens before Friday's prayer and sermon. This rite of passage into the world of women occurred vis-à-vis our bodies. While the Qur'an and *Haddith*[4] suggested that we as females were as loved, worthy and accountable before God as our male counterparts, and that we should be educated in exactly the same manner as the male students, the reality was that no one asked the boys to clean the bathrooms before prayer and no one would have ever suggested that they think about who they were going to marry before what career they were going to choose.

[4] The sayings of the Prophet Mohammed as related by his companions and early followers.

To be female was to already have your life laid out for you. I recognized the female body as a marker of difference from the men in our patriarchal community, and this difference was read as inferiority. For males, the future was open and subject to their individual agencies. Being born female, I had a predetermined purpose of eventual marriage and motherhood, and my body was central to this purpose. I was never angry at the men who had chased me away from my father's side because I thought that this was just the way things were meant to be. Instead, I directed my anger at the women for being complicit through their unquestioning obedience. Men were different than I was and they owed me no allegiance; but women, I thought, should have recognized their own childhoods of inequality in mine and done something to stop it. Now, I see that my anger was misguided, and that those women were also entrenched in a global system that make it difficult to resist patriarchy without also facing reprimands, both in the dominant Western culture and in Arabic cultures as well. More than anything though, I was angry at God for making me female and often asked Him why I could not have been born a boy. My body had changed in shameful ways that betrayed me and revealed me as "Woman"; it classified me as impure and unclean one week out of every month. The male body did no such thing. The male body was born pure and would remain so forever. The male body was whole, and consequently it was given access to the world in ways that my own female body would never experience. Despite my luck at not having any privileged male siblings, I could not stop my own transformation from girl to woman. The women at the mosque condoned the practices that I viewed as unfair, and so when I traveled from Canada to Damascus at sixteen to study the Qur'an and Arabic language, I expected that the Arab women I met would be submissive, dutiful and interested in getting married and

having babies. I was not proud of being an Arab woman. I felt that Western women were better off and stronger. It seemed that women in Canada had access to their own desires in life outside traditional expectations of marriage and motherhood. Prior to visiting the country I had much the same opinion of Middle Eastern cultures and Arab women as many other Westerners who glean their understanding of the Middle East from nightly news casts on cable television. Arab women were housewives and mothers, and that is all they wanted to be. My grandmother. with her crazy rants and extraordinary life was a rarity, was she not? I was partly right. My grandmother's experience was rare, but her understanding of the issues facing Arab women and what was needed for Arab women to progress was not so rare. The more Arab women I met, the more I began to realize that they were not content with simply being wives and mothers. Indeed, the University of Damascus was filled with young women desiring an education and careers. Neither were these women naïve when it came to their current role in society. They understood the role which institutionalized religion played in relegating them to the peripheries of society. Still, many women I spoke with espoused an ideology of patience. Things do not change overnight, they told me, and these women recognized that to find independence and equality they could not simply apply a Western methodology of feminism to their own lives but had to find answers from within their own culture. These women did not need me to tell them that something was very wrong and that things needed to change. They also did not need my ideas pertaining to how to fix everything because quite frankly my Western ideas would not have worked for them anyway. It does no good to simply replace one form of oppression with another new and alien form, and Europeanization would be just that. Western ideas would have been viewed as alien and therefore suspect.

I began to realize that Arab women come from a long history of independence and that I could be proud to be an Arab woman. Throughout my life, I have always remembered what my grandmother told me, and as my identity became subject to my body, I used her advice to guide me. Because of that advice, I was instilled with a sense of determination to learn whatever I could: I chose to study English literature. I began to study Arab women's writing to discover where in the canon of English literature I could find a representation of myself and my people that was not simply Scheherazade. As wonderful as her character is, Scheherazade was really the only female Arab character I could remember from books. I soon learned that Arab literature has a rich history, and that Arab women writers have many diverse stories to tell.

This project began in my living room during the first Gulf War when I first heard the words "our people" and wondered who those people were and what stories they had to share. Another part of this project was born in my mosque when I ate with men and laughed with men and lived like a man by my father's side, until that time when I was forced to become a Woman because I was born a daughter and not a son. So, my motivation for learning about Arab women writers became fueled by my gendered exclusion from the man's world. What does it mean to be both Arab and a woman? A single answer is impossible due to diverse experiences, but my experiences have informed the culturally inflected way I view the world; to acknowledge my private experiences as constitutive of my Arab female identity is to prevent a homogenizing resolution to this project.

While studying Arab women's writing, I began to understand that Arab women are diverse and strong people with many stories that still need to be told and studied, and

so I wish to contribute to that task with my work. The images of Arab women I had been inundated with from popular media and news coverage suggested that for Arab women, a life of victimhood, violence and oppression was the only narrative that existed; yet the creative works of Arab women showed me otherwise. They revealed to me women who were willing to resist patriarchy in any form. These women were attempting to reclaim their agency and resist the oppressions which they faced daily. This project became a study of their tragedies and their triumphs.

In this paper I will investigate the ways in which Arab feminist authors Nawal El Saadawi and Hanan Al-Shaykh resist patriarchy and religious oppressions through their novels. I will examine El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* and *The Fall of the Imam* and Hanan Al-Shaykh's *Women of Sand and Myrrh* and *The Story of Zahra.* Both authors directly target and criticize religious leaders and their use of religious doctrine to enslave women. Both writers also focus on the body as a site of female resistance of male domination as well as a site for female reclamation. While the body in monotheistic religious doctrine is secondary to and less valorized than the spirit, these writers valorize the female Arab body as a sensual and sexual space for investigation. I will examine the ways in which the body is restricted through religion, but reclaimed and reframed in the aforementioned texts as a site of resistance and empowerment for Arab women.

I would like to clarify that my examination of these texts moves past a formalist approach. Rather than viewing the writings of Arab women as "art for art's sake," I believe that the political and the creative intersect in Arab women's writings, so that the fiction these women create has a political purpose to actively resist patriarchy and empower women. In the Middle East, religious doctrines (like all monotheistic doctrines)

serve to inform the political climate and construct political, social and familial systems as well as to determine the level of social mobility women are granted within such systems. The creative works of Nawal El Saadawi and Hanan Al-Shaykh actively combat patriarchy and women's oppression. In her article "Exile and Resistance," El Saadawi elaborates on the importance of writing and how it contributes to her political activism and to women's rights:

> When they had finished the superintendent would growl at me: "If we find a pen and paper in your cell that will be more dangerous for you than if we find a gun." Since that moment I have never ceased writing. Writing has allowed me to reach people in my home country and in other countries of the world. It has torn down the walls of isolation that separated me from them, from myself and from my body, rid me of the feelings of alienation and exile no matter where I am. (El Saadawi *Exile* 10)

During the Sadat era, El Saadawi was imprisoned for her activism and for speaking out against the unjust regime. Her writing reached people at that time and perpetuated a fear among men that surpassed the threat of a gun. But this sense of threat is not surprising when one knows of El Saadawi's life. Born in an Egyptian village in 1931, El Saadawi had eight brothers and sisters, all of whom were educated, as she was, in the Arabic school system. Her father insisted on education for his children, and El Saadawi excelled, entering medical school upon completion of her secondary schooling. In 1955, she graduated and began practicing medicine in villages. She recorded the stories of women's health issues which she encountered during this period in her polemic *The Hidden Face of Eve*. El Saadawi eventually became a director in the Egyptian Ministry of Health. She became an outspoken activist for women's issues and, after she was released from prison,

created the women's journal, *Al-Nun*. She also founded the Arab Women's Solidarity Association (1982); both of these endeavors were shut down in the early nineties by the Egyptian government. In the seventies, she began writing a great deal and was well known for her works which criticized the government among other things. During the Sadat regime, she was let go from her ministry position and she was eventually imprisoned. This oppression did not stop her. When she was released from prison, she continued her work and in the 1980's was placed on a death list, in part, because of her work *The Fall of the Imam*. El Saadawi went into exile in the United States, teaching at universities, but she returned to Egypt and now splits her time between the two countries, preferring Egypt for her writing. She sees her writing as being linked to the land of Egypt and its people (Malti-Douglas *Men* 10-12).

While much is publically known about El Saadawi, less has been publicized about the life of Hanan Al-Shaykh. She is one of the Arab world's leading writers, but she is not a public speaker and activist, as El Saadawi is. Her feminist ideologies are revealed in her writing and she lets her work speak for itself. Born in Lebanon in 1945, Al-Shaykh was raised in a Muslim family dominated by a very religious father. Like El Saadawi, Al-Shaykh was taught in the Arabic schools, as opposed to the foreign-run schools of Britain and the United States which exist in the Middle East. As a teenager she began publishing essays in the newspaper, *Al-Nahar*. After her secondary education, she went to college in Cairo. During the civil war, she moved to Saudi Arabia, a part of her life that is reflected in *Women of Sand and Myrrh*. She now lives in London with her family and continues to write. Her works are some of the most controversial in the Arab world and have either been banned or censored like El Saadawi's. *The Story of Zahra* particularly caused uproar

because of its depictions of sexuality, sex acts, divorce, and abortion, all of which, according to many Arab readers, wrongly portrayed Arab womanhood. The novel could not be published in Lebanon, and Al-Shaykh had to publish it at her own cost (Beydoun).

Both of these writers have witnessed and experienced extraordinary hardships and continue to write what is considered among many Arabs to be unspeakable. Taboo issues find their way into the well-crafted narratives of these authors as both women continue to write against the oppression of Arab women. To underplay the political aspects of these creative works would be misleading.

Feminism(s)

The suffragettes of the nineteenth century were early pioneers in the first wave of Western feminism. This first wave battled for political rights of women in the West such as the right to vote. Of course, the "right" of "women" to vote was won but strangely enough did not include *all* women. In Canada, for example, Native women gained voting rights as a result of the civil rights movements in the United States, as the Canadian government feared a similar uprising involving its Native population (Maracle 123).[5] I point this out only to remind us, as we begin to examine feminist writings of the East, that Western feminism has had its problems: it is not untouched by racism and classism, but has been very much rooted in these forms of oppression. The second wave of Western feminism gained impetus in the 1960's, and has since seen the mass movement of women from the private sphere of the home to the more public sphere of the work place. The progression of Western feminism has shown that women are not a monolith, as many forms of feminism have evolved to represent the differences among women. As

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[5] Native women in Canada did not receive the vote until 1960; these women were governed by the Indian Act and denied the vote under federal law ("women take the right to vote").

a result of the plurality existing among women, feminisms such as Radical feminism. Lesbian feminism, Third World feminism. etc., emerged to meet women's demands. The examination of experiential differences among White and racialized feminists called for a reconsideration of political and socio-economic priorities. While issues such as equal wages for equal work were important to White feminists, issues of race. class. and religious oppression were important to Black and Third World feminists. In her essay, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," Chandra Talpade Mohanty denounces the production of a monolithic Third World woman constructed through certain White Western feminist discourses (Mohanty 333-336). This Third World Woman. Mohanty claims, is one in need of saving, and Western women are charged with her rescue. Mohanty points out what many women of racialized backgrounds have always known, that there is no "Third World Woman" and that women in the Third World are not in need of rescue by their Western sisters. While in many cases aid and solidarity is appreciated, to see Third World Women as constant victims who are unable to free themselves from the trap of patriarchy produces two effects: (1) this perception perpetuates the women of the Third World as a monolith. all victims in need of rescue and unable to resist victimization, and (2) it posits Third World women as inferior to White women in the West and supports ideologies of Western superiority and Eastern inferiority. Instead, change for Third World Women must come in the form of localized grass roots movements.

In the Middle East, the Arab feminist movement began in the late nineteenth century in Egypt and has moved along a similar trajectory as Western feminism. While the West often depicts Arab and Middle Eastern women in popular news media,

especially after 9-11, as victims in need of rescue, Arab feminism does not receive the same media attention. When one discusses Islam and Arab culture and understands the ways in which both are steeped in patriarchal systems of dominance, it seems hard to believe that feminism exists there at all; however, Nawar Al-Hassan Golley suggests that feminism not only exists, but it is indigenous to Arab women, contrary to Arab opposition to feminism, which considers feminism "an illegal immigrant and an alien import to the Arab world and, as such, [...] not relevant to the people and their culture" (Golley 521). Golley suggests that "the argument for women's rights grew out of the religious context...[B]y representing early Islam as the ideal,[6] especially as far as its treatment of women was concerned the feminist project 'harkened back to more distant and presumably more authentic origins' instead of breaking away from the past" (532).

This movement towards an "indigenous" feminism was well executed by the Arab feminist project since there was (and still is) debate over European culture and its infiltration into Arab lives. While the upper classes favored the European model of nationalism to which they attributed social, educational, and technological advances, religious leaders were wary of losing their own Islamic and Arab culture to European influences. By maneuvering the Egyptian[7] feminist project within the already existing religious framework, early Arab feminists were able to appease the anti-colonial[8] faction

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[6] For example, Prophet Mohammed's first wife was a successful business-woman; one of his most famous wives, Aisha, was a leader in the early Islamic movement.
[7] While my study focuses on the Egyptian feminist movement (as does the work of Golley and Ahmed), it should be understood that it was the earliest Arab feminist movement and therefore a pivotal force in influencing those Arab feminist movements that were to follow it. These other movements followed a similar trajectory to the Egyptian movement. Also, I focus on Egypt due to the availability of research on this particular movement; the other movements have yet to be studied as rigorously.
[8] Here I use the word "colonial" to mean the time period during which the Middle East was occupied by European forces. In Egypt these forces where the British (1882-1922); later references to colonial superstructures existing today are to the neocolonial movement. By neocolonialism I mean the current

that would find no wrong with religion while also making progress towards education, which is what both the feminists and the upper class desired.

Leila Ahmed, on the other hand, concurs with popular belief that the feminism of the late nineteenth century was indeed an import of foreign agencies, and that it was also used to promote colonialist agendas. In her insightful and critical examination of Muslim women and the East, *Women and Gender in Islam*. Ahmed suggests that feminist discourse in Egypt was first used by Lord Cromer, the British consul general, and the British colonialists in order to further their own imperialist agenda. Ahmed skillfully points out that the colonialist fixation on liberating the Arab female from her subjugated position through her unveiling was of course hypocritical; while the English were enthusiastic in their desire to "free" Arab women from this oppressive and barbaric garment, they vehemently opposed the feminist movement in their own country. Indeed, the Women's Rights movement in Europe propelled the colonists to offer liberation for women they colonized. Of course, the belief was that the unveiling of women would lead to a greater acceptance of European culture and an acceptance of the British "civilizing" presence.

Ahmed also points out that foreign missionary schools for Arab girls (popular at the time) espoused this same ideology. Some of Egypt's first feminists such as Huda Sha'rawi and Nabawiyya Musa were both educated in Europe by European tutors. These early feminists wanted to emulate European culture and advocated progress in the form of Europeanization, as did other advocates of unveiling during this time, such as Qasim

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economic exploitation of the Third World by the First World through capitalist-driven multinational corporations, and globalization.

Amin (1863-1908),[9] whose work on the status of Arab women began a debate on the veil. The veil (or unveiling) then became a symbol of the women's movement and women's liberation. These discourses were informed by class and race, as upper classes enjoyed the aforementioned technological and educational advancements the Europeans instituted. Ahmed does agree with Golley that there was a feminist movement in Egypt which did espouse an ideology of return to "proper" Islamic teachings and that through Islam, women would find the freedom they sought. Zeinab Al-Ghazali is best known for this type of feminism and was a central figure in Egypt's Islamic feminist movements.

During this first wave of Arab feminism, women began to abandon the veil, a symbol which, in the minds of men and women, was linked to conservative Islamic values and religious oppressions. Arab women wanted to move into the public sphere to assert their independence from and their equality with men. The abandonment of the veil spoke loudly in this respect.

In the early twentieth century, the face of Egyptian feminism changed once again. While the upper classes were happy with their new-found wealth, Golley suggests that the petit bourgeoisie took up nationalistic causes. I suggest that feminism was hijacked and strapped to the platform of Egyptian nationalism. Golley explains that Arab women were "militant" in their support of the nationalist cause and as a result, they helped Egypt establish partial independence in 1922 and total independence after the Second World War. In opposition to colonial rule, women began to veil themselves again as a sign of dissatisfaction with colonial oppression. It would seem then that Arab women did choose

[9] Amin is known as "the father of Egyptian feminism" for his works *the Liberation of Women (Tahrir al mara'a)* and *The New Woman (al mara'a al jadida)*. Ahmed suggests that Amin's analysis of Egyptian womanhood is extremely limited due to the segregated society in which he lived. She asserts that Amin's harsh criticisms and depictions of Egyptian women in comparison to Western women could only be based on his limited interactions with female family members, servants, and perhaps prostitutes.

the oppressions of Islam over the oppressions of colonialism, at least at that point in time. This is not at all surprising, though, as men's fights for nationalism have always been constructed upon the bodies of women; women's bodies become currency to be stolen and/or rescued in those battles. In India, the nationalist movement found support when women were kidnapped by enemy sides, and the honor of a nation was determined by the ability to rescue and protect its own women.[10] The Black feminist movement in the United States has also been arguably set back by the Civil Rights movement and the struggle for racial equality. If Black women stood for feminism they aligned themselves with White feminists and a White system which stood in opposition to racial equality.[11] In much the same way, Arab feminism and the progression of women's rights seemed to take a back seat to the fight for independence and national autonomy at the time. Independence is, of course, a great victory for any colonized people; however, post-independence did not see the return to women's issues and the male support for which Arab women had been hoping: "What has been even harder for women to accept is that, after independence is achieved, 'men often prefer to return to "normal"; they take up the old role patter and the double standard again goes into operation'" (Golley 533).

Throughout all the feminist movements in the Middle East, women's writing has been central to the debate. Women writers were not only able to express their opinions and thoughts on political and social matters, but they also competed with their male counterparts. Women writers made clear their feelings on issues such as marriage,

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[10] Urvashi Butalia's work on testimony of female survivors of Partition outlines the ways in which women's bodies were appropriated by the nationalist movements of India and Pakistan and constructed as spaces of national and masculine honor.

[11] In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, bell hooks shares her experience as a Black woman and a feminist, and examines the way in which Black women find themselves caught between the fight for racial equality and women's rights.

divorce laws, veiling and segregation. The second wave of Arab feminism occurred around the 1960's and 1970's (as Western feminism did), with women writers such as Nawal El Saadawi at the forefront. While the first wave of feminism focused on veiling, education, and political rights, the second wave dealt with sexuality and took the form of what Ahmed calls an "exposé" (Ahmed 216). Writers took an in-depth look at violence against women and children, as well as violence against women's sexuality. The novels I examine in this paper are a part of this second-wave feminism emerging from the Middle East. These novels directly address sex, violence against women and women's sexualities.

