Constructing Women and Femininity in 20th Century Egyptian Novels: A Comparative Study of Nawal El Saadawi's *Imraʾtani fi imraʾa* and Naguib Mahfouz's *Al-Shahhadh*

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Acknowledgements

Abstract

The following dissertation explores the literary constructions of women and the gendered reality they inhabit in the modern Egyptian novels *Imraʾtani fi imraʾa* by Nawal El Saadawi and *al-Shahhadh* by Naguib Mahfouz. These two high-profile 20th century novelists who achieved international attention are revisited through a close reading of their texts, which adopts feminist theory influenced by poststructuralism and postcolonialism. Recent scholarship has moved into giving a more nuanced discourse on the status of Arab women within their varied societies in order to move away from previous Orientalist interpretations of women as passive victims of an extra-brutal kind of oppression. Before presenting the analysis, the novels and novelists are initially placed within their literary and historical contexts, which boast of a rich literary tradition charged with gender-conscious thought. The close readings and analysis of this text show how women in text are not simply constructed as passive victims of an all-encompassing and rigid patriarchy, but that various experiences of Arab womanhood exist and that different social conditions allow for different modes of negotiating one's identity and struggles. The gender identity of the authors is taken into account and the analysis observed that El Saadawi's text was more involved in specific issues pertaining to women's oppression but gave more attention to ways in which women may express agency. On the other hand, Mahfouz's text presented the struggles that women faced as more limiting and allowed his characters less expression of agency.

Note on Transliteration

Throughout this dissertation, all forms of Arabic transliteration follow the IJMES transliteration style. With regards to Arabic names, their simplified or popularised transliterated forms will be used. The popularised forms of the names of the authors Naguib Mahfouz and Nawal El Saadawi will be used instead of the proper transliterated forms Najīb Maḥfūẓ and Nawāl al-Saʿdāwī, for a more comfortable reading experience. The *hamza* (ʾ) and the *ʿajn* (ʿ) will be retained in simplified transliterations.

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1. Introduction

"A woman is alive,

You do not take her for a sign,

In nacre on a stone, alone, unfaceted and fine"

- Joanna Newsom, *Divers*

"There is, in my view, nothing about femaleness that is waiting to be expressed; there is, on the other hand, a good deal about the diverse experiences of women that is being expressed and still needs to be expressed."

- Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution'

1.1 Constructing 'Woman'

On the 21st of March 2021 it was announced that the feminist author-activist and medical doctor Nawal El Saadawi had died in a hospital in Cairo after a long struggle with illness. Newspapers and magazines all over the world published obituaries remembering her life and work. Who is Nawal El Saadawi and what was her life all about? Many Western publications jumped to mention her fight against the oppressive Arab and Muslim culture whilst skimming over or omitting her staunch socialist and anti-colonial views. Despite all the work that has been done in the past couple of decades to place the work of Arab and Muslim women in their social and historical contexts, their images continue to be used to push forward imperialist feminist rhetoric as seen in certain western media and publications.

What does being a woman mean in Arab cultures? This question is made problematic when considering the essentialist implications of the terms 'woman' and 'Arab culture'. Within the field of literary studies, emphasis is placed on the question of representation of women, as well as the prevalence of the traditional tropes by which they are depicted within written productions. Women writers in Arabic-speaking cultures are not as new a phenomenon as they may be in other cultures. Histories of pre-Islamic Arabian literary productions rush to mention the poetess known as al-Khansaʾ and the masterful poems she produced, mourning the death of her brothers. Arab women's presence in

literature was sparse, with poetesses few and far between, nonetheless their images and voices, whilst faint and obscured, were woven into the poems and narratives of the times. Women writers navigated a male-dominated space—and world—employing various literary techniques and symbols, even subverting certain symbolic tropes used by men to refer to women. Many examples of women's poetic productions involved the making use of their bodies in order to get their words across, in order to be listened to. The female body as an object of desire, and the cultural implications it carries due to the regulation of sexual relations in orthodox Islamic doctrines proved to be an effective mode of communication for these women.

As a result of the increased focus on Arab women and their cultural productions, a narrative depicting Arab women as 'victims' of a 'barbaric' form of patriarchy has developed in various European and North American feminist groups, wherein neo-colonial discourses have been allowed to proliferate. Arab feminists such as El Saadawi rushed to denounce the imperialist rhetoric of these feminists who sensationalise certain practices whilst ignoring the social and economic forces of modernity that engender their struggles. This dissertation takes heed to these demands and aims to engage in a critical literary analysis whereby the complexities of experience and representations are acknowledged and accounted for.

1.2 Research Scope, Aims, and Objectives

Studies on Arab women's writing as well as studies involving application of feminist and postcolonial theories to Arabic literature represent a growing field, and this dissertation aims to contribute to this regard. Surprisingly, the application of feminist theories to Arab men's writing has not been carried out on a significant level. This dissertation aims to address this gap through an exploration of the construction of women in the modern Arabic narrative and the socio-historical forces acting upon the creation of these characters. The analysis is carried out through a comparative approach between two novels from the late 20th century in Egypt, in which the authors are a man and a woman respectively. The two novelists chosen for study are Nawal El Saadawi and Naguib Mahfouz, who were both prolific Egyptian authors of the modern period with significant influence upon cultural discourses of the time, even if their works were not always positively received. The novels that have been chosen are El Saadawi's *Imraʾtani fi imraʾa* (*Two Women in One*) and Mahfouz's *al-Shahhadh* (*The Beggar*). This study mainly draws upon two feminist

theoretical frameworks as analytic tools, namely the poststructuralist and the postcolonial lenses. The specific questions directing this research are:

1. How are women and girl characters constructed in the chosen novels of Nawal El Saadawi and Naguib Mahfouz?
2. What are the social, historical, and ideological forces that drive the construction of women and girl characters in modern Arabic narratives?
3. What role, if any, does the gender of the authors play in the construction of women and girl characters as well as their character development?

The interests of this dissertation do not lay in critiquing the author's styles, literary forms, and the merits of their work, but rather their literary constructions of women, femininity and the discourse surrounding this construction and/or transgressions of norms relating to gender roles. Two authors with one work chosen from their repertoires have been chosen for the purposes of limiting the scope of study as well as allowing a closer reading of the texts. Both authors were chosen for the fact that they boast a wide Arab and international readership and range of influence within the modern Egyptian tradition, even if some of their works were restricted or even banned by the Egyptian state.

For the purposes of this dissertation, it is important to clarify what is meant by narratives produced in the context of the modern Arabic literary tradition. In layman's terms, modernity, *ḥadātha* in Arabic, connotes change, development, and innovation on one hand, or a period of time in the recent past or current present on the other. Modernity is also defined in opposition to tradition. However, in the case of Arabic literature written in this modern period, there is often dialogue between modernity and tradition, causing this binary to break down. Modernity in the scope of Arabic literary study is usually defined by the introduction of western influences as a result of the European colonial projects.[1] This intercultural contact is referred to as one of the factors resulting in the intellectual renaissance of the 'Arab World' known as *al-naḥḍa*. The *naḥḍa* revitalised and