El Saadawi and Al-Shaykh exemplify the second wave of feminism: they are resistant authors who venture to expose and weaken, if not dissolve, the boundaries and social constraints that serve to contain women. Both authors write passionately about issues pertinent to Arab women, and I believe through their writing change can occur. The novels I will examine in the following chapters focus on the experiences of Arab women of various classes and attempt to breach the boundaries of what is deemed socially acceptable for members belonging to traditional, male-dominated Arab society. Social scrutiny often focuses on women, as women's bodies, sexualities and activities become sites of national and family honour. The characters are arguably provided with avenues of resistance; however, the greater affront to patriarchy is that these women dare to write about the issues of sexuality, abuse, male corruption and female independence. These discourses are either relegated, through discourses of honour, respectability and femininity, to the domain of men, or else restricted to the margins of society.

I will begin my examination of Arab women's writing by investigating the implications of cultural translation. What happens to a text originally produced in one language for a particular audience when it is translated and disseminated among an audience from a radically different culture? This has happened with both Al-Shaykh's and El Saadawi's works. How should Western readers study a work written for a different cultural audience? Open-mindedness is key, but the tendency toward negating Otherness can reaffirm racist ideologies of Western superiority and destroy any chance of critical dialogue much needed between the two transhistorically produced spaces that define the global binary—East and West.

I will then focus on Al-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra* and El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* and *The Fall of the Imam*, focusing on the ways in which religious oppression is addressed in the texts. My analysis will focus mainly on *The Fall of the Imam* and the way that the religious and political intersect with the local and global. How do these authors construct Islam and its leaders and how does the West play a part in the subjugation of women? How are Western women perceived by the Arab women writers?

Chapter 4 focuses on the body as a site of reclamation and empowerment for women in the abovementioned texts. In *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, Western theorist Judith Butler suggests that bodies come into being through the reiteration of gendered performances; that is to say that "gender" is produced through the *performance* of gender one enacts (Butler 1-4). If this is indeed the case then what happens to bodies that do not "properly" perform their genders? In El Saadawi and Al-Shaykh's works, the female characters cannot or will not adhere to socio-religious norms that force them to perform their genders as they are constructed within Arab society. The

result is that these women's performances are unintelligible to their societies and their bodies are no longer "bodies that matter"; instead, they are marginalized. In the works of both authors, the female characters' refusal to reiterate gendered norms and come into gendered existence through these reiterations is unintelligible. While Butler asserts that it is the performance that produces gender in material terms, the Arab men in the novels see gender as innate and when faced with an unintelligible gendered performance they suggest that there must be some malformation of the material body. This will become clearer in Chapter 4 with my examination of the sexual and gender dynamics between Maaz and Suzanne in *Women of Sand and Myrrh*. In both El Saadawi's works as well as in *The Story of Zahra,* the bodies of resistant women, unviable to a rigidly gendered and hetero-normative[12] society, are destroyed. In *Women of Sand and Myrrh* the women's gendered performances deviate from the norm as well, but they are marginalized in another, I insist, crueler way

The final chapter of my analysis deals with the narrative strategies and structures Al-Shaykh and El Saadawi use in their works. In this chapter, I examine El Saadawi's use of surrealism in *The Fall of the Imam* to comment on women's experiences of violence against women. I also explore El Saadawi's use of goddess imagery and its ability to reclaim a feminine history. In *Woman at Point Zero* and *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, the narrative structure becomes my focus. The frame narrative employed in *Woman at Point Zero* effectively brings the reader into the text and allows her to learn from Firdaus alongside the psychiatrist. Al-Shaykh's four part narrative, I argue, makes use of the African-American jazz aesthetic in order to give each woman a chance to tell her own

[12] Here I use the word hetero-normative to mean espousing an ideology of the superiority and normalcy of heterosexuality, whereby homosexuality is rendered inferior or deviant by comparison

story while simultaneously allowing the four voices to join together to deliver an even greater story—that of women's experience in the Gulf

I believe that through the writings of Arab women, women in the Middle East will be able to decolonize their consciousness[13] and find opportunities for resistance.

[13] Ngugi Wa Thiong'o was the first to discuss this concept in his work *Decolonizing the Mind.* El Saadawi takes this idea and applies it to gender relations and patriarchy in some of her polemics and speeches She believes that patriarchy works in a similar way to colonization and that the mind must be decolonized or deprogrammed of patriarchal forms of knowledge which subjugate women.

CHAPTER 2

CAN YOU HEAR ME? THE POLITICS OF CONSUMPTION

Can you *hear* me? The question sounds simple enough, but the politics that lurk behind the question mean that no quick, reactionary answer will do. You have to think about it, really think about it. Are you listening?

When working with texts such as Nawal El Saadawi's and Hanan Al-Shaykh's novels it is in the interest of interpretive rigor to acknowledge that such texts are translations and not the original pieces of literature in the authors' own language. This means that these works were not only written in another language (Arabic), but that they were also written for an Arab readership. Just as words do not always translate properly, the same can be said with respect to cultures. In pointing out this difficulty, what I will call the challenge of "cultural translation," I am simply reframing what theorists such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Edward Said have made clear in their work: that the West quite often consumes the East, not only in economic terms, but also consumes Eastern stories and creates literary discourses about the East, in order to perpetuate the myth of Eastern inferiority.[14] The East is not allowed[15] to speak for itself, and partake in its own construction, and so, what enters these systems of knowledge is a picture of the East as backwards. Said's analysis of the ways in which Western discourse "creates" the East, or Orient, and the Oriental Other, pertains to my argument that a Western reader of literary works, such as the ones examined in this paper, also partakes in these systems

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[14] Edward Said makes this argument in *Orientalism*.

[15] By this I mean that the East is marginalized through socio-political, military, and economic power imbalances between First World and Third World and, as a result of these power imbalances, any discourse which is contrary to what the West already "knows" about the East is discarded.

of knowledge-formation and domination. It does not take a malicious person to partake in this kind of dialogue; on the contrary, the everyday reader who means no ill will is often an unconscious participant. We must remember that "we," as individuals and communities, function inside systems of domination that have been operating for centuries; these systems include structures of racial and gender domination. Speaking specifically to the way Third World women's stories are consumed by the Western market, Sherene Razack writes, "For feminists, storytelling has always been particularly seductive; women's stories have not been told. When we depend on storytelling either to reach each other across differences or to refute patriarchal and racist constructs, we must overcome at least one difficulty: the difference in position between the teller and the listener, between telling the tale and hearing it" (Razack 83). (To Razack's astute observation, I would also affix the difference between writing the tale and reading it.) The difference in position between the teller and the listener, which Razack points out, is the issue of "cultural translation" to which I have alluded. If an Eastern woman tells a story, does that mean a Western woman can properly *hear* that story or understand it? I prefer to be optimistic, and believe that cultural translation can happen; that Western women can indeed hear this story if they are conscientious of the politics around listening and speaking. However, this involves being honest about the privilege one is afforded due to race, sex, nationality, positionality, etc. This is a very complicated issue which is too broad for the scope of this paper; however, in this chapter. I propose to examine the ways in which meaning can be altered through publication, translation and, as Razack has pointed out, the differences in positionality between teller/writer and listener/reader. Examining Amal Amireh's work on El Saadawi's early texts we will be able to

understand the ways in which the meanings of a text can be formed and *re*formed when presented to a different readership. As Western readers, it is important to be aware of the ways in which "cultural translation" can alter the meaning of a text as much as linguistic translation, so that we avoid recreating discourses of Otherness and our own superiority through the process of reading.

In her essay, "Framing Nawal El Saadawi: Arab Feminism in a Transnational World,"[16] Amal Amireh proposes that the readership of a work impacts how that work is received. AWestern, predominantly Judeo-Christian audience will read a text such as *Woman at Point Zero* or *Women of Sand an Myrrh,* differently than an Arab, predominantly Muslim audience. Amireh explores the intricacies of El Saadawi's reception history extensively in both the Western world and in the Arab world. Amireh argues that to truly understand the reception and criticism of El Saadawi's works in any atmosphere, the texts must be historically contextualized, and the changes in El Saadawi's own views must be examined.

El Saadawi gained notoriety, initially, not for her novels and fiction, but for her non-fiction works in the 1970's. She had published works of fiction in the 1950's, but she became well known in the Arab world for her 1969 non-fiction work *Women and Sex*. It was not until the 1980's that a Western readership became aware of her work. What was happening historically at the time El Saadawi was writing? This question becomes pertinent in understanding both her texts and the criticism surrounding her work. She is part of a large group of writers that emerged in the 1970's after the six-day war with Israel (1967) in which Egypt was defeated, and forced to concede land. Many Egyptian

[16] I rely heavily on the work of Amal Amireh in this chapter on readership and cultural translation because to date, she is the only author who has thoroughly examined readership and reception theory with regards to Arab women's writing.

citizens took this loss as a sign that change had to occur within Egypt, and that Western decadence had become a major issue in the country. The pens of many Egyptians after this war—among them El Saadawi's-- turned towards ideas of political change. El Saadawi's early fictional works, such as *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor,* examined the intricacies of being an Egyptian woman in a highly gendered and oppressive society. The narrative of these works culminated in a happy resolution, but her later texts, such as those we are examining in this paper, offer harsher critiques of gender construction, male domination, and national politics. Her later works also lack the happy outcomes of her earlier writing.

When El Saadawi was introduced to a Western readership, the circumstances surrounding her introduction were also of great importance. The first text to reach a Western audience was her non-fiction work about the lives of Arab women entitled, *The Hidden Face of Eve*. At the time, the Iranian Revolution (1978-79) was still fresh in the minds of Western readers, and fears of Islam were prevalent in the West. In this revolution, a Western-imposed Shah had been removed from the Iranian government, and a new leader opposed to Western influence, and especially the United States, was inaugurated. This convinced many in the Western world that Islam was a legitimate threat, and reinforced it as "Other"— that exotic culture which can be marveled at as well as feared. El Saadawi, a very political figure in her own right, made *The Hidden Face of Eve* a launching pad for her political concerns in the introduction to its British publication. Concerning this subject Amireh writes:

> Devoting half her introduction to this momentous event [The Iranian Revolution], she celebrates it as a great anti-imperialist blow to the West, especially the United States, defends it against its critics and against Islam's detractors, and exposes the

> real motives of its enemies, particularly the United States and the Egyptian regime of Anwar Sadat. (Amireh 41)

Amireh goes on to explain that through this backing of Islam and the Iranian Revolution, El Saadawi was trying to control the way in which her feminist texts were read. Amireh also implies that the author anticipated the way in which her work would or could be read by a Western audience that "[might] try to use her criticism of her culture to further distance the Third World and to reaffirm stereotypes of it as underdeveloped and backwards" (42). Also, Amireh concludes that in the 1982 US publication, the harsh criticism from Western audiences in Britain led El Saadawi to "reframe" her narrative for a Western audience (realizing the anti-imperialist rhetoric would be even less popular among her U.S. readers). She rewrote the introduction and "the anti-imperialist rhetoric is gone" (43). However, El Saadawi continues to defend Islam against those who would demonize it as the main reason for Arab women's oppression; she points out that Islam is no more oppressive than the other monotheistic religions (Judaism and Christianity) which endorse much of the same anti-feminist rhetoric that debatably can be found in Islam, and that they did so first. This is a stance which the writer maintains to date, and is still vocal about. For example, in *The Fall of the Imam,* Katie, a Christian figure, is seen running to Jesus and devoting herself to him in a lover/beloved relationship (El Saadawi *Imam* 108). Katie is never lifted to a transcendent state through her worship of the male being. Christianity does not liberate Katie from her sense of oppression in either her life in the Middle East or in the West. She devotes herself in a subservient position to the male God figure, but as El Saadawi

points out in many of her polemic works, God in all of the Abrahamic[17] traditions is male, and in all these religious traditions Man is the superior being. Christianity, Judaism, and Islam all have a history of anti-feminist ideologies and practices. El Saadawi would argue that Christianity, then, is no more or less feminist than Islam. Yet, Arab women still suffer under great oppressions which women in the Western world, arguably, have overcome, such as the right to an education, equal rights in marriage and divorce, the legal right to child custody, etc. (the gendered oppressions of the West are not always the same as those in the East). This suggests to me that these oppressions are not simply the result of the Islamic religion and its ideas of women, but perhaps a result of a combination of cultural factors, which include religious ideologies, cultural beliefs, politics, and colonial influence in the Middle East, among others. In the translation of El Saadawi's work from Arabic to English (from its Egyptian publication to its European debut) Amireh points out, many other aspects of the text were altered. The title of her book was changed so that the old meaning was lost, and a new meaning given. *Al-Wajh al-'ari lil mar'a al-'arabiyyah* literally means, "*The Naked Face of the Arab Woman*"; upon translation it became *The Hidden Face of Eve*, bringing new meaning to the title. The former suggests that the Arab woman is revealed entirely and set free; the latter suggests Arab women are hidden (Amireh 45), and to this I would add exoticized. The new translation implies and conjures up images of the veil in the minds of the readers. Although no such changes occur in the translation of the title of El Saadawi's novel, *Woman at Point Zero* (*imra'a 'ind nuqtat al-sifr*), it is only natural that changes in the meaning of the work occur upon translation, and the abovementioned example

[17] As Leila Ahmed points out in *Women and Gender in Islam*, Judaism, Christianity and Islam are all derived from the line of Abraham making them "Abrahamic" religions.

demonstrates the way in which translation and publication for a different readership can alter the original meaning of a text.

The subdued tone of El Saadawi's introduction to the American publication of *The Hidden Face of Eve* meant that many critics completely bypassed her defense of Islam and focused on areas that were of greater interest to a Western audience, namely clitoridectomy. Many critics remember the book only for its early depiction of El Saadawi's own clitoridectomy, which is apparently less dramatic in the Arabic publication: "El Saadawi's book, then, becomes a testament to the progress that American women have achieved in contrast to their oppressed Arab sisters, supposedly still groaning under the shackles of Islam" (Amireh 48). This fixation on Otherness has also become an issue in the English translation of *Woman at Point Zero*. The early clitoridectomy of the main character, Firdaus, in the opening pages becomes grounds for Western women to reaffirm their superiority over the "Third World" because Westerners do not practice forms of excision. Therefore the Arab world can be associated with the barbaric, and a dichotomy between East and West can be reinforced. In *Woman s Body Woman's Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing*, Fedwa Malti-Douglas suggests that "this futile dialogue on gender and women has long attracted the West. The image of women languishing under the yoke of Islam titillates the Western observer and permits him to place himself in the superior position. Women and their role become a stick with which the West can beat the East" (3).

In a recent review of El Saadawi's *The Hidden Face of Eve*, Juliet O'Keefe, writing for the online journal *Democratiya*, recalls how she felt reading the book's first

(1980) publication. A White, Western woman, O'Keefe affirms, in her reaction. the validity of Amireh and Malti-Douglas' concerns. O'Keefe writes:

> The chapters on female genital mutilation are unforgettable, and drew attention for obvious reasons; a 1982 New York Times review by Vivian Gornick was entitled 'About The Mutilated Half' and focused almost exclusively on this aspect of the book. [2] For me, as for many other young (white, North American) feminists in the early 1980s, the horror of genital mutilation. of which we had largely been ignorant. overwhelmed us, and—and I say this carefully—fixed to an unfortunate degree our opinions on women's situation under Islam. The images of brutalised girls, damaged by fingernails and razors, are overwhelming, as are El Saadawi's reports of the physical and psychological trauma suffered in consequence. That genital mutilation is not a specifically Islamic tradition but an African one, with a history long predating the Islamic conversions of nations where it is still practiced, was elided in our understanding, and we became (and Aparajita Sagar writes of this tendency in her Western students) 'fixated on clitoridectomy and the veil'. [3] This response to *The Hidden Face of Eve* was an honest one, for if ever a book were writ with flame, this one was; but its outrage became our own and had its own momentum, eventually obscuring El Saadawi's other concerns so that we took from the book a one-dimensional afterimage of the Arab woman as wholly victimised and held under the thumb of a rigid, ahistoric theocracy. (O'Keefe "A Woman at Point Zero")

El Saadawi had a story to tell about the lives of Arab women but how was that story *heard*? Juliet O'Keefe admits that as a White woman living in the West she read El Saadawi's study with an Anglo-American lens, and it indeed became a stick with which to beat the East out of its "rigid, ahistorical theocracy." She could not hear all of what was being said. She, and women like her, only heard a fraction of the story—the fraction which they wanted to hear. The harrowing tales of El Saadawi's polemics and novels. and Al-Shaykh's novels provide Western readers with what they want to hear, and

reaffirm Western superiority. In O'Keefe's review, she relates how El Saadawi became a lone representative of Arab women to the West, and how other voices were not considered because of this type of hyper-focused[18] reading. These female readers did not *hear* what was being *told* to them; the picture with which they walked away from the text was a "caricature" of Arab women's lives and El Saadawi's position within the feminist movement (O'Keefe "A Woman at Point Zero").

If El Saadawi's texts are supported by Western readers for the abovementioned reasons, then are they rejected or criticized by Arab readers and critics for just that reason? No, not completely: "A Different View of El Saadawi emerges if we consider her within the original Arab context of her books. In Egypt and the Arab world, El Saadawi is neither a victim nor a lone campaigner for women's rights, but within her culture, not outside it" (Amireh 51). As an Egyptian feminist El Saadawi is not alone, as Juliet O'Keefe and her contemporaries believed, but, as previously discussed, a part of Egypt's rich feminist history. As such, El Saadawi's call for reform, and the rethinking of women's place in Arab society, is not isolated; Huda Sha'rawi. Nabawiyya Musa, Zeinab Al-Ghazali and a number of other Egyptian feminists have also called for reform. El Saadawi, however, differs from these Egyptian feminists for numerous reasons, among which are the militancy of her brand of feminism, as well as her rejection of either Europeanization or a return to Islamic doctrine and rule. For El Saadawi neither of these would liberate Arab women as liberation for women must also come with liberation for Egyptian society (O'Keefe "A Woman at Point Zero").

[18] By "hyper-focused" I speak of the Western tendency to fixate on a single, reader-affirming aspect of the text, disregarding other important elements of the work. O'Keefe's horror and fascination with the veil and clitoridectomy are examples of hyper-focusing.

After El Saadawi gained notoriety in the West for writing "Women and Sex," she went on to write a number of polemic[19] works which questioned government, patriarchy, and especially, religion and its hand in the oppression of women. Amireh is careful to illuminate that El Saadawi did this while continuing to denounce Western hegemony, and that she was one of many writers post-1967 who made this their mission. In the Arab world, El Saadawi's polemic works are scarcely criticized, and few would deny their worth; rather it is her fiction that is the focus of her Arab critics. Arab literature, although only recently gaining acceptance among Western readers, has a longstanding tradition, and El Saadawi is most often criticized for her writing ability and status as a novelist within its canon. Arab professors familiar with her work have often suggested to me that El Saadawi is simply a poor technician, and that there are a number of superior writers to choose from. In the male-dominated world of Arab literature, poetry is firmly established, and highly praised for its intricacy and cleverness. In addition, many people in the Arab world conclude that El Sadaawi is appreciated in the West not for her literary merit, but rather for "[her] fulfillment of Western readers' assumptions about Arab men and women"(Amireh 54). As O'Keefe's testimony shows, this may be true; however, as Amireh points out, this does not negate the aesthetic value of her fiction. In a recent interview, El Saadawi clarifies the importance of her Arab readership: "'I do not write for the West. I write for people everywhere who believe in justice, freedom, love, equality, peace, and creativity. But I do write in Arabic; therefore I write mainly for people in our countries" (Newson-Horst 8).

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[19] Here I use "polemic" to mean works which argue concerning political, religious or philosophical matters as is the case with much of El Saadawi's non-fiction. For example, in *The Hidden Face of Eve*, El Saadawi directly argues against many aspects of Islamic doctrine, Arab culture, Egyptian politics and philosophy and their collusion in the oppression of Arab women.

El Saadawi has been accredited, by even the likes of Arab critic, Georges Tarabishi, as bringing the Arab, feminist novel to the foreground because her success in her non-fiction allowed her to "write unambiguously radical, angry works that secured for the feminist novel a place on the literary map of modern Arabic literature" (Amireh 57). Arab critics such as Tarabishi, however, criticize her for reducing the males and females in her novels to mere warring "types," rather than creating a complex psychological narrative. In other words, Tarabishi suggests that her narratives are too simple, and her characters one-dimensional—and that "abstractions do not make for good literature" (18). However, Tarabishi also presents an extensive psychoanalytical reading of El Saadawi's heroines in his critique of the author, but finds that they all suffer from psychological deficiencies in the form of castration complexes, anal complexes, and Oedipus and Electra complexes (13-34). I will examine some of Tarabishi's critiques of El Saadawi in more detail in Chapter 4. In her reply to Tarabishi, published in the same book, El Saadawi suggests that Tarabishi is enamored with Freudian psychology, after translating a number of Freud's works into Arabic, and that it is this Freudian bias which causes Tarabishi to judge her characters in terms of fixed Freudian definitions of masculinity and femininity. El Saadawi, says, "This view regards femininity as a set of fixed characteristics, including weakness, submission, infatuation with violent men and seeking hopelessly to have a penis—and replacing this with a baby and becoming absorbed in the role of motherhood as the only way of coping with this natural disaster" (Tarabishi 195). Until Malti-Douglas' 1995 study on El Saadwi's works, *Men, Women and God(s): Nawal El Saadawi and Arab Feminist Poetics*, Georges Tarabishi's Freudian critique was the only book-length work of criticism on the author's work available in

English. Malti-Douglas points this out herself in the introduction to her own book. The consequence of this lack of translated English criticism of El Saadawi's work means little opposition towards Tarabishi's anti-feminist criticisms-- for example, his criticism that El Saadawi's characters seem less like fictional characters and more like mouth-pieces for the author. His assumptions that El Saadawi identifies with Firdaus, the prostitute, and with many of her other heroines, or that her own life must inform their fictional lives remain unquestioned. This is something El Saadawi denies in her reply to Tarabishi, and refutes by providing many details of her own life.

Tarabishi also perceives that her novels are inferior to the poetry written by Arab men for centuries. Within this Arab popularized tradition of ornate and intricate poetry, El Saadawi's writing is, in contrast, stark and bare: however, it is particularly this rawness in El Saadawi's writing that I will suggest attracts female readers and critics, as it reveals the brutality of women's lives in a tone and style which suggest such occurrences are normalized facts of life for women. Anastasia Valassopolous who comments upon the "rawness" of El Saadawi's writing, is one such critic. However, this attraction once again must be scrutinized, so that it is not simply an attraction rooted in Western desires to see the Other as inferior.

While there is less criticism surrounding Hanan Al-Shaykh's texts, I have been able to recognize patterns of Western and Arab consumption similar to those Amireh fleshes out in her essay. Al-Shaykh's works, like El Saadawi's, are received by her Arab and Western audiences in very different ways. Her novel, *Women of Sand and Myrrh,* was listed as one of the 50 best books of 1992 by *Publishers Weekly,* while *The Story of Zahra* was harshly criticized by Arab critics because "it gives a very wrong impression of

Arab culture" (*Kutub*). *The Story of Zahra* could not even be published in Lebanon because of its controversial nature, and Al-Shaykh was forced to pay for the publication of the novel herself. The book has been banned in much of the Middle East; however, reception of *The Story of Zahra* by a Western audience is much more positive. Jana Harris, of *The Seattle Times*, called the work a "novel of masterly proportions." *Publishers Weekly* suggested that "this rich tale mesmerizes with its frank sexuality and scenes of war-torn Beirut" (*Publishers Weekly* quoted in *Kutub*). Once again, the Western audience tends to hyper-focus on the alien aspects of the narrative that do not touch their own lives, such as the war in Beirut. I am not suggesting that the war should be overlooked, as it is a major aspect of Al-Shaykh's work; however, it should be examined alongside the other elements of the novel, such as the intricacies of male-female relationships, Zahra's reclamation of her body, or her journey to self-knowledge and empowerment. Zahra, herself, rather than being regarded as one Arab woman, can be misread as a representation of the state of all Arab women psychologically affected by the chaos of the Middle East. Perhaps the Western focus on her differences and on her tragedy will prevent the West from seeing any similarities between Zahra and themselves, or deriving any messages of female empowerment from the narrative.

In the introduction to their book, *Going Global: the Transnational Reception of Third World Women Writers*, Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair Majaj write:

> We discovered that this gesture of inclusion was not innocent, but instead often functioned to contain our voices in a predefined space. Discursive, institutional, and ideological structures preempted our discourse and determined both what we could say and whether we would be heard when we spoke. If we critiqued our home cultures or spoke of issues confronting Arab women, our words seemed merely to confirm what our audience

> already "knew" – that is, the patriarchal, oppressive nature of Third World societies. If we challenged this ready-made knowledge, we were accused of defensiveness, and our feminism was questioned and second-guessed. We found ourselves occupying a predefined role, positioned as Mary E. John calls, "native informants from 'elsewhere' " (23). Our very identities were constituted for us: although neither of us sees herself as a Third World woman, we were often viewed as only that, denied an identity in the plural. (1-2)

It is this type of confinement which feminism is meant to fight against; however. Majaj and Amireh make it clear that in the "Academy," and even among feminists, their voices, their stories were "preempted" and used to reaffirm a type of knowledge of the Other which cast her as lesser. That El Saadawi's polemic works and novels have been reprinted in the West in the aftermath of September 11th 2001 is no surprise. To me it is something to be celebrated; her work will once again inspire a new generation, but at the same time there is a fear that accompanies this celebratory feeling— the fear that her works will once again be read with the narrowed eyes of the anger, grief, and confusion that plague an American nation trying to rationalize the events of that day. I fear that history will repeat itself and that women's words and experiences will become justification for a new era of colonial domination and occupation to "save" the enslaved Eastern woman. Popular news media images of Muslim women in Iraq and Afghanistan suffering extreme male domination are now common. Leila Ahmed points out how feminism was once co-opted into doing the dirty work for colonialism: will neo-colonialism receive the same helping hand? And more importantly how can we prevent it? Can we learn from one another? Is a cultural exchange that moves beyond domination

possible or must women of the East safeguard their experiences and knowledge in fear that it will be misused, or that no one is really *listening*? As I said, I would like to think that "cultural exchange" is possible, but I am aware that it is in no way a simple task.

Arab women's voices are being allowed into Western discourse, but the question still remains: what will be *heard*? Al-Shaykh and El Saadawi's novels, now available to an English-speaking audience, open up an important opportunity for Western feminists to listen to the voices of women in the East, as well as for open dialogue towards common goals of female liberation and equality central to all definitions of feminism. Feminisms do not have to be carbon copies of each other in order to reach this goal. The key to hearing is self-reflexivity in the way we listen and the way we read. We must always question our position and our privilege as Western readers. The Western fascination with Eastern exoticism, and aspects of Middle Eastern culture, such as female circumcision, or arranged marriages, lead one to focus on features of these texts which reaffirm the Western reader's superiority in contrast to Arab culture. Incidents, such as Firdaus' female circumcision (El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*) or Zahra's unhappy marriage (Al-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra*) become focal points, rather than aspects of a larger narrative of Arab women's own ability to subvert patriarchy and find empowerment. The stoning death of Bint Allah (El Saadawi's *The Fall of the Imam*) may become the sole focus of the narrative because such a death is cruel and alien to a Western audience. It thus becomes easy for Western readers to focus on this event alone, rather than opening to the entirety of the work and its vast implications. What is available to us when we listen is a new wealth of knowledge previously unrecognized and unexplored. There is

also the possibility of cross-cultural respect and appreciation. A reader of texts such as those explored in this paper, must attempt to understand the intricacies of cultural oppression rather than making quick, sweeping judgments. To focus on one aspect, and allow that aspect to dominate the narrative as the focal point, reduces an entire culture to a "caricature."

Can you *hear* me? The question still remains to be answered. I enter my own voice into the discourse, the body of criticism on Arab women's experiences and writing, hoping that it will be heard because the implications of truly hearing one another are far-reaching.

CHAPTER 3

RELIGION, THE IMAM, AND THE WEST

When we begin to examine Al-Shaykh's and El Saadawi's criticism of religion and its hand in the subjugation of women, it is important to keep in mind the issue of cultural translation which we discussed in the previous chapter. One must listen to the story being told and understand the complexity of Islam and Muslim leaders; producing a reading of Islam as horribly patriarchal and run by ruthless Arab men does nothing to further our understanding of the power dynamics that operate in such systems and only serves to distance the Other, and reaffirm our own beliefs. Instead, Islam and its leaders must be read carefully, as we incorporate into the discussion the complex issues of Arab nations' relationships with the West, social stratification, poverty, and the Imam's attempt to overcome these sources of shame in his life.

In their novels, El Saadawi and Al-Shaykh both strongly criticize the use of religion as a tool to enslave those who are uneducated and fearful of God's punishment. In Al-Shaykh's novels religious leaders specifically are not as harshly demonized as they are in El Saadawi's texts; however, Al-Shaykh's construction of religion in Lebanese society reveals it to be an instrument of patriarchy. In *The Story of Zahra* there is no great religious leader but religion is still ever-present, intertwined with everyday culture. When Zahra's father beats her mother he holds the Qur'an out to her and demands that she swear on the word of God that she is not seeing another man: "My mother was sprawled on the kitchen floor as my father, in his khaki suit, his leather belt in one hand, was beating her. In the other hand he held a Qur'an as he demanded, 'Swear! Swear! Show me!'" (Al-Shaykh *Zahra* 15). The holy book is used to serve the patriarchal purpose of

controlling women within the family realm rather than for any message of deliverance, love or kindness that its pages may harbor. Furthermore, Al-Shaykh juxtaposes the image of the Muslim holy book with images of Zahra's down-trodden and beaten mother, linking in the mind of the reader religion and violence against women. Zahra does not focus on religion and neither do the women in *Women of Sand and Myrrh*; however. religion informs familial and social practices in the Middle East. Al-Shaykh is quite vocal on the way women and their bodies are policed, as we will see in Chapter 4.

El Saadawi specifically criticizes religious leaders in *Woman at Point Zero,* where so-called men of religion are no more than hypocrites and tyrants. Firdaus' first encounter with a holy man is with her Azerhite[20] uncle; he is kind and caring towards Firdaus but as a child she does not understand that this man of God is taking advantage of her body. Her uncle repeatedly fondles and molests her (El Saadawi *Woman* 14). It is not until she is older and sees other couples kissing and revealing their bodies at a public cinema that her uncle explains that this behavior is sinful. At this point Firdaus can no longer bring herself to look her uncle in the eye or to sit on his bed due to awareness of what has been happening to her and what may very well continue to happen to her each night (22). Much like Al-Shaykh, El Saadawi pairs the image of the holy book with sexual violence. When Firdaus is first molested her uncle is reading a book. Because he is a student at Al-Azhar it would be logical to presume that he book he holds on his lap as he begins violating his young niece contains religious knowledge and may even be the Holy Qur'an itself. This image of the learned religious man, holy book in hand, molesting the young girl during his tutelage of religion is, at least, discomfiting. El Saadawi's

[20] Someone who studies at the religious university Al-Azhar in Egypt.

juxtaposition of the two images sears upon the reader's mind the hypocrisy religion can, and often times does, disguise.

When Firdaus marries Sheikh Mahmoud it should be a joyous occasion because she has married a man of religion and as such has married well, but Sheikh Mahmoud is old and controlling. He beats her frequently for small mistakes that she makes as a new bride. In Chapter 3, Verse 187 of the holy Qur'an God urges married couples to be garments for one another and to love and protect one another as clothing protects the body. Men of religion such as the Imam or Sheikh Mahmoud would be conscious of such verses in the Qur'an but Sheikh Mahmoud, like many men, neglects these verses in favor of verses which can be read to condone beating one's wife and treating her as subservient. When Firdaus complains about the constant beatings she says:

> My uncle told me that all husbands beat their wives, and my uncle's wife added that her husband often beat her. I said my uncle was a respected Sheikh, well versed in the teachings of religion, and he, therefore, could not possibly be in the habit of beating his wife. She replied that it was precisely men well versed in their religion who beat their wives. The precepts of religion permitted such punishment. (44)

No further explanation of the verse permitting husbands to beat their wives is given and as Firdaus' aunt suggests, the general consensus is that "A virtuous woman was not supposed to complain about her husband. Her duty was perfect obedience" (44). In El Saadawi's narratives the religious men of God are no better than the lowliest of men as Firdaus' pimps beat her in the same way as her husband. El Saadawi has been criticized

for her portrayal of Arab men,[21] and her portrayal of religious men seems even harsher because these men should be enlightened by the words of God. The Imams and Sheikhs of God are hypothetically meant to lead people to faith and to happiness, but as El Saadawi makes clear, all too often these men use the power their knowledge affords them to twist and manipulate into conforming, those who will listen This manipulation is especially detrimental to women.

El Saadawi's harshest condemnation of religious leaders comes in her novel *The Fall of the Imam* in which she criticizes the title figure, the Imam, for his many ungodly crimes. In the preface to her novel El Saadawi fleshes out her intent with regards to the novel and the ever-elusive figure of the Imam, confessing that one of her goals was to capture the figure of the Imam on her own terms. She goes on to write, "I could not allow him to exercise absolute power in my story, just as he had done in everything else" (El Saadawi *Imam* preface). I have no doubt that the Imam El Saadawi speaks of is not only her fictional character, but the idea of the Imam as sacred religious leader within Islam.

In Fedwa Malti-Douglas' introduction to El Saadawi's novel, *The Innocence of the Devil*, Malti-Douglas suggests that *The Fall of the Imam* was the beginning of a project El Saadawi was to undertake concerning religion and its intersections with the political and social (Malti-Douglas xi). Hence, from the very outset of El Saadawi's work, religion and its unjust rule over the marginalized of society was to come under fire. It should be understood that while El Saadawi criticizes both the Imam and Islam, she

[21] In *Woman Against her Sex A Critique of Nawal El Saadawi* Tarabishi offers a harsh criticism of El Saadawi's fictional works, basing his analysis in Freudian psychoanalysis His analysis suggests that El Saadawi's heroines all suffer from neuroses or psychoses because of castration complexes, anal complexes, Oedipal complexes and other Freudian, anti-feminist complexes such as a lack of femininity He also criticizes the construction of the Arab male in El Saadawi's works, suggesting that her characters hate men He suggests that essentialized characters are a guise for the author herself, and insinuates that El Saadawi also has problems with men See my discussion of Tarabishi in Chapter 2

openly argues that all Abrahamic religions, Islam, Christianity. and Judaism are equally unjust in their treatment and construction of the female and femininity In a lecture El Saadawi gave in 1981 entitled "Empowerment of Women, Writing and Fighting" she said:

> most of the religions of the world put women in an inferior position relative to [the] superior gender, the male sex. God is male. All prophets are male. All religions are patriarchal, class religions with the authority of men. Whenever you have revival, especially political revival of religions and religions are political ideologies, then women suffer first. (El Saadawi *Empowerment* 2)

In her writings El Saadawi is consistent with her beliefs as she depicts Christianity, as we will see, as no more liberating for the female than Islam.

The Fall of the Imam moves back and forth through time, piecing together the story of Bint Allah, an illegitimate daughter of the Imam. The narrative reveals that the Imam, although considered Allah's representative on earth, is no more than a symbol of corruption and hypocrisy, going against all that his position and Islam are meant to stand for. The reader is first introduced to the character of the Imam as he is creeping out of the room of a woman, "his mouth exhaling an odour of wine and of sweat from the bodies of unhappy women"[22] (El Saadawi *Imam* 10). A dog then bites his bottom and tears his pants and he is left with a hole over the left buttock revealing his shame. This image of the Imam is repeatedly revisited by El Saadawi as she moves from the Imam's childhood to his present. The hole inflicted by the dog, Marzouk. has plagued the Imam from his very beginnings, first as a symbol of the poverty he aspires to overcome, but ultimately as a symbol of his own shame. While El Saadawi harshly criticizes the Imam,

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[22] The irony here is that fornication and the consumption of alcohol are contrary to Islamic doctrine and the Imam is meant to be the leader of the Islamic people. Yet he, hypocritically, partakes in these actions.

it is images such as this which allow the reader to understand the psychology of this man. His thirst for power at any cost and his treatment of women are morally reprehensible, but his humble and shameful beginnings humanize the Imam, leaving the reader wondering if perhaps the religious leader is more complex than initially presumed. Why does the Imam constantly fear being replaced, and why his need for a body double? What is the Imam aspiring to become through his position? These are questions I will return to. El Saadawi reveals the Imam to the reader as a man filled with fear and unattainable desires; the other characters of the novel, however, elevate the Imam to a level above that of ordinary man.

The Imam is initially positioned as a God figure as the masses follow him devoutly, like a god; however, it is clear that the power the Imam holds over his followers is not the result of his holiness or even due to his own brilliance (he does not write his own speeches and is not a very good orator) but due to the ignorance of the people he lords over. In the chapter entitled "They Cannot Read," the Imam's followers are depicted as blindly following all of his decrees because "God has visited him many a time and so he knows His word better than anyone else" (7). But the narrator observes that the peasants "do not know God's word, nor what it says. God's word is written and they can neither read nor write" (6). The critique of the Imam is clear to us, without El Saadawi directly attacking his character (although to do so would not be hard). He has a disproportionate amount of power awarded to him because God has supposedly visited him and he knows the word of God. The reader understands almost immediately that the amount of power the Imam has over these villagers is sinister. His pictures hang from

banners everywhere in the state, and the people look to the heavens when they speak of him as though he were a god.

El Saadawi goes even further in problematizing the figure of the Imam and constructing him as a rival to God. Within Islam the one sin which cannot be forgiven is *Shirk*, which refers to humanizing Allah or constructing Him as anything other than singular. To Muslims, the representation of Christ as both God and God's son within Christianity is blasphemy: however, El Saadawi constructs the Imam as assuming a similar blasphemous position when his chiefs speak of him in terms of a trinity during Bint Allah's trial. The chief asks Bint Allah, "'Do you not believe in the Imam, in the nation and in God?'" When Bint Allah asks if she must believe in all three at once he replies "'Yes. either belief in all or nothing'" (174). This dialogue reveals what I suggest is the Imam's status as that of a man-god. He stands in as Christ in the trinity. the human form of God on earth. This not only aligns the Imam with Christianity rather than Islam but suggests that his position rivals that of Allah and is therefore sinful. El Saadwi's Arab readers, familiar with Islamic doctrine, will recognize the Imam as an oppositional figure to the oneness of God, if nothing else. But for the reader more versed in Saadawian ideologies (and knowing that the political and religious intersect), it becomes apparent that the author constructs the Imam in this way in order to make a commentary on the current state of Islam and its leaders. It is not just this particular Imam who has placed himself above the tenets of his own religious ideologies, but a number of religious leaders in the Middle East, and for that matter elsewhere in the world. While Islamic leaders across the globe assert *Tawhid*-- the oneness of God-- they form oppositions to that oneness by either constructing themselves, or allowing

themselves to be constructed, as demi-gods on earth. In this way the religious elite simply pay lip service to a set of ideologies they use to gain and maintain power, in much the same way as the Imam of this narrative. The Imam of El Saadawi's novel is not very far off from a number of religious leaders world-wide who preach one thing publically but privately practice another. I also suggest that a second commentary is being made about the relationship between Islam and Christianity, one which suggests that there is very little difference between the two religions; both are Abrahamic religions, and Islam builds heavily on the traditions of Christianity. Many of the stories which appear in the Judeo-Christian Bible also appear in the Qur'an (for example the Creation story, Noah's Ark in the Old Testament, or the Virgin Birth of Christ in the New Testament). And both religions are alike in their ideology of male dominance and female subjugation; however, a major area of contention between Muslims and Christians is the Christian idea of Christ as the son of God and God on earth. Of course Muslims believe that God has fathered no children with a woman, for He was not begotten and does not beget. The Imam reveals Islam's dirty secret—that Muslims also erect human-God figures in the forms of their leaders.

The Imam is also aligned with the West as he chooses a White, Western wife who "speaks seven tongues" (34). Katie does not love the Imam, but marries him for the power such a position affords. This is a commentary on Western women, Western imperialism and on the Imam. In the West Katie works hard and never receives much for her efforts. Where men excel she cannot. As the wife of a powerful Arab man however, she can have what she wants. In this respect, Katie is much like Suzanne in Al-Shaykh's *Women of Sand and Myrrh.* Unappreciated by men in the West, these White women are

placed on a pedestal in the Middle East and privileged because of their Whiteness. While they have more power than the Arab women, this power is also superficial: their racial identity positions them on top of the racial hierarchy but they find themselves at a disadvantage to men because of their gender. In reality Katie and Suzanne are exoticized and fetishized, becoming symbols of Whiteness and the West, both of which Arab men covet. There is an inversion going on here as the White women are transformed into mere symbols of the West which can then be conquered and consumed sexually by the Arab men. As bell hooks points out in *Black Looks*, the sexual encounter between races can be, and sometimes is, viewed by the dominant race as a way of sexually transcending the racial divide and the truest way to experience the Other. In her work hooks suggests that White men consume the Black body sexually in order to cross the racial divide and experience the Other. Of course, this type of "cultural exchange" is parasitic because it is superficial and is deeply rooted in systems of racial domination. While the Imam as an Arab is considered inferior in terms of the neocolonial racial system of domination,[23] he also practices a kind of "Eating the Other"[24] in his marriage to Katie. Because of his marriage to Katie the Imam casts aside his Arab wives. We are told that he marries her once he obtains a certain degree of power. But what can all his power afford him? It cannot make him White and it cannot let him experience Whiteness; this is where Katie comes in. The Imam consumes the White female body through the sex act in hopes of experiencing an intimate, sexual knowledge of Whiteness. For the Imam and other Arab men, conquest of the West is a sexual conquest played out through the White woman's

[23] The time frame of *the Fall of the Imam* is not explicitly given but I suggest that it is more contemporary due to the inclusion of the "test-tube man" in the novel. In-vitro fertilization was first successful in 1978. which places the novel some time after this date.

[24] This is the name of the essay in *Black Looks* in which bell hooks develops her theories about sexual consumption in terms of racial domination and experiencing the Other.

body. Of course, using the female body in this way is a frivolous and revolting conquest, but it is not new or surprising. It also does not aid these Arab men at all to achieve what they truly desire—the status of White men. True, the Imam gets himself a White wife, but he cannot keep her. The White test-tubeman,[25] eventually The Philosopher in the Imam's cabinet, who comes from the West and is Katie's former lover, takes Katie back and makes love to her in the Imam's own bed—a stinging blow. Of course, the irony that he too was out committing adultery is lost on the Imam: his White wife, the woman he loves, the woman he has cast aside his Arab wives in favor of, is really not his at all: she favors a relationship with the White man over one with the Imam. That he kills these two does not change the fact that he is still inferior to the White man in the grand scheme of things.

El Saadawi's creation of the character of the Philosopher is another way in which she forms a link between the Imam and the West. In her book, *Men, Women and God(s) Nawal El Saadawi and Arab Feminist Poetics*, Fedwa Malti-Douglas suggests that there is a parallel created between the character of this White man and the character of the Imam through the frame work of *The Thousand and One Nights*. As Malti-Douglas points out, both The Philosopher and the Imam are constructed as modern day King Shahriyars, the king whom Scheherazade entertained with her stories to keep herself alive. In *Nights*, the King and his brother are both betrayed by their wives and so they kill the wives and their lovers. King Shahriyar then proceeds to take one virgin to bed each night and kill her in the morning. Of course, the story goes that Scheherazade told the King stories every night that lasted until morning so that he decided to keep her alive to continue the

[25] The White test-tube man is so named because he is the product of in-vitro fertilization and born without a known father. When he explains this to the Arab men they are shocked and appalled that this procedure exists.

tale the next night. When the stories were completed Scheherazade had three sons and the King allowed her to live. Malti-Douglas suggests El Saadawi manipulates this medieval narrative to reflect the ruthlessness of the Imam and in turn The Philosopher: the Imam finds the Philosopher in bed with his wife, and after killing them he also asks for a virgin. But because of his "Islamic concerns" he deflowers her and murders her every month in line with the Islamic lunar calendar (Malti-Douglas 103-106). The link between the Imam and the Philosopher from the West is made in the similar parallel between the White man and the medieval king. Malti-Douglas points out, "The test-tube man tells his wife that he is going to 'the other world'" (103). After leaving her, he looks in the mirror and sees himself as "'King Shahriyar. I will rape a virgin every night, and before dawn I will kill her before she kills me.'"(103). Malti-Douglas suggests that this reworking of *Nights* informs the reader that "Politics may vary, places may vary, but sexual politics[...] do not" (107). This is not only meant to be a criticism of Arab-Islamic sexual politics but also those of the West, as both areas of the world are patriarchal and invested in the subjugation of women; both the Imam and the Philosopher want to rape and then kill the virgin Arab female.

El Saadawi, however, does not simply point out the similarities between Eastern and Western patriarchy; she offers a real criticism of the West in the form of Katie. The Imam replaces his Arab wives with some*thing* better which is more reflective of his current worldly status. As head of the country his White wife is a testament to his greatness and what he has achieved. Katie, however, cannot be trusted and goes back to her former lover. El Saadawi criticizes the West through Katie as she, as much as the women he has truly hurt, wishes the demise of the Imam— but only after she has used

him and fled with her lover. She uses the Imam for monetary gain. only to toss him away when she is done with him. The novel is filled with nightmare-like passages, which I will examine further in Chapter 5, and these passages present the viewpoint of the unnamed narrator of the novel as well as the perspectives of a number of the characters. During a dream-sequence the Imam sees his own death and says, "she [Katie] removed all the marriage and kingly rings from my fingers, emptied my pockets of small change, divested me of my official dress and buried me in a pit dug in the palace gardens" (55). The West's use of the East for monetary gain is harshly criticized through Katie: this is no surprise given that all Arab nations (including Egypt) were once colonized and continue to be economically exploited by the West.[26]

El Saadawi's construction of the Imam is truly complex. I suggest that El Saadawi's humanization of the Imam renders him more understandable and real, but through him, she also establishes a striking criticism of the West. While the Imam is the leader of an Arab people he is a sad figure; he is constantly reaching for something that is unattainable as is evidenced by his marriage to Katie. He longs for not only the power and the prestige linked to the West, but also equality with the West; however, the reader understands that this will always be out of his reach. Just as Katie abandons the Imam, he will continue to be viewed as the Eastern Other. He will not find equality with the West through mindless Westernization (or marrying a Western woman).

Does El Saadawi suggest that the Imam is indeed linked to the West? I think so. Although El Saadawi never spells this out for her reader, there are clues within her text by which the informed reader might deduce this fact. Returning to the questions I posed

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[26] It is not clear that the novel is set in Egypt but El Saadawi often sets her novels in her home country. The novel is, however, set in an Arab country and so my interpretation of Katie's actions as symbolic of Western colonization and neocolonialism still applies.

earlier: why does the Imam constantly fear being replaced and why is there the need for a body double? What is the Imam aspiring to become through his position? Through his position as leader the Imam is really aspiring to one goal—to rid himself of the shame he feels. Feelings of shame have haunted the Imam since he was a boy, and he tells us that he desires wealth and power to rid himself of the feelings of shame he felt as a result of his poverty (32).[27] That ever-present hole in his pants, revealing his shameful parts, symbolizes the poverty the Imam sought to overcome and has; however, he can never rid himself of his shame, just as he cannot seem to rid himself of the hole in his trousers.

The Imam has a body double who it would seem wears a mask in order to resemble the Imam in every way. The Imam is a head of state and loved, respected and feared by the people of that state, yet he still fears assassination. Who could the Imam fear will assassinate him? While it is clear he does not trust the other members of his council completely, it seems that the largest threat comes from outside. The Imam tells his wife "'no one will try and kill me other than a member of Hizb Al Shaitan, or a mercenary hired by some secret party, or an *enemy sent from a foreign* land'" (37, my emphasis). The narrator continuously makes mention of a foreign enemy and war. Bint Allah and her brother, Fadl Allah, were in the war fighting for their country: but against whom? This never becomes clear, but I would suggest that this foreign enemy is a Western enemy. As I have said, the political and the creative often, if not always, intersect in El Saadawi's narratives, and as a public speaker El Saadawi has been vocal about the Western practice of financing and supporting fundamentalist religious leaders who serve neo-colonial purposes. When leaders such as Saddam Hussein or Osama Bin Laden become too

[27] That the Imam directly provides the reader with this information and no one else, suggests that it is very personal and a source of deep-rooted shame; this also serves to render the Imam more sympathetic

difficult to control they are rejected and disposed of. At a speech presented in 1999 for the Jubilee Summit 2000 in South Africa El Saadawi proclaimed that "Neocolonialism and religious revival are two faces of the same coin. You cannot veil the minds of people without some kind of divine power, hidden behind the clouds. We need to oblige local governments in the South to stop serving the multinational economic powers." In a speech given in 2002 entitled, "Towards a Philosophy that will Awaken the Conscience of the Human Race," El Saadawi suggests:

> Corrupt, paternalistic, dictatorial governments in the East or in the South including Arab governments have been supported by the class and patriarchal capitalist rulers of the West under the leadership of the United States. The fundamentalist and terrorist political movements in Islam, Judaism and Christianity have received encouragement and support from the same ruling forces in the West.

Understanding El Saadawi's personal and political views aids us in understanding her construction of the Imam and characters like him. To the lay reader the Imam is simply a villain, but to a reader who is more aware of El Saadawi's background and philosophies, the Imam becomes much more complex. A sinister and yet tragic figure, the Imam is the stunted Arab male who can wield power over the female and the marginalized, but who has no power over his own fate— or rather, whose power over his own fate is superficial and fleeting. While the Arab males in the text exert power over the females, the Imam is a reminder that gender issues are not problems in isolation from other social issues. Rather, gender, race, and class all intersect on the level of the family, the state and the globe. While the Arab male is more powerful than the female, he too exists inside a social structure of neocolonialism.

While the Imam is revealed as a callous, uncaring unbeliever who manipulates the people he preaches to and neglects his duties, El Saadawi's most scathing critique of the Imam comes in the form of his daughter, Bint Allah. Her existence reveals the Imam for the fraud he truly is; but this is more complex than the fact that he has an illegitimate daughter. Bint Allah literally means the daughter of God. At the orphanage this is the name she was given but the name is blasphemy in Islamic terms. God has no son and if he has no son then he certainly has no daughter. The idea of God begetting children is contrary to Islamic doctrine: yet the child exists and she flies in the face of rigid religious interpretations. The Chief of Security tells Bint Allah, "'your name itself is heresy'" (137). While we are told her father is the Imam her lineage at times seems unsure; could she be the daughter of God? And what a rebellious slap in the face to not only suggest that God has a child but that it is a female child. The female child within Arab cultures is less desired and not nearly as celebrated as the birth of a son. In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus relates how her father would become enraged and beat her mother if a male child died but if the child was a girl he would do nothing but go about his business (El Saadawi *Woman* 18). In *The Story of Zahra*, Zahra remembers how her mother favored her brother by serving him morsels of meat, but provided her with none because she was a girl (Al-Shaykh *Zahra* 11). Bint Allah's name also reaffirms the Imam's rivalry with the one true God of Islam. She is supposedly the Imam's daughter, and he has made himself a god on earth. Sadly his followers cannot read, and so they do not know what God says about false deities. In her activist and feminist work, her polemic texts, and her novels, El Saadawi is adamant that education and the mind are the ways in which subjugated peoples will find freedom— women included. Bint Allah recognizes that the Imam is not

God and that his laws are not just, because she uses her mind. I will turn to the idea of the mind and the body and how both figure in El Saadawi's works in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4

THE ARAB FEMALE BODY: SEX, SEXUALITY, AND DEATH

Most monotheistic religions espouse that the mind and soul supersede the body in validity and importance. As such the soul and mind are connected and linked to godliness and faith, that which causes a person to do right and aspire to become a good human being. The body on the other hand has been linked to sin, especially sins of the flesh. The association of the body with sinfulness in people's minds leads to restraints placed upon sex and sexuality by both the individual and the community. Such restraints are religiously sanctioned and policed individually as well as socially. The mind is also constructed as being masculine while the body, linked to sexuality, sinfulness and temptation, is constructed as feminine. Leila Ahmed suggests that this line of thought goes all the way back to Classical Greece, to the times of Plato and to Aristotle (who was Plato's student), whose view on the female was accepted by Arabs and Europeans as both philosophy and science. Aristotle, Ahmed points out, suggested that the female body was an unfinished body and therefore naturally inferior and malformed in contrast to the perfect male body. It was the place of the male to rule over the female in the same way the mind ruled over the body. Even in the conception of a child the male was linked to the mind/soul and the woman was linked to the body, as Aristotle suggested that a man`s role in conception was to produce the soul and create the material form while the female's role was limited to supplying the "material mass" (Ahmed 31). Ahmed asserts that females in Aristotle's society remained perpetual infants, under the rule of their male guardians at all times. Aristotle also constructed the male as rational and well-rounded

and the female as emotional. These ancient philosophies can be clearly seen in monotheistic religious ideologies concerning women. Women are stereotypically portrayed as temptresses and seductresses luring unsuspecting and innocent men away from the path of God towards the path of the devil; their unrestricted sexual bodies were sources of corruption for the male. Within the Christian tradition the ultimate temptress is Eve, who tempted Adam to disobey God and taste the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge.[28] As a result, men were sentenced to till the earth, women were sentenced to fully experience the pain of childbirth, and both were cast out of the Garden of Eden. While the Islamic scenario of the Genesis story has both Adam and Eve equally deciding to eat of the apple, thereby relieving Eve of sole responsibility for the fall, Islam still constructs women in much the same ways as Christianity and Judaism before it. What becomes clear from the abovementioned mythologies is that the split between mind and body was a philosophical or "scientific" theory predating monotheistic religions and that these religions adopted the popular beliefs surrounding masculinity/femininity and male and female bodies. As a result the female is inferior and women's sexualities are still constructed as in need of special policing. Actually, all sex and sexuality is policed in Islam; but what is permissible and not permissible is defined in terms of one's sexuality and sex. Within Islam sex is not permissible unless constituted within a marital relationship between two members of the opposite sex. Homosexuality is *haram.*[29] It is female sexuality, however, which is stringently monitored and controlled through religious and political interpretations of Islam. Women are seen as gatekeepers of sexuality, making them responsible not only for their own sexual desires and actions but

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[28] The story of the temptation is provided in Genesis of 1:3.

[29] This is an Arabic word meaning forbidden or unlawful; opposite of the word *halal* meaning permissible or lawful.

also for those of men. This tradition with regards to female sexuality and promiscuity, as seen in Aristotle and the Adam and Eve story, still pervades modern-day Arab thought.

Furthermore, in Arab societies women's bodies are sites of male honor and a woman must maintain her chastity and virginity until her wedding night to uphold the bride's family honor. If a woman is found to have lost her virginity prematurely the consequences can be dire. In *The Hidden Face of Eve*. El Saadawi relates a number of stories from her time as a doctor in Egypt where young women were injured or even killed because their virginity was in question (El Saadawi *Eve* 26, 30). El Saadawi goes on to explain:

> Arab society still considers that fine membrane which covers the aperture of the external genital organs is *the most cherished and most important part of a girl's body*. and is more valuable than one of her eyes, or an arm, or a lower limb. An Arab family does not grieve as much at the loss of a girl's eye as it does if she happens to lose her virginity. In fact if the girl lost her life. it would be considered less of a catastrophe than if she lost her hymen. (26, my emphasis)

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

> This is due to the fact that patriarchal class society has imposed premarital virginity on girls and ensured that the very honour of a girl, and her family, is closely linked to the preservations of this virginity. If virginity is

> lost, this brings almost everlasting shame which can only be "wiped out in blood," as the common Arab saying goes. (27)

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

El Saadawi also points out the startling double standard that exists within Arab cultures with regards to sex and sexuality, for while female virginity is insisted upon, the same standards are not applied to men. Male promiscuity is a known and accepted fact in many Arab societies. While Islam maintains that both males and females should remain chaste until married, Arab cultures place the burden of purity, honor and respect on the female body only; the male body is held to a different set of standards that classify male virility and sexual experience as markers of worth. For a man to have many partners is not as shameful as it is for a woman in Arab society because "'only the pocket of a man can bring him shame'" (29). That is to say that the only source of shame for a man is to lack wealth. I would also suggest that the inability to control his female family members can also be a source of shame but as pointed out, this shame can be erased through blood. In this regard I find that Arab cultural standards with regards to gender and sex resemble quite closely conservative North American standards, though in the Muslim world sexual freedom, whether male or female, is still taboo. El Saadawi's explanations also make it easier to understand the Imam in *The Fall of the Imam* and his constant need to shuck off his impoverished beginnings as a marker of shame while continuing to be promiscuous. The only source of shame that the Imam outwardly acknowledges is his boyhood poverty, which constantly haunts him (El Saadawi *Fall* 32); the Imam recognizes no other source

of shame and so he continues to be promiscuous because his money reassures him that he is honorable.

Due to the attention placed on the Arab female body and the energy invested in maintaining the desired conduct of such a body within religious and cultural constraints, the body becomes a perfect site for both El Saadawi and Al-Shaykh to wage war against the oppression of Arab women. In their texts, these writers use sex, sexuality and the Arab female body as a site of resistance against oppressions faced daily by Arab women. By reclaiming the Arab woman's body within their texts and revealing that women are indeed sexual beings with desires outside of their husband's. Al-Shaykh and El Saadawi loosen the tethers which have held down Arab women for centuries. While both authors make women's bodies sites of resistance against daily oppressions, they take up the issue of the body in two very different ways

Hanan Al-Shaykh's novels, *The Story of Zahra* and *Women of Sand and Myrrh* intricately deal with the everyday lives of seemingly ordinary Arab women. The characters of Al-Shaykh's *Women of Sand and Myrrh* are restless and desperately wish to escape their mundane lives. As the narrative progresses, it becomes clear that the women of this unnamed Gulf state have little freedom and their bodies are literally restricted and contained by the patriarchal society they are a part of. The women must veil in the *abaya*[30] as sanctioned by law. Their bodies are further restricted and policed as physical movement is limited by law as well; a woman is not allowed to leave her home without a male-relative chaperone. Suha, a Lebanese national, is not used to such stringent Islamic rules as are practiced in the Gulf state and she finds the time she spends there trying, to

[30] The *abaya* is a long black outer dress/cloak worn in many Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia. It is sometimes paired with the *nicob* or face covering which reveals only the eyes.

say the least. She is restless but cannot even venture out without her male driver, as women are also restricted from driving and from certain forms of education.[31] In the Gulf where these women reside mobility is extremely limited, which causes Suha to feel as though she is going mad and to long for Lebanon even as it is in the midst of a civil war. The chaos of Lebanese war would be preferable to the confinement she finds in the desert.

Nur, a national, is from a wealthy family and her wealth affords her much of the same mobility that a man would have. However, this mobility is superficial in the Gulf where extreme Islamic interpretations are practiced. Even with her money Nur is under her husband's control, as evidenced when he confiscates her passport and refuses to grant permission for her to go abroad. Nur is trapped, much the same way Suha is trapped, because she is a woman. Had she been born a male in such an affluent family in the Middle East her opportunities would be endless, but as a woman in a patriarchal society she is still substantially more limited than a man. When the two women meet they are drawn to one another and begin a sexual relationship. It is through this illicit sexual relationship that Al-Shaykh is able to reclaim the female body for women and resist the stringent religious oppressions placed upon these bodies. In conservative Middle East societies same-sex relationships are an extremely taboo subject.[32]

When Nur and Suha begin their affair they are doubly flying in the face of religious law, as they are committing adultery (both are married to men) and are also

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[31] While education is available for females, it is still up to the family whether or not a girl will be educated. Many families do not see a need for higher education for females and many Islamic universities only permit male students.

[32] Homosexuality is illegal in Lebanon, and much of the Middle East, and is punishable by up to one year in prison. Lesbianism presents a double-taboo as: (1) the woman is engaging in extra-marital sex and (2) it is with a member of the same sex (Torbey).

engaging in a homosexual relationship which is forbidden in even the most lax of Islamic societies. A sexual relationship with a person of the same sex is strictly forbidden and in the Gulf state Al-Shaykh creates for the reader one can imagine that the punishment for such a practice would be harsh. It is with each other that these two women find escape and are able to alleviate some of the hardships they experience at being women in such a repressive and oppressive society; however, the relief Suha feels in such a relationship is only fleeting.

Suha begins to feel badly about her relationship with Nur and recognizes that Nur is simply using her. Though Nur pursues Suha to a degree, the relationship ceases. Suha ends the relationship because she deems it sinful, but Al-Shaykh does not clarify if Suha believes it is sinful because it is lesbian or because both women are already invested in previous relationships. If the relationship is indeed sinful to Suha because of its lesbian nature then it would seem that Al-Shaykh is reaffirming religious readings of the body as a space for hetero-normative practices only. This would also seem to reaffirm patriarchal readings and once again suggest that the female body is a space which men alone should rule.

However, a second reading of the lesbian relationship between Nur and Suha is indeed possible, one which disrupts patriarchal readings of the female body and attempts to reclaim the space for women. I would suggest that Nur, although physically female and as such still under the rule of men, is herself very much aligned with patriarchy because of her class and status within Arab society. Butler suggests that the material manifestation of the body (whether one is born physically male or female) does not truly determine one's gender. On the contrary gender is constructed through the reiteration of practices

deemed male or female by the society in which one lives. A woman becomes a woman not because she is born this way but rather because she is ushered into a world of feminine practices and reiterates these practices over and over again in order to produce gender (Butler 1-5). Nur exemplifies the ways in which gender can nevertheless be manipulated. All individuals perform gender: however, not everyone performs her socially assigned gender. While in many ways Nur does perform her gendered role, shopping and enjoying fancy clothes, we are also able to see a number of gender slips: Nur also performs masculinity as it relates to sexual desire. Nur then, is a conundrum for the Arab society within which she lives. She performs femininity only half the time, and she thereby attempts to produce herself as "male" subject, in order to gain control over her body and her activities. This of course cannot happen, because as Butler suggests, in order for one to be intelligible in society, one must perform the correct gender. All other performances are linked to the abject and therefore unintelligible. This becomes clearer when we examine Nur's gender slips. For example, Nur uses sexuality in much the same way the male characters within the novel do, in their relationship to the female body. While male sexuality is constructed as being insatiable and indiscriminate,[33] Nur's sexual behavior falls along the same lines. She uses her partners' bodies to fulfill her own needs and the relationships become parasitic. Whether the body is male or female does not matter, as Nur simply uses the body as a means to an end. It is because of this character flaw I suggest that the lesbian relationship between Suha and Nur is bound to fail: not because Suha believes it to be sinful but because it does not fulfill her. Nur sees Suha as

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[33] Here I am thinking of male characters Al-Shaykh constructs—for example, Maaz and the other Arab men who use Suzanne sexually. Even though Maaz is a married man he sees nothing wrong in pursuing a sexual relationship with Suzanne. Nur's affairs in Britain, however, cause Saleh to desire a divorce. Maaz's affair seen as socially acceptable and Nur's is not.

prey to be caught and dominated, thereby taking on a masculine mindset in terms of the love relationship. As it were, Nur is performing masculinity through her relationship with Suha, and so what Suha finds is the same patriarchal confinement she sees elsewhere in the desert. The lesbian relationship does not open a safe space for expression of female desire for Suha; rather, she is simply used in much the same way that the other females in the novel are — for sexual gratification. It is also pertinent to point out the framework within which Al-Shaykh is writing. While her work is already considered controversial and shocking to many, to outwardly condone lesbianism as legitimate practice would be very difficult for a Muslim, Arab woman. In a Middle Eastern version of such a relationship, there can be no happy ending for Suha and Nur. Again, the ending of this lesbian relationship speaks to the context in which it is written, as homosexuality in the Middle East exists but is not condoned or outwardly expressed.[34]

I am not suggesting, however, that Nur is a simple character. On the contrary, while she performs the essence of what is considered male, her material body is female and as a result is doomed to a life that cannot fulfill her. Education bores Nur and, hoping to gain some control and independence in her life, she marries; alas, she moves from the custody of her father to that of her husband. Nur is infantilized, unable to become her own guardian in that desert society. She is constantly in the care of men, and as a result, her actions are very much like those of a child: selfish and self-serving. Women have indeed historically been infantilized, in both Western and Eastern societies. One need only read the writings of Virginia Woolf, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, or Aristotle to see this. However, rather than carelessly recreating the infantilized female in her construction

[34] Since the novel was written in 1988, Helem, the first-ever gay advocacy group of its kind in the Arab world, was founded in Lebanon.

of Nur, Al-Shaykh provides the reader with a commentary on and a criticism of such depictions. Nur's infantile behavior is a direct result of the situation within which she (a woman in this desert society) has been placed; yet her husband, Saleh, is constantly frustrated with her. How can men restrict women, force them into the position of children and then condemn them when they act accordingly? For example Saleh, her second husband, marries her with some understanding of her decadent ways and her extravagant tastes, yet after she enters his custody he alters his role as friend and lover (seemingly Nur's equal) to that of guardian. Nur says, "Then Saleh began asking me like a school teacher if I'd read the newspapers and whether I'd like the books he'd brought me to read" (Al-Shaykh 256). While one may argue that Saleh is simply trying to educate Nur or stop her from lazing about the house all day (Nur suspects the latter) it is clear that he does not see her as his equal. He is the learned adult who is cultured and well educated and, despite her breeding, Nur is a petulant child whose bad behavior must be rectified. Saleh takes it upon himself to change Nur into the wife he desires, a wife who will reflect more positively on him; however, in Nur's case, this is harder said than done. Saleh attempts to force Nur into her gendered role by forcing her to reiterate tasks associated with the role of the female in Arab society, such as waking and caring for her daughter, or running the household. But she refuses to partake in these gendered performances and instead desires to use her affluence and class mobility to escape the monotony of the desert through shopping or feeding her sexual appetites.

Nur's relationship with Saleh is interesting since prior to their marriage Saleh confesses that he too feels the frustration that women feel living in such a regulated society, "but this was our country and we had to put up with it" (253). This statement,

made early in their relationship, positions Saleh as a sympathizer and who perhaps will understand Nur's own frustration. However, this is not the case. While Saleh feels frustrations at the pressures of society and its traditions, he fails to realize that his mobility as a man in such a society is far greater than that of Nur or any other woman. Therefore, he cannot entirely relate to the frustrations women feel in this society. The female is placed under much greater scrutiny and surveillance by the desert society and Saleh has failed to recognize this. Saleh is able to leave the home and travel the city unimpeded while Nur must have a male driver and cloak herself in the *abaya*. Indeed, while Nur was never a keen student she relates how this practice alone made attending school difficult (247). Furthermore, Saleh has full control over Nur and his "school teacher" -like interrogation of her activities is permitted by society. Nur, on the other hand, cannot nose about in Saleh's affairs with as much ease. Of course, it is Saleh who has the authority to confiscate his wife's passport which she "needed to live, like oxygen" (271). I read this manipulative action as a signal that we have reached the point in the narrative where Saleh wishes to rid himself of Nur but will not divorce her for the sake of his own honor; instead, he wishes her to request the divorce and confiscating her "oxygen" is his means to this end. In this desert state a wife cannot travel without her husband's consent, but of course a male needs absolutely no consent from a woman to do anything. The list of inequalities between men and women, Saleh and Nur, is long, but I will conclude with one last example. While Saleh does not wish to initiate the divorce himself (once again for fear of losing public respect), he has the complete legal right to divorce while his wife has none. Indeed, Nur did not know her first marriage had ended until she was given a certificate of divorce while her husband was out of the country. The

utter power imbalance that exists between men and women in this desert state means that men like Saleh will never feel the same frustration and anxiety felt by women like Nur, because whereas male sovereignty is limited in some ways in this very rigid society, the restrictions placed on females are more plentiful and of a greater magnitude. That Nur is trapped and acts out (superficially) through the only means of expression available to her — her money and her body — is in no way surprising, but the male reaction to her inability to conform to these rigid gender roles is cruel and unusual punishment. In Nur, Al-Shaykh has created facets of the female self which have been overlooked or thought imaginary by many men; one such facet is the desire for sexual fulfillment. It may be because of this sexual appetite that Nur is imaged as a "vampire" and "Dracula" (255), once again a masculine villain.

In the Muslim creation story, Eve is said to have been created from Adam's rib to be his companion; as such, women are said to be the companions of men in the Qur'an and *hadith* and are meant to fulfill men's natural sexual urges and desires. It is presupposed in the (male) Arab world that female sexual desire and need for sexual fulfillment is unnatural and we see this when Suzanne becomes sexually assertive with Maaz. As Suzanne struggles to reach orgasm and becomes dominant in the sexual act Maaz flees from the bed and shouts, "'Damn your race!...you are a devil! God preserve me!'" (202). Suzanne's sexual dominance and aggression is unexpected and the Arab man cannot tolerate it. In their previous sexual encounters in which Suzanne enacts the female (passive) role during sex, she is not met with this same hostility. That Maaz later questions why "God created foreign women out of the same clay as men, or at any rate not out of the same clay as *normal* women" (202, my emphasis) suggests that he believes

normal women (read *Arab* women) do not have the desire to be sexually dominant, or to find sexual gratification in the same ways that foreign women and all men do. Of course, Maaz has not met Nur.

In Nur we see rampant, unfiltered female sexuality. She has desires and those desires are to be met whether it is with Suha or a British rock star. The lesbian relationship between Suha and Nur highlights women's sexuality as reality and women's desires as concrete. Constructing a depiction of lesbianism in the Middle East also opens up a space into discourse on the validity of lesbian relationships, however small this space may be. In *Women of Sand and Myrrh* Al-Shaykh shows that women have real sexual needs and desires and that women's bodies can be spaces for themselves rather than for men alone.

Al-Shaykh also highlights the double standards which are present in modern day Arab culture with regards to sex and sexuality. While the female characters in the novel are controlled and their bodies literally restricted by law, these laws do not apply to men or to White women. Suzanne and Maaz's sexual affair brings to light stereotypes Arabs harbor about White women as well as the double standard, with regards to sex and sexuality, which is condoned within Arab societies. Maaz has a wife and child but he carries on his affair with Suzanne without a thought to his marriage. It is as though such behavior from a man is not only tolerated but expected. When Maaz travels abroad he contracts a sexually-transmitted disease and passes this on to his wife and child. When Suzanne sees the young Arab woman she realizes how lucky she is that she is not the one suffering with the illness, and how close she came to death. This scene is very telling, as it is the Arab female body which suffers because of the male's sexual desire, rather than

the White female body. The Arab female is the most expendable in such an equation, as she falls lowest in a hierarchy made up of Arab Man, White woman and herself. Suzanne is able to use the power afforded to her because of her American citizenship and her Whiteness to avoid many of the restrictions placed on Arab women, but as a woman she is still seen as sexually accessible and perhaps more so by the Arab men because of her status as a Western outsider.

At the same time Suzanne is not an unsympathetic character; while Suzanne has little regard or understanding for the Arab women's predicament in the Gulf, Al-Shaykh creates connections between White women and Arab women through this character. Suzanne finds the Arab nation freeing because she is sexually desired and is treated very well due to her Whiteness and her American nationality. She honestly does not recognize the oppressions faced by Arab women and frequently whines the phrase "I do not understand." This humorous catch-phrase paints Suzanne as a dazed and confused tourist in a disorienting desert world, but it also veils the less funny truth that Western women simply do not understand the experiences of Arab women, even though some still see fit to pass judgment on Arab women's lives. The intricacies and complexities of life as a woman in the Middle East elude Suzanne just as they elude much of the Western world, and yet Suzanne wishes to transplant herself to this world where her race will grant her greater mobility and appreciation than other women observe. The word "transplant" suggests a type of foreign intrusion into this desert state and indeed Suzanne's presence becomes an intrusion as she consumes the desert. In the above-cited example Suzanne takes the Arab man Maaz as lover, aware of his married state, but she does not catch the STD—that is left for Fatima, his Arab wife. So, Suzanne consumes the Arab man

sexually—perhaps in an attempt to transcend the racial divide and experience the Other in the same way that the Imam wishes to experience Whiteness through his sexual experience with Katie. In a similar fashion the test tube man in *The Fall of the Imam* wishes to delve into the Orient and the Other through his sexual trysts with Arab virgins every night. Suzanne's many sexual encounters with the Arab male may be read in this same way especially when one takes into account her sexual behavior in her own country. Suzanne tells us that "I didn't find it strange about Fatima, and her lack of pleasure and desire; when I was in America, I'd stopped having sex with David or doing it by myself, and I was no longer conscious of my body" (210-211). That Suzanne's sexual interest is reawakened when she comes to "transplant" herself among the Other is telling. While sex in America disinterested Suzanne, sex with the Other is exciting and she is insatiable. In this foreign land Suzanne is able to reinvent herself from frumpy Texan housewife to desirable foreigner; her Whiteness and Americaness, as markers of superiority and power, allow her this reinvention. Still, Suzanne is also a woman and consequently the men of this Middle Eastern society do have expectations of her, even though they view her as superior to their own women in many ways. When she is sexually assertive with Maaz he tells her, "'God created woman to make children, like a factory. That's the exact word, Suzanne. She's a factory, she produces enjoyment for the man, not for herself.... Yesterday you were like a she-devil ....I swear in God's name I was disgusted by you and your whole race. You seemed like a man to me, when you were crying out. I said, Maaz, this woman's a hermaphrodite. She's both a man and a woman'" (210). Maaz makes it perfectly clear that Suzanne's fulfillment of his sexual needs is acceptable and expected, but women do not fulfill their own sexual desires. He cannot understand

Suzanne's actions, and, rather than conceding that women are sexual beings and that they do indeed pleasure themselves, Maaz rationalizes Suzanne's behavior by suggesting that she is a man or at least a hermaphrodite. It is also interesting to point out that Maaz does not see gender as being socially constructed but as innate, God-made. Once again, the man uses God and religion to construct female sexuality. Because Maaz does not see sex or gender as constructed his only rationalization is that Suzanne's transgressive material body is not wholly female.

Although I do see Suzanne as a transplant to Eastern culture who consumes the East, her sexual desires and feelings about her body make her a sympathetic character to whom many women can relate; she struggles with many of the issues with which women world-wide, and especially women in the West, struggle daily: she is a middle-aged mother whose husband shows her little sexual attention. She is overweight and her body does not live up to Western ideals of beauty. In the East her Whiteness is coveted and she is desired and privileged because of it. With the Arab men with whom she has relationships, Suzanne is able to fulfill her sexual needs and find validation for her body— a validation she was unable to find in her husband or in America. Therefore, Hanan Al-Shaykh uses Suzanne as a bridge between cultures, because Suzanne's insecurities and unfulfilled sexual desires make her sympathetic in the eyes of female readers, while also connecting her to the comparably sexually unfulfilled Arab females she meets.

In *The story of Zahra* the female body, Zahra's body, is central to the narrative. From the early stages of the narrative Zahra seems to be dissociated from her body. The

beatings her mother receives from her father because of a sexual affair may be the reason for the way Zahra views her own body and sexuality as a young adult.

When Zahra loses her virginity to Malek, the reader recognizes immediately that he is using the young girl and will never marry her. In Arab society Zahra is committing social suicide—if not literally endangering her own life through these actions—but she seems disinterested in her body and its true value. She instead wishes to find some form of worth and feeling which has eluded her thus far. She gives her body away, looking for something deeper in return, but she receives nothing. When she discovers that she is pregnant the only thing she receives is an abortion. Her body becomes a type of science experiment, used and discarded. Zahra immediately recognizes that her value has decreased as an Arab woman with the loss of her virginity and begs Malek to swear that they are "married" before God; although he never confirms their "marriage," Zahra continues the affair. Malek uses Zahra's body and she never mentions sexual pleasure during intercourse. It is as though her body is a vessel to be used and discarded by Malek again and again. One must ask, what draws a young girl, once disgusted by her mother's own sexual "deviance," to commit the same deed but only slightly altered? Both Zahra and her mother have extramarital sexual relationships. While it seems that her mother finds pleasure and excitement in her affair and may love the man she sleeps with, the same cannot be said for Zahra. Zahra seems to be playing with her life, merely for the sake of pushing the boundaries of what is socially acceptable. She is drawn again and again to the small room to give her body over to Malek but she seems dissociated from this material body and feels nothing. I see these actions suggesting two possibilities. First, I see a young woman trying to get to know her body but finding it difficult to enjoy sex

and find pleasure when the fear of punishment is constantly upon her. This is why she panics when the realization of the loss of her virginity, and the impact upon her of that loss, finally hits her. She does not want to marry Malek but understands the severity of the act she has committed in terms of the judgment of her community. Her plea for marriage is an attempt to alleviate her fear and anxiety and to undo what she has done. But Zahra never marries Malek and soon falls back into the same pattern of visiting the small room to engage in sex with him. Her return to Malek and the room suggests Zahra is using sex and her own body to subvert social boundaries. In this act she is attempting to find independence and freedom from societal oppressions. When she becomes pregnant for the second time and has another abortion, she realizes that Malek and their relationship is not benefiting her in any way. She still feels trapped and lacks the independence she desires.

After the second abortion she leaves Beirut for Africa to visit her Uncle Hashem. While she is in Hashem's care he molests her, leaving her feeling dirty and responsible for the encounter. She mirrors her mother's actions, recalled from her childhood, and hides in the bathroom, silent. In this way Zahra is very much like Nur. While she has none of the fire and passion which Nur possesses, she is infantilized and portrayed as childlike and mad. She moves from the custody of her father to that of her uncle and finally to the care of her husband, Majed. She has no independence, but the reader comes to understand that this is what Zahra is looking for in her sexual encounters and in her travels.

In her relationship with her husband, however, she displays the same dissociated attitude towards her sexuality and her body; El Saadawi's claims surrounding female

virginity in Arab families become reality when we witness Zahra's tragic life. When her husband realizes she is not a virgin he becomes angry and takes her to a clinic to find the truth. In *The Hidden Face of Eve*, El Saadawi relates how common an occurrence this truly is, as young brides are often brought to clinics for the hymen to be examined when they do not bleed on their wedding nights (El Saadawi *Eve* 26). Al-Shaykh uses parts of her novel as a mirror to reflect the inequalities and horrors of Arab society back to Arabs – the audience for which her novels were written first and foremost. The clinic experience soon after one's wedding is something her Arab readers would be well aware of or perhaps would have experienced themselves. Here Al-Shaykh makes it clear that the female's body is not her own, as she can be dissected and her most personal secrets revealed by a simple examination: her body will reveal all. Of course, as El Saadawi points out, such examinations cannot with certainty truly determine whether a woman is virginal or not, as some women are born without the hymen and other girls have the hymen torn prematurely with something as non-sexual as exercise.

Embarrassed by the prospect of being found out by a doctor, Zahra tells Majed she was raped, only to later reveal her affair with Malek and her two subsequent abortions. *The Story of Zahra* confirms the importance of controlling the female body in Arab societies and moreover highlights the fact that the hymen is the most important part of an Arab woman's body; if by some unfortunate accident a young woman parts with it willingly or unwillingly the consequences are the same.

Zahra's feelings towards her own body and sexuality remain the same while she is in her husband's care. When she returns to visit her mother in Beirut, her mother laments Zahra's homely appearance and says she is thankful that her daughter was ever able to

find a husband. This statement is reflective of the general Arab belief that a female's greatest accomplishment is to marry; once again the novel becomes a mirror reflecting ugly truths of Arab society to Al-Shaykh's Arab readers. When Zahra returns to Africa and her husband, she begins to feel, but her desires are to possess her own body and to assert some sort of control over her life: "I wanted to live for myself. I wanted my body to be mine alone. I wanted the place on which I stood and the air surrounding me to be mine and no one else's" (Al-Shaykh *Zahra* 93). Up until this point Zahra's body has been possessed by the men around her and she has asserted little control in her own life. When Majed pushes himself on her in an attempt to make love to her she resists and bites his arm. When he throws her to the floor and beats her she demands that he divorce her. Although Zahra is seemingly weak in many ways, she finds the strength to demand her freedom and realizes that men and marriage cannot be a source of happiness for her (109). Seen as simple and weak by those around her, Zahra shows herself to be a strong woman, which suggests she can resist and will resist the confinement of men. This is a turning point for Zahra. Her return to Lebanon after her divorce will find her in the civil war and the freedom she finds in the war will allow her to reclaim her body and her desires.

While it takes time for Zahra to eventually find sexual liberation and pleasure, this does not mean Zahra does not recognize her own needs. She understands that her previous sexual relationships have been unfulfilling because "from beginning to end, I had been a mere spectator" with no real control (114); despite this awareness she begins her relationship with the sniper in much the same manner. Living in the Lebanese Civil War, Zahra begins to play with her life by attempting to find the sniper. When she finds

him and he pulls her down to the ground she becomes submissive and lifeless, and feels no pleasure. Yet Zahra continues to return to the rooftop and the sniper each day until one day she finds pleasure and begins to feel: "When I asked for more he gave me more. And I wanted more, and he gave me more, until I cried out" (152). It is through sexual pleasure that Zahra finds catharsis for her pain:

> My cries as I lay in the dust responding to the sniper's exploring fingers, contained all the pain and sickness from my past, when I had curled up in my shell in some corner somewhere, or in a bathroom, hugging myself and holding my breath as if always trying to return to the state of being a fetus in its mother's womb. Withdrawing back into my shell had been exhausting because it drained me of all control over my body. My arms would feel as dry as sticks: my knees would be like iron rivets; my thighs would be like saws whose teeth grated at each other. So many days and hours passed in this way until I found myself shaking at the whiteness of the doctor's coat. I still kept my silence, but it was a different kind of silence now: one containing rest and slumber My body had undulated with pleasure as the sniper looked into my eyes. Would I be thought of as the sniper's accomplice now that my body had become a partner to his body? (153-154)

Zahra no longer views her body and herself as spectator or witness during her sexual encounters; rather, she finds pleasure and release in her encounters with the sniper and instead of viewing her own body as inferior to the male body or a vessel to be used, she recognizes it as partner to his body. In the word "partner," Zahra has elevated her status to that of equal with men in the sexual experience and she finds pleasure in such experiences. She does not elevate herself to "partner" status until she is able to feel

pleasure, the pleasure which is reserved for men. Indeed Zahra is not simply his partner now but her body is her own partner. Through the new-found ability to feel pleasure her relationship with her body has been renewed and reframed. Before, Zahra felt nothing and as a result she felt no connection between her mind, spirit, and her body. For Zahra this was detrimental to her health and probably the reason those around her constantly saw her as mentally ill. Because she could not connect to her body she could not feel whole. It was as though her body was not there because she could not *feel* it to make the connection between mind and body. Finding pleasure with the sniper causes her to feel her body and accept it and connect to it. Despite the fact that she is constructed by her mother as less attractive than other girls and less deserving of a relationship, she finds worth in her body through sexual pleasure. While her body has been a source of pain under the control of men, when she is in control of her body she "asks for more" and thus begins a relationship with herself.

But why is it that Zahra's happiness with the sniper cannot last? Although she tries to take control of her sexual experiences and her body by using birth control she is too late. At thirty years of age Zahra has found her body and has taken control of it but she becomes pregnant and jeopardizes her new-found freedom. Unable to procure an abortion so late in her pregnancy Zahra must return to the sniper and tell him of the pregnancy. He promises to marry her but with her new-found strength Zahra breaks her silence when it is unnecessary and ventures to ask him if he is indeed the sniper. It is only her new-found ability to connect with her body and feel pleasure as well as pain that transforms Zahra into a woman strong enough to find the voice hiding within her body and ask the forbidden question. Although he denies being the sniper Zahra is shot dead by

the sniper on her way home. In this case silence would have been a safer and perhaps smarter choice for Zahra but she once again refuses to fulfill her feminine gender role by keeping quiet. If she had remained silent the sniper may have married Zahra and she would have fulfilled her function as an Arab woman; however Zahra makes the choice to voice her concern to the sniper and asks for an answer to an unforgivable question. Is she aware that this question is not to be asked? Presumably so, since she has refrained from asking him before; however, the question asked is not just a simple question. It is Zahra finding her voice in the narrative. When silence would constitute Zahra as intelligible in Arab society and grant her the status of wife and mother, she jeopardizes this status for an opportunity to have control over her body and to find her voice. For a short time Zahra is in control of her body, her sexuality, and her desires, and breaks a sacred silence. For a short time she is happy but within the narrative this happiness cannot last. Zahra pays with her life, for breaking her silence and taking control of her body. Within the parameters of Arab society female bodies are not meant to feel pleasure, only to give pleasure. As Maaz so aptly tells Suzanne, in *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, a woman is "'a factory, she produces enjoyment for the man'" (Al-Shaykh *Women* 210); in this same way women are not meant to ask questions, only to answer. As Virginia Woolf suggests in *A Room of One's Own*, females are meant to reflect the male back to himself in a magnified fashion so that he sees himself as greater than what he is in actuality (Woolf 43). Zahra has always refused to fulfill this role, from her marriage in Africa to her relationship with the sniper, and given a final opportunity to do so, she once again fails in her duties to her society and is rendered unintelligible. A divorcee who has had a number of abortions and cannot maintain her family honor, Zahra cannot exist within the

framework of a society that privileges marriage, motherhood and female chastity: thus she dies. There is no other option for the unintelligible woman in Arab society but to suffer a death of one sort or another. This outlook may very well seem bleak but it is something that Al-Shaykh's Arab readership would not be ignorant of.

While Al-Shaykh explores the ways in which Arab women use their sexuality to find their own pleasure, El Saadawi utilizes a somewhat different construction of the female body. This may be because of the social classes the two writers are examining. While Al-Shaykh writes about middle-class Arab women. El Saadawi concerns herself with the lower classes. In *The Fall of the Imam* the heroine is an orphan, while a prostitute awaiting her execution is the main focus in *Woman at Point Zero.*

It seems unusual that the body is secondary to the human spirit in El Saadwi's work when the writer criticizes religion for perpetuating this ideology; however, this is indeed the case. And the mind of a woman for El Saadawi is more important than both body and spirit. The bodies which El Saadawi constructs are incomplete in some way In *The Fall of the Imam* Bint Allah is young and has not yet come to understand her body. Her only sexual experiences have been forced upon her and she has not come to find pleasure in her encounters. Nonetheless, Bint Allah's body is a recurring image as she runs from the Imam's men who pursue her throughout the novel. The image of her naked body running from men is the initial introduction to Bint Allah and El Saadawi posits her as a natural goddess figure. Bint Allah knows the land and recognizes its grooves as though it were her own body. She says "this is my land," taking ownership and control over the land just as she must do over her body. Just as El Saadawi begins her novel by imaging Bint Allah as a goddess of nature she ends by reaffirming that image. When the

followers of the Imam find Bint Allah and try to dismember her they discover that they cannot: " While they were trying to pull out her head from her body they discovered that her roots were plunged deep into the soil" (174). The scene reaffirms Bint Allah as a mythical goddess figure connected to the land.

Of course when she is captured her body becomes the property of the Imam and his followers. She cannot escape and she is killed but her words live on as she transcends her body: "She leaves her body lying there. turns away from it with no regret, and stands up on her feet. She walks on the earth without a body, like a spirit or a dream with feet that do no touch the ground as she moves here and there" (143).

She realizes that for her, ownership of her body is not a possibility but her spirit and mind have never been owned. When asked, by the Imam's followers, what she has to say for herself Bint Allah replies:

> I want to say that I am innocent and have committed no sin and that I have one mother and she is the sun and innumerable fathers whose faces and names I do not know. I also do not read the letters of words written on paper and I live in the House of Joy but in my heart there is sadness. What is day for you is night for me and what is happiness for you is sadness for me. Pleasure for you is pain to me and victory for you means defeat to me. Your Paradise is my hell and your honor is my shame, whereas my shame to you is an honor. My reason is madness to you and my madness becomes reason for you. If my body dies my heart will live but the last thing to die in me is my mind, for it can live on the barest minimum and everything in me dies before my mind. No one of you has ever possessed my mind. No one. And no matter how often you took my body my mind was always far away out of your reach, like the eye of the sun during the day, like the eye of the sky at night. (174-175)

These words are recognized as truth by the followers of the Imam but the truth is too dangerous to patriarchy for her to remain alive. She points out that her reality is different from that of men and the reality she lives exists in opposition to the current male reality because it is steeped in patriarchy. Because of this, men's honor is her shame and their heaven would be a hell for her as all her experiences are opposite to those of the male watchers. Her words also reveal the way in which Bint Allah inverts the social and religious norms, from her very name and existence, to her lived experiences. El Saadawi goes on to write:

> She saw them standing in front of her in a long line, striking one palm against the other in great surprise. They said: She is neither a sorceress nor is she mad. They said: she is in complete control of her mind and what she says is reason itself. And her reason to them became more dangerous than any of her madness and they decided to condemn her to death by a method that was more rapid than stoning to death so that she would not have the opportunity to say anything further. They also decreed that her trial should not be published in the newspaper and that her file should be definitely closed and buried deep down in the earth forever. (175)

The Imam's followers know the truth but do not want to hear it. These men wish to silence Bint Allah rather than recognize the message of freedom that she sends. This is because the message of freedom is one which would drastically change the lives of women and free them from subjugation. While men under the Imam's regime also lack freedom they still have much more mobility and greater rights than women and these

privileges cannot be risked by allowing Bint Allah to live. El Saadawi recognizes that for women to be free they must recognize the worth of their minds over the worth of their bodies and that such a message is a dangerous one to deliver. Bint Allah's final words also show the erasure which occurs to female modes of knowledge. While patriarchal knowledge is perpetuated, female knowledge is "buried deep down in the earth forever."

In *Woman at Point Zero*, Nawal El Saadawi chooses to uncover an area of sex which has existed arguably for as long as humanity but has been an undesirable topic. Prostitution is said to be the world's oldest profession; however, in most societies it is still illegal and considered morally wrong. El Saadawi's heroine, Firdaus is a convicted murderer and prostitute; it is through her story that the reader is introduced to the world of prostitution and the ways in which a woman's body can become a literal commodity. Firdaus sells her body for payment. While Georges Tarabishi criticizes this prostitute figure as man-hating and deviant, El Saadawi's heroine is surprisingly in control of her life and it is through the act of prostitution that Firdaus finds agency. Building on the work of Karl Abraham as well as Freud, Tarabishi argues that it is the prostitute's frigid exterior that gives her power to metaphorically castrate men by not feeling. A man's inability to bring her to climax, reduces him to nothing more than an animal through the prostitute's frigidity. She does not need him as he needs her. searching her out for the purpose of enacting his basest animal desires. Tarabishi does not explore the power of the prostitute any further or in terms of empowerment for women: however, Firdaus' prostitution of herself is a form of empowerment.

Firdaus becomes aware of her body as a sexual vessel early on when she is molested by her Azherite Uncle. She makes it clear that even then she felt no pleasure

because she has been circumcised. Firdaus' circumcision leaves her body unable to feel sexual pleasure and so, unlike Al-Shaykh's characters, she does not search for fulfillment of sexual desires. She does however, seek out love. Her early attraction to a school teacher is the only experience of "love" Firdaus finds before she is married off by her uncle to an elderly man. In Sheikh Mahmoud's care Firdaus becomes nothing more than a body, used for sex and abuse. When the beatings by her husband become too severe she runs away and meets Bayoumi who treats her well until she wishes to be independent. It is at this point that Bayoumi calls her a "lowly woman" and uses her as a prostitute, bringing his friends over every night to have sex with her and verbally abuse her.

When she escapes from Bayoumi she falls back into a life of prostitution once again, but this situation is somewhat better than the last one. She meets Sharifa who teaches her about prostitution. Firdaus says:

> I became a young novice in Sharifa's hands. She opened my eyes to life, to events in my past, in my childhood, which had remained hidden to my mind. She probed with a searching light revealing obscure areas of myself, unseen features of my face and body, making me become aware of them, understand them, see them for the first time. I discovered I had black eyes, with a sparkle that attracted other eyes like a magnet, and that my nose was neither big, nor rounded, but full and smooth with the fullness of strong passion which could turn to lust. My body was slender, my thighs tense, alive with muscle, ready at any moment to grow even more taut. (El Saadawi 54)

It is only once she meets Sharifa that she can truly begin to learn about herself. It is as though she has never seen herself or cared for herself before this. From the time Firdaus

is circumcised as a young girl she becomes detached from her body and begins to focus on her mind. She achieves a secondary school diploma but is not allowed to venture any further into the world of letters, a world reserved for men. It is clear that from the time she marries she is valued in terms of her body but Firdaus lacks the connection to her body necessary for her to realize her own value (literally and figuratively). In the above passage there is a new-found awareness of the body and the power of the body. Her thighs are "alive with muscle, ready at any moment to grow even more taut." There is also a pleasure associated with the body and the sexuality of the body although this pleasure is not sexual pleasure. Looking at the beauty of her own body, Firdaus seems to find pleasure in its power, and revel in its image. Looking at the beauty of her own body, Firdaus seems to find pleasure in its power, and revel in its image. As a child Firdaus felt unattractive and these positive visual connections are established only after she meets Sharifa and begins a life of prostitution. Firdaus learns that valuing her body figuratively can translate into literal value. Under Sharifa's care she learns about her own beauty and remembers moments from her past that she has suppressed. Her eyes have been opened to her situation before she met Sharifa and she is given a future. But the experience with Sharifa is not completely good as Firdaus tells us that "Day and night I lay on the bed, crucified, and every hour a man would come in" (57). The sexual encounters are revolting and force her to turn her face away from the stench of the male body every time, but this is a stepping-stone onto something even more liberating for Firdaus. At this point in the narrative there are few options for Firdaus because she is just starting to learn about herself. She chooses to stay with Sharifa for the time being because life as a prostitute is better than life with her abusive husband. This is a strong statement. That

Firdaus continues along this path rather than returning to her family illustrates the abusiveness of her marriage. I might add that Firdaus may also be intrigued at the new feelings of power she is experiencing through reconnecting with her sexuality.

When she leaves Sharifa, she begins to prostitute on her own and to put her sexual power to her own use. She sells her own body: "For the first time in her life, it is actually she who controls her body. No one but herself, no pimp or 'Madame,' she sells her body. Holding a ten-pound note in her hands makes her tremble and induces 'an inner contraction as though something had jumped inside me and shaken my body with a violence which was almost painful'...She feels free and independent" (Al Ali 23). For the first time since the narrative began Firdaus has made her own choice. No one is pushing her into doing something, selling her, or exploiting her – she sells herself. I am aware that societal constraints had a hand in turning Firdaus to a life of prostitution but I read the prostitute in this narrative not as a victim of society but as a woman searching for empowerment. Firdaus' strong voice tells me that she does not wish to be pitied and she is not just another victim. In prostituting herself Firdaus has taken control away from Shaykh Mahmoud, Bayoumi and even Sharifa. She is her own master and she is the one who reaps the benefits of her own body. True, Firdaus has few options available to her as an Arab woman in Arab society but rather than consign herself to life as an abused wife she finds another way to return power to herself.

At last she can do as she pleases as money opens up doors to the world of men. El Saadawi makes a clear statement that the liberation of women can come only in the forms of education and financial independence. Once a woman is able to pay her own way in life she is able to make her own choices. Growing up in her father's home, Firdaus is not

allowed to eat until he has finished eating. If there is not enough food, her mother hides the food from the children for her husband. Firdaus' husband also controls her food. Many of her beatings revolve around food. Shaykh Mahmoud shouts at her or beats her if she eats too much, wastes food or uses too much of the cooking ghey when preparing food. Firdaus never feels comfortable when eating in his presence as he watches her constantly, ready to pounce. When Firdaus first sells her own body and receives ten pounds, she goes and buys herself roast chicken. In Egyptian society meat is not eaten by the poor generally (Malti-Douglas *Men* 53). The money also affords her something else, the ability to eat without being watched. The waiter averts his eyes from her plate at the sight of the money. She can eat in a relaxed environment. Money has given her the power of men if only in a limited capacity. The link between power and consumption should not be overlooked as it plays a central role in the story of the prostitute. The metaphor of power and consumption can be applied to the sexual act. The power that money provides men allows them to sexually consume Firdaus. This is because Firdaus lacks financial stability; however, as her wealth amasses, Firdaus says that she can turn away clients. This newly acquired freedom suggests that men's ability to consume her sexually has been curbed by Firdaus' own financial independence: because she possesses the body and the wealth she also has the power.

Firdaus continues to prostitute herself until she is told that she is not a respectable woman.[35] Her situation then changes and she is left working for a company, making a meager but "honest" salary. After three years in the company she realizes:

[35] Firdaus never considers that she is not respectable until she is told so by a client. This makes her feel badly about prostituting herself and she begins to consider how to become a "respectable" woman.

> as a prostitute I had been looked upon with more respect, and been valued more highly than all the female employees, myself included...I felt sorry for the other girls who were guileless enough to offer their bodies and their physical efforts every night in return for a meal, or a good yearly report, or just to ensure that they would not be treated unfairly, or discriminated against or transferred...I came to realize that a female employee is more afraid of losing her job than a prostitute is of losing her life. An employee is scared of losing her job and becoming a prostitute because she does not understand that the prostitute's life is in fact better than hers. And so she pays the price of her illusory fears with her life, her health, her body and her mind. She pays the highest price for things of the lowest value. I now knew that all of us were prostitutes who sold themselves at varying prices, and an expensive prostitute was better than a cheap one. (75-76)

The life of a "respectable woman" only leads Firdaus back to a life of submission under upper-level, male employees instead of the reign of her husband, father, uncle, pimp or Madame. The female employees she observes are no less prostitutes than she, but they are paid inappropriately, or with meager dinners and reports. They too sell themselves to men for something better in life but Firdaus quickly determines that to be expensive is better than being cheap. In her life as a prostitute she feels free and independent. She is able to live well and afford the things in life that make her feel powerful and important. The respectable life has done nothing but reduce her to poverty. After falling in love with Ibrahim and finally being rejected by him in favor of the boss's daughter Firdaus decides that:

> [t]he time had come for me to shed the last grain of virtue, the last drop of sanctity in my blood. Now I was aware of the reality, of the truth. Now I knew what I wanted. Now there was no room for illusions. A successful prostitute was better than a misled saint. All women are victims of deceptions. Men impose deceptions on women and punish them for being deceived, force them down to the lowest level and punish them for falling so low, bind them in marriage and then chastise them with menial service for life, or insults, or blows.
>
> Now I knew that the least deluded of all women was the prostitute. That marriage was the system built on the most cruel suffering for women. (El Saadawi 86-87)

The phrase, "Now I knew what I wanted" speaks volumes to the agency Firdaus displays at this point in the narrative. The passage also depicts a juxtaposition of the saint figure and the whore which prevails in religious iconography. This split utilized in religious discourse suggests that a woman may fit into only one of two groupings, that of the saint or "honest woman" or that of the prostitute or "lowly woman." The suggestion is that the saint is privileged and a woman should aspire to fall into this category rather than that of the prostitute; but Firdaus suggests that "a successful prostitute was better than a misled saint," inverting the normalized equation and privileging the benefit of sexual experience for women over that of religious knowledge. This inversion can be viewed as yet another criticism of establishment religion. Women's reality is not the male reality which constructs and maintains prevailing discourses surrounding women's sexuality. Firdaus sees this and responds accordingly.

She returns to a life of prostitution and becomes very successful, denying any man she wants and she refuses many offers of marriage. Firdaus can ask any price she wishes at this point in her narrative, and this is what she wants. Sadig Al Ali says, "Her conscious choice is a manifestation of her insight into the hypocritical morals and values of patriarchal society and their total rejection. A feeling of 'non-belonging' is linked to a newly obtained value: freedom" (Al-Ali 24).

Her new found "freedom" also gives her a new view on honor and respect. Because she is a wealthy woman now, she can donate large amounts of money to different charities. Firdaus remembers:

> One day, when I donated some money to a charitable association, the newspapers published pictures of me and sang my praises as the model citizen with a sense of civic responsibility. And so from then on whenever I needed a dose of honor or fame, I had only to draw some money from the bank." (El Saadawi *Woman* 91)

She realizes that "respect" can be bought like anything else in life.

After Firdaus kills her pimp, she is solicited by an Arab prince. She refuses him many times but eventually sets her price and enters his room. He angers her and she tells him that she is a killer. When he refuses to believe that she is capable of murder because she is too gentle she replies, "'and who says killing does not require gentleness…I might not kill a mosquito, but I can kill a man'" (99). When she is paid, she tears the notes:

> I snatched the notes from his hand and tore them up into little pieces with a pent-up fury. The feel of those notes under my fingers was the same as that of the first piastre ever held between them. The movement of my hands as I tore the money to pieces, tore off the veil, the last, remaining veil from before my

> eyes, to reveal the whole enigma which had puzzled me throughout, the true enigma of my life...it was as though I was destroying all the money I had ever held, my father's piastre, my uncle's piastre, all the piastres I had ever known, and at the same time destroying all the men I had ever known, one after the other in a row: my uncle, my husband, my father, Marzouk and Bayoumi, Di'aa, Ibrahim, and tearing them all to pieces one after the other, ridding myself of them once and for all, removing every trace their piastres had left on my fingers, tearing away the flesh of my fingers to leave nothing but bone, ensuring that not a single vestige of these men would remain at all. (El Saadawi 98)

This tearing of the prince's money is symbolic of Firdaus' resistance against all the men who have oppressed her in one way or another during her life. She finally sees the truth that, while her actions provide her with wealth and freedom, she cannot be free of a patriarchal system which influences every aspect of life. She has already killed. She is shocked at how easy it is to rid herself of men and wonders why she has not done so before. She seems to lose control at this point, tearing at the money maniacally; yet she knows exactly what she is doing and is in total control of her actions. Firdaus' destruction of the prince's money in front of him is likened to castration by Tarabishi, as he suggests that "money = penis," but what Firdaus is really doing is shattering the economic ties between the prince and herself. There is no more money and she owes him nothing more. His money cannot buy her body any longer. In tearing the money Firdaus is also excising all the men from her life and all the oppression she has ever felt.

It is only her life as a prostitute that could have gotten her to the point at which she is able to understand what she calls the "enigma" of life. Yet, as mentioned, El Saadawi insists that Firdaus does not hate men but that she is open to love (Tarabishi 195). The painful reality is that love is never offered to her and instead she is met by men who wish to use her and harm her; she kills the pimp and slaps the prince not because she hates all men but because she is loving and taking care of herself. Without this part of Firdaus life where would she be? Perhaps still with Shaykh Mahmoud being beaten and used daily. It is only by venturing into the world of the forbidden that she can uncover the secrets of men and of patriarchal society— secrets behind which other women are still veiled. It is only this aspect of her life which reconnects her with her body and allows her to find pleasure through it—the pleasure of empowerment. It is because of this truth she says she must die. Al Ali comments, "even if Firdaus is filled with pride when telling her life story to the psychiatrist, it becomes evident that, in the end, it is society and its male values that gain victory over her. Her execution at the end of the novel annihilates her body" (Al-Ali 25). While death annihilates Firdaus' body in the same way that it annihilates Bint Allah's and Zahra's bodies, El Saadawi's characters do not need their bodies any longer; therefore, I must disagree with Al-Ali. Both Firdaus and Bint Allah transcend their bodies in death so that rather than the patriarchal order gaining a victory over these women it suffers a great loss through the revelation of their tales. In Firdaus' prison narrative– relayed by the psychiatrist–and Bint Allah's chilling final words, it becomes clear that the women of El Saadawi's novels understand that the body is either a tool, as in Firdaus' case, or simply a vessel so long as it is confined within the patriarchal system. While both women embrace and use their bodies for their own purposes they

recognize that the female body is a commodity and something that can be controlled by men. But the mind and spirit in El Saadawi's narrative are strong and unable to be contained by patriarchy. Bint Allah and Firdaus steal back this knowledge from the patriarchal order and it is then transmitted to the reader in the prison narrative and in Bint Allah's last words. Bint Allah's last utterance of resistance is so powerful that although the male onlookers bury her trial transcripts, her words still live on and inspire other women through the narrative. That she had the strength of mind to rebel against the patriarchal order and speak her final, defiant words is a great loss to patriarchy; this utterance suggests that somewhere something is going very wrong and that women such as El Saadawi's characters are beginning to wrench their minds from the clutches of patriarchal colonization[36] and are starting to think.

Although the narrative suggests that the mind is more important than the body, I do not see El Saadawi as reaffirming philosophical and religious ideologies surrounding the mind-body split. While these ideologies suggest the superiority of the mind over the body and associate the mind with the male and the body with the (lesser) female, El Saadawi makes no such claims. Instead, she subverts these philosophies by *reclaiming* the mind as a space for women. Also, El Saadawi does not suggest the body is less important than the mind, simply that in the process of freedom for women the mind must be decolonized before the body can ever be free. It is the mind which is intangible and therefore cannot be possessed by man and so it is the mind which must be freed from its shackles before the body can follow suit. If women are unable to free their minds and see the ways in which patriarchal power systems control docile female bodies then there is no

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[36] In El Saadawi's writings and public speeches she is candid about her belief that colonization starts first in the mind and that colonization and patriarchy are very much linked.

hope of freedom for the female body—education must come first. While strong women such as Bint Allah and Firdaus can transcend the bounds of men, the death of their physical bodies shows how great a threat such women pose to patriarchy. Neither Bint Allah nor Firdaus can be controlled or contained because neither fears her punishments or desires that which society tells her she should. Bint Allah cannot worship the Imam and Firdaus cannot be respectable in terms of Arab society; therefore they must die. After their deaths only their stories remain to inspire other women so that perhaps more women will rebel and speak the "truth [that] is savage and dangerous" (El Saadawi *Woman* 100). Their stories are evidence that the experiences of women like Firdaus cannot be contained.

Their inability to fulfill gender roles and become intelligible in terms of their societies, ends in the physical and figurative deaths of the female characters in El Saadawi's and Al-Shaykh's novels. The deaths of Zahra, Bint Allah and Firdaus are real, while in the *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, women of the unnamed Gulf state (such as Nur) are left to languish in their current situations; they face a metaphorical death. Such readings of these novels can indeed be taken to reaffirm Western stereotypes of Arab women's lives and to reaffirm Western "knowledge" of the Other; but I have attempted to remain self-reflexive and aware that these novels are meant to be empowering; these works challenge the gender roles of women, especially in terms of their sexual functions, desires and their own bodies. The endings are indeed grim but they act as a mirror, reflecting the injustices of Arab society to an Arab audience — the audience for whom El Saadawi and Al Shaykh write, first and foremost. While their Western readers can use these endings to reaffirm what they think they already "know" about Arab womanhood,

the burden must fall on the reader to reflect on her own positionality and question her predetermined ideas about the Other. The writers' goal is not to titillate a Western readership, but rather to shake Arab readerships out of their apathy towards the injustices the texts reveal.

CHAPTER 5
NARRATIVE STRATEGIES AND STRUCTURE

Hanan Al-Shaykh's novel *Women of Sand and Myrrh* utilizes a very intricate narrative structure. The text is partitioned into four chapters, each chapter containing the story of one woman who inhabits the nameless Gulf state. Suha narrates the first chapter. She is a Lebanese national who is living in the desert region because of her husband's work, but also to escape the civil war in her own country. Suzanne is a White, American woman in her forties also in the region because of her husband's work. The last two chapters are narrated by Gulf state nationals: Tamr, a lower middle-class woman and Nur an extremely wealthy and self-centered socialite. The four women come from very different backgrounds and each of them experience desert life in a different manner. All the women are limited by their gender and unable to do most of the things that men find the freedom to do, such as drive a car or venture outside without a male chaperone (in this way the state closely resembles Saudi Arabia where Al-Shaykh also fled during the civil war). Suzanne finds slightly more freedom because she is White and American; because of these attributes she is privileged within Arab society over Arab women. These four voices, although very different, come together and intermingle to create a beautiful song, very similar to jazz music, in which many different voices can be heard contrapuntally. In *Rituals of Memory in Contemporary Arab Women's Writing*, Brinda Mehta suggests that Al-Shaykh makes use of the blues in her novel, *Beirut Blues*. Besides the evidence of the title, Mehta suggests that Al-Shaykh's heroine (aptly named after a revolutionary Arab singer) uses the blues form in her mournful letters of exile; Mehta writes, "The legendary singer infused her music with the soulfulness of the blues to

create a particular style of Arabic harmonics, and the novel's heroine infuses her letters with the same soulful cadence to sing Beirut's sad-sweet song of suffering, survival, and resistance" (Mehta 196). Clearly Al-Shaykh is familiar with African American musical aesthetics and when we examine her earlier work, *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, Mehta's findings may suggest that Al-Shaykh experimented with the blending of the musical and the literary much earlier.

In *Kinds of Blue: The Jazz Aesthetic in African American Narrative*, Jurgen E. Grandt suggests that the essence of jazz music is about story-telling (Grandt xi). This means that the jazz form lends itself to narrative forms which also involve story-telling; from solo songs to group performances jazz music allows for each individual to tell his or her story and be heard (xi). While Grandt says that the jazz aesthetic is indeed an African American art form. he also suggests that there is an "inherent hybridity" (xii) in jazz music which lends itself to Al-Shaykh's work as the voices of rich and poor, young and old, Arab and non-Arab find their distinct place but also inform each other's stories. By using a jazz aesthetic Al-Shaykh takes African American music, an art form of a marginalized people and resituates it as the center.

This, in turn, mirrors what she is doing in her narrative. Women's voices are marginalized in the Middle East, like the voices of African Americans in the United States, but through her novel their voices become central. For Grandt jazz music is fluid and moving. As more "stories" are added they enrich the song or story but maintain their singularity. Coherence is not key; discord is not only allowed, but encouraged: "The (literary) jazz aesthetic thus affords its practitioners a figurative space of temporary freedom that plays on and against the social, cultural, and racial binaries of the American

landscape" (xvi). While Grandt roots the jazz aesthetic in America and African American experience, the hybrid state of the art form suggests that it can adapt and, I would argue, be used by authors such as Al-Shaykh, who also wish to push the boundaries of social, cultural, racial and even gendered binaries. The key to the literary jazz aesthetic is to tell a story, your own story, and through the voices and experience a whole will form, not exactly unified or coherent, but connected in a way that reveals a larger and richer picture.

By allowing the narratives to exist independently of one another, Al-Shaykh gives each woman a voice with which to tell her own story and share her own experience of the desert (this is central to both the literary and musical jazz aesthetic Grandt lays out). However, by allowing the voices to come together in the overall narrative Al-Shaykh demonstrates, that, although these women's lives and experience are different and need to be represented as such there is a link between the four women which connects their narratives without homogenizing them. The story of the Gulf whispers throughout the four stories and even though the women's experiences range from thoroughly enjoying the Gulf to feeling trapped and unhappy in it, the story of life in the Gulf also finds voice. Differences are seen but so are the similarities which the women and the stories foreground. For example, while Tamr and Nur are from completely different social classes, they are restricted in much the same way and Nur has no more power to travel without her husband's consent than does Tamr. Tamr, Nur, Suha and Suzanne are all part of a male-dominated system that privileges the male body and relegates the female to the periphery. The female body is nothing more than a receptacle to be used by men in this society, which is why Nur and Suha's lesbian relationship is so dangerous, not only to the

women themselves if they are found out, but to the male structure as well. Suzanne enjoys being used as a body in the Gulf. because sex makes her feel desirable in ways she never did in America. Because she is aging and overweight her body is not attractive in American society, but in the Middle East her White skin, and all that that entails for Arab men, makes her alluring. Suzanne escapes an STD that Maaz passes on to his young Arab wife because Suzanne is a White privileged body, and although she allows herself to be used by the Arab patriarchal superstructure, her Whiteness provides her a means of stepping outside this system. All of these stories come together through Al-Shaykh's use of the jazz aesthetic to sing a complex song[37] about not only Arab women's limitations and inequality, but the inequality faced by women world-wide every day and the violence such inequality poses to women's bodies, women's minds and women's spirits. While these stories work together to form a larger narrative, they do not unite. The singular stories are clear and at times they even reveal discord and difference as do the stories of jazz musicians. There is no need for them to agree in this safe space of "freedom"; they can simply let go of their stories and allow them to join in the song.

While *The Fall of Imam* can be considered a postmodern novel, utilizing the fragmented structure of such a work, I believe an even more nuanced reading of El Saadawi's novel is in order. Her novel is not simply fragmented: rather, it utilizes aspects of surrealism which Abrams explains as "a revolutionary movement in painting, sculpture, and the other arts, as well as literature; [joining] forces, although briefly, with one or another revolutionary movement in the political and social realm" (Abrams 310).

[37] The novel begins with a canary chirping; thus the narrative opens with song. The canary is a repeated trope throughout the text. Song is also represented as an avenue for female solidarity when Suha witnesses women performing, singing and dancing together, to the exclusion of men, at a party. Suha resents that she is not a part of the group of women.

The political and social aspect of surrealist art fits well with El Saadawi's project. Abrams goes on to suggest that

> The influence, direct or indirect, of surrealist innovations can be found in many modern writers of prose and verse who have *broken with conventional modes of artistic organization* to experiment with free association, a broken syntax, nonlogical and *non chronological order, dreamlike and nightmarish sequences*, and the juxtaposition of bizarre, shocking or seemingly unrelated images. (310-311, my emphasis)

The dream sequences which make up the bulk of the repetitive scenes in *The Fall of the Imam* suggest to me that these elements can indeed be considered surrealist. While many postcolonial authors' works are considered magic realism, *The Fall of the Imam* lacks the elements of magic and the fantastic that come to mind when we consider works such as those of Salman Rushdie (*Midnight's Children*). El Saadawi's dream sequences, although nightmarish, depict reality; the horror comes from witnessing the abhorrent acts that are revealed.

In *The Fall of the Imam* El Saadawi employs surrealist dream and nightmare-like sequences to extend the boundaries of reality. That is, while what is being depicted may seem like an unreal nightmare I suggest that it is really the horrifying perspective of the lived female experience. What is being depicted is oftentimes horrific but this mode of expression can be empowering for women as it allows for a female perspective that is raw and shocking. The images speak loudly and can be an affront to those who wish the female perspective to remain passive, hidden or silent. The horrible events do not simply happen once; they recur over and over again, forcing Bint Allah to repeatedly live these events. Not only are the sequences dream-like in fashion, but they are repeated in order to

disorient the reader and make it difficult for us to discern which character is being depicted. The novel moves back and forth through time to piece together the life of the Imam's illegitimate daughter, Bint Allah, from her time in an orphanage after the death (is she dead?) of her mother until her own death at the hands of the Imam's followers. The narrative constantly returns to three (or is it two?) events within the text: the very similar stoning deaths of Bint Allah and her mother and the assassination of the Imam. These events are presented over and over again until the line between reality and an altered version of reality is blurred, and the reader is no longer certain of certainties. For example, the reader first meets Bint Allah, El Saadawi's heroine, while she is being hunted by a group of the Imam's male followers who wish to kill her. Bint Allah is depicted as naked, running over the landscape looking for an escape. Later in the novel Bint Allah's mother is depicted as being hunted and killed in much the same fashion. The sequence is then revisited by the author a number of times in order to blur reality and also to blur the identities of the two women. The reader must ask herself who is being hunted here? Which woman? This is exactly the point El Saadawi wishes to make by employing this type of surrealist imaging. It does not matter which woman it is happening to as it has happened to countless women in the same fashion, over and over again for generations. In these surrealist sequences El Saadawi reveals the tragic truth that violence against women happens so often that one violent act becomes indiscernible from another.

The Imam's death becomes problematized through El Saadawi's use of surrealist imagery as well. The Imam's fear of assassination is such that he employs a body double who wears a mask in order to resemble him in every way. The Imam is shot, but El Saadawi presents this event in a number of different nightmarish passages, some of which

depict the Imam's face melting away or falling off as he is being shot. Does this mean that the body double and not the Imam has been murdered or is there a deeper meaning in El Saadawi's bizarre images? The Imam's face slips off as though it were a mask, a scenario that alludes to his fraudulent identity. He is not an Imam as one should be but a power-hungry devil. But does the Imam die at the hands of his daughter Bint Allah as Katie foretold or is it a true assassination attempt seen through to fruition, as he has always feared? El Saadawi gives the reader no easy answers, as nothing is easy when one is dealing with religion and other power structures. All these realities are true and Bint Allah and the Imam are dead by the end of the narrative.

While Bint Allah dies as a woman on earth, El Saadawi leaves the reader with some hope that she lives on in other ways through the text's use of goddess imagery. In *Rituals of Memory in Contemporary Arab Women's Writing*, Binda Mehta suggests that El Saadawi reclaims an ancient Egyptian past which is centered on the female goddesses Isis and Noot rather than the male deity valorized by current monotheistic religions. Mehta suggests that this reclamation of the Goddess is empowering for women readers and offers an alternative narrative to male-centered master narratives, in which women can situate themselves. I would have to concur with Mehta; as she points out in her work. El Saadawi has referred back to the early Egyptian inclination towards goddesses and the philosophy of love and compassion which these goddesses embodied prior to the time when the ancient slave system was employed by the pharaohs (El Saadawi *Philosophy*). Mehta suggests that this "ancestral maternal" presence in El Saadawi's writing is a way of reclaiming a past that has been nearly erased from history. Mehta writes:

> El Saadawi's work demonstrates how Arab women have been maintained in a state of amnesia that has justified their systemic exclusion from historical and intellectual production. This omission from history or denial of women's history has inhibited them from direct involvement in the elaboration of the dominant discourse, even though women were active in the role as the Prophet's disciples who spread these teachings alongside male worshipers. (Mehta 159)

Rather than suggesting that we return to a polytheistic past, I believe El Saadawi makes these reclamations in order to uncover the great lie of patriarchy which is that the female has no history and therefore has no avenue into discourse. By revealing goddess culture in her writings El Saadawi provides a past which women can then use to question the status quo. Why are we less important than our brothers? Why must we be ashamed of our bodies? Why are women considered evil? What happened to the goddesses? The answers to these questions all lie in the realm of patriarchal, monotheistic religions, and understanding this is a first step in deconstructing the current, unsatisfactory image of the female in Middle Eastern society (indeed in all societies). Mehta unravels El Saadawi's use of goddess culture and the ancestral maternal, but Mehta's analysis heavily focuses on *Love in the Kingdom of Oil,* one of El Saadawi's more recent novels. But I believe that this imagery was utilized by El Saadawi, long before *Love in the Kingdom of Oil,* in *The Fall of the Imam*. As Bint Allah's naked body runs over the land in order to prevent being captured she is depicted as a "goddess of ancient times" (El Saadawi *Imam* 3). The goddess imagery continues as El Saadawi writes, "They ran as fast as they could, trying to catch up with her, but she was light as the wind, faster then any man. Besides she knew

all the secrets of the land over which she ran....This was my land, my land" (3-4). While popular depictions of the land position it as the female, thus creating a stereotypical view of the feminine as "natural" and "mothering" as well as depicting the land as a female body to be conquered by the male, El Saadawi's depiction accomplishes something completely different. By positioning Bint Allah as a goddess in touch with the land and by figuring the land as Bint Allah's own body (Bint Allah knows the land like she knows the contours of her body) El Saadawi is reclaiming the female body for women. Bint Allah *owns* the land, a feminized land, rather than male conquerors. She is imaged as the goddess ruling over "my land." The men cannot keep up with her because she knows the land as she knows the contours of her own body or her mother's breast. The land (like the mother's breast) feeds her and gives her life and she in turn watches over it. This is a very spiritual depiction and one that I think women can find powerful and empowering.

In *Woman at Point Zero* El Saadawi uses a very effective frame narrative. The narrative begins and ends with the psychiatrist, who has been studying female inmates. This woman is educated and well-off within her society; she is a "respectable" woman but her portion of the narrative is quite short in relation to what I call the "confessional narrative" of Firdaus. Firdaus is clearly the lesser of the two women by society's standards since the psychiatrist is a well-educated doctor and Firdaus a prostitute awaiting death; however, Firdaus is surprisingly in control of the narrative and self-assured in a way in which the psychiatrist is not. From the moment Firdaus opens her mouth she takes complete control of the narrative, telling the psychiatrist, "'Let me speak. Do not interrupt me. I have no time to listen to you'" (El Saadawi *Woman* 11). This is in stark contrast to the way in which the psychiatrist handles herself when Firdaus

initially refuses to visit with her. The psychiatrist says that "a strange feeling of heaviness weighed down my heart, my body, drained my legs of their power. A feeling heavier than the weight of the whole earth, as though instead of standing above its surface. I was now lying somewhere beneath it" (El Saadawi *Woman* 4). Firdaus' rejection has left the psychiatrist physically drained and feeling depressed. It is odd that Firdaus has such a dramatic effect on the psychiatrist whereas the psychiatrist has little effect on the prostitute. In *Men, Women and Gods*, Fedwa Malti-Douglas likens the dynamics of the psychiatrist and the prostitute to that of a lesbian relationship or attraction. The psychiatrist takes on the role of the "initially spurned and then satiated" beloves while Firdaus is the active lover (Malti-Douglas 49). When the psychiatrist is given permission to meet with Firdaus her feelings completely change and she says that "I held the whole world in my hands; it was mine. It was a feeling I had known only once before, many years ago. I was on my way to meet the man I loved for the first time" (El Saadawi *Woma*n 6). Clearly there is an inversion of the usual power structure going on in the relationship between the psychiatrist and the prostitute in which Firdaus has the upper hand. El Saadawi has taken the marginalized character and made her the central figure who possesses the dominant role and the power. The psychiatrist yields to Firdaus' story and does not interrupt the nearly one hundred pages of confession. The psychiatrist is able to resume control of the narrative only when Firdaus has yielded power to her and has finished her own story. In this way El Saadawi empowers the disenfranchised of society and subverts usual power structures. The psychiatrist is an agent of the state and therefore aligned with patriarchal power structures. This is clear when the warden tells the psychiatrist "'she did not tell me anything.... But she does know you'" (4). Firdaus

has never met the psychiatrist, yet she has met this agent of patriarchy in other forms: in the men that lay on top of her every night, in the pimp she kills, in the police officer who threatens to arrest her if she does not take him as a client, and in her Azherite uncle, to name a few. El Saadawi is making a commentary on the depth and reach of the patriarchal superstructure and highlighting the ways in which women can become agents of this structure, contributing to the reiteration and reaffirmation of patriarchal values which subjugate women. Why else would El Saadawi structure her narrative in this way? The story being told is that of Firdaus, not that of the psychiatrist. Firdaus' tale could stand alone without being couched between the psychiatrist's thoughts and feelings, but El Saadawi inserts the psychiatrist into the story in order for the doctor to hear Firdaus. The psychiatrist is to function as the listener. Firdaus' story cannot come to be known if no one is there to listen and then carry it on to others. The prostitute is determined not to recant her statements and to face death; thus, without the psychiatrist acting as a conduit for the story, it would never be told.

I also suggest the psychiatrist is the reader. She is the average middle-class woman who conforms to the social structure or progresses only as far as the patriarchal framework allows her to go in order to be a "respectable woman" or to obtain some other simple benefit. The psychiatrist would also fit the demographic of El Saadawi's Arab readers, presumably middle to upper-class educated individuals (the lower-class peoples do not have as much access to education and therefore would not be reading her novels). The result of El Saadawi's insertion of the psychiatrist into the narrative is that the psychiatrist leaves Firdaus' prison cell experiencing what the reader is meant to feel: "Inside me was a feeling of shame. I felt ashamed of myself, of my life, of my fears, and

my lies…at every step, wherever I went I could see the lies, could follow hypocrisy bustling around…. at that moment I realized that Firdaus had more courage than I" (108). The reader is now meant to question the status quo and ask herself how far off Firdaus' life and ultimate fate are from her own (as I said in the introduction, El Saadwi's novels exist at the intersection of art and politics. While I have already confirmed that there is a great social distance between the prostitute and the psychiatrist in terms of their class, with regard to their gender and the limits placed upon them, they are also very much alike. The psychiatrist's class gives her a certain amount of social mobility within the patriarchal framework, but like Nur of Al-Shaykh's novel, she is not free to do everything she wants. There are restraints and expectations placed on her just as there were for Firdaus; Firdaus and the psychiatrist are connected and that connection transcends class boundaries. The difference between these women, then, becomes their investment in patriarchy. While Firdaus disavows the system and chooses death rather than submission, the psychiatrist acts as its agent, rarely questioning the society around her until she meets Firdaus. Once again the reader asks herself, how close is she (the reader) to being a Firdaus? Where does she fall in the infrastructure of such a far-reaching system of domination as patriarchy?

As has been discussed, Firdaus, valued by men for her body, ultimately becomes a body which is unintelligible in Egyptian society because she will not be silent about hypocrisy and because she is not afraid. She is executed because patriarchy will not allow her body to exist in a society that has no understanding or way of interpreting a woman who will not conform. The psychiatrist walks away from the prison and Firdaus' fate only because she has learned to be the type of woman society values. However,

succumbing to the pressures of the patriarchal system does not provide the psychiatrist with the benefits one would hope; she is plagued with shame and guilt. She is disgusted by her life and her lies and ends the narrative with her epiphanic observation: "I realized that Firdaus had more courage than I" (108). In this epiphany El Saadawi leaves the reader with hope, hope that now that the psychiatrist has recognized her investment in this system, she will also be able to work towards changing and subverting it so that she will not have to encounter another Firdaus.

This ending is indeed grim. El Saadawi's novels often depict bleak outcomes for the female characters but they act as a mirror, reflecting the injustices of Arab society to an Arab audience. While her Western readers can use these endings to reaffirm what they think they already "know" about Arab womanhood, as I have discussed in Chapter 2, the burden must fall on the reader to reflect on her own positionality and question her predetermined ideas about the Other. It should also be understood that Firdaus' story is not the story of every Arab woman. She is singular and her narrative should be allowed to exist as such; however, we as readers and critical examiners of her narrative can learn from her story without insisting that it speak for Arab womanhood as a whole.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION: LEARNING AND MOVING FORWARD

The oppression of women in the Middle East is a reality just as women's subjugation world-wide is indeed real; however the essentializing construction of the passive Arab woman who is unable to resist patriarchy and is trapped within a life of victimization is not necessarily a truth. In my work I have attempted to show that Arab women's writing is a method of resistance for women in the Middle East. Through works such as *Woman at Point Zero*, *The Fall of the Imam*, *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, and *The Story of Zahra*, authors Nawal El Saadawi and Hanan Al-Shaykh are able to create a space for women to resist patriarchy and subvert socio-religious norms. These novels question the status quo and encourage the reader to do the same.

I have attempted to show that not only are gender inequalities in the Arab world rooted in the misuse of Islamic doctrines and corrupt leadership but also that these issues are linked to the West as the familial, the state and the global are all intertwined. The Arab woman's body as a site of resistance has been central in my analysis of the abovementioned texts. El Saadawi and Al-Shaykh reframe the image of women from that of docile receptacles to active subjects whose bodies both give *and receive* pleasure. Sex and women's sexuality, both taboo subjects in Arab culture, become central to the texts and women are encouraged to understand their bodies and reclaim them from a patriarchal power structure that has abused them for far too long. This is easier said than done and El Saadawi and Al-Shaykh are candid in the depiction of the punishments women can and do face.

Through the writers' use of intricate narrative strategies such as the jazz aesthetic in Al-Shaykh's *Women of Sand and Myrrh* and the frame narrative of *Woman at Point Zero*, a number of women's voices are heard and different women's experiences are juxtaposed against one another. In Al-Shaykh's novel this allows for a number of perspectives that function separately and in unison to sing a song of women's experience(s) in the desert. El Saadawi's frame narrative allows the reader to position herself as the psychiatrist and question her own complacency in the patriarchal power structure so that we all come to the realization that "Firdaus had more courage than I" (El Saadawi *Woman*108).

Through El Saadawi's use of the surreal we are pulled into a nightmare and asked to discern one woman's suffering from another only to realize that we cannot. Women have been suffering too long and the injustices mirror one another so closely that we must now concern ourselves with ending oppression rather than trying to discern which woman is which—it makes no difference as patriarchy oppresses all women unless, like Bint Allah and Firdaus we refuse to sit passively by and be complacent. Arab women are especially asked to question their own cultures and resist the injustices they are faced with daily.

Through her use of goddess culture El Saadawi provides her female reader with an alternative history and an alternative form of knowledge rooted in the feminine through the ancestral maternal. Ultimately knowledge is what these narratives are about in the end – knowledge of one's body, knowledge of one's spirit, knowledge of one's self and sharing that knowledge with other women. Eve was punished because she ate from the tree of knowledge and till this day women who wish to do the same are beaten and

broken, placed on death lists and lose their lives all because they want to learn what their brothers are encouraged to know. El Saadawi suggests that when one comes to understand the intersections between the public and the private, the local and the global,

> you'll discover the power relationships between countries, between classes, between sexes and then you become a danger. Then they want to get rid of you; they'll get rid of you by killing you physically, psychologically Or they'll marginalize you or silence you. We have to undo what [patriarchal] education did to us. We became unable to connect things together." (El Saadawi *Empowerment* 2)

Al-Shaykh's and El Saadawi's narratives inspire the reader to replace flawed forms of knowledge, subjugating to women, with a new knowledge—the knowledge of what patriarchy is, and what it has done, can, and will do to women. Patriarchy must be contested. That is the beauty of these novels; they have the power to inspire resistance, and to create change. Education is central to Arab women if they are to understand their rights and assert themselves as equal, productive citizens within Arab society. But what form of education? Clearly, El Saadawi suggests that education must include a deprogramming of the knowledge of ourselves as inferior and less deserving of knowledge and respect. We must be able to connect things back together and see the big picture in order to truly understand how far-reaching and complex patriarchy truly is, linked as it is to other forms of oppression such as racism and sexism (Maracle 123). Education for women can come in traditional forms—learning reading, writing, etc. so that women are able to enter the work force if they choose and become financially independent. The precarious situations so many women find themselves in today mean

that they are unable to question or resist, for fear of the repercussions for themselves and their families.

Arab society is largely informed by Islam and as conservative values are revived in the Middle East I believe that it will be harder for women to maneuver through the red tape put in place to confine them. One way to attempt to break through the barriers is by using Islam as I perceive it was meant to be used-- to allow people to exercise free thought and come to rational conclusions. Irshad Manji suggests in *The Trouble with Islam*, that a revival of free thought or "*ijtihad*" would aid in improving the East's current status as perpetrator of human rights violations with regards to women and minorities (Manji 173-205).[38] While this will be no simple task, it is one avenue women may choose to use in order to enter the public sphere, for any rational interpretation of the Qur'an or Haddith will reveal that women have a long history of activism within Islam as well as the public domains of commerce and politics, and must be able to revive this past. Benazir Bhutto, the late prime minister of Pakistan, also suggests that education for women is key in dismantling extreme views of Islam which further marginalize women and minorities. During her time in office she recounts opening fifty thousand schools across Pakistan in hopes of educating its population (especially girls) to aid in building a middle-class which she believed would fuel democracy in Muslim nations (Bhutto 289) All of these women concur that education for women (an education which dismantles the

[38] I find this book extremely condescending and opportunistic, still, Manj's suggestion that women and minorities utilize the Islamic practice of *ijtihad* can be useful, El Saadawi has espoused similar ideas, however, she has not been properly recognized in the West for these ideas as she often ties freedom of expression and education with freedom of movement vis-a-vis Palestinian rights While El Saadawi views Israel as a Zionist state oppressing the rights of the Palestinian people and colonizing their lands, and America as a greedy super-power, Manji's book praises Israel for its "favorable" human rights record and America for its "tolerance" post 9-11 Manji also attributes the current upsurge in Islamic extremism to "desert Islam" or Arab interpretations of Islam which have been appropriated by non-Arab members of Islam Her work makes some good points but is overall one-sided and overshadowed by Manji's own distaste for "so called moderate-Muslims "

foundations of patriarchal values) is key if women are to be able to assert their rights and reconcile with their communities on both the familial and local levels. Al-Shaykh and El Saadawi offer a different type of education through their literature — a literature not found in Western classrooms — which cultivates an understanding passed on from one woman to another. This history is not always pleasant but as Firdaus puts it, "truth is often savage and dangerous." For me this type of learning and teaching is the first line of defense against women's oppression as the love and kindness manifested in women teaching other women is a powerful thing. I do not remember many things I was told as child but when my grandmother explained to me the importance of an education it was something that she was passing on to me from her own experience as an Arab woman. Her message is one of the few things I carried with me through life and into this project. What she probably never realized was that she was educating me in that very moment by sharing some of her knowledge with me. Arab women's writing is central in this endeavor of passing on our experiences of what we have learned from one generation to the next: within the words of these authors is a message of freedom, not only for Arab women, but for all women if we are willing to open ourselves up to alternative forms of knowledge and simply listen.

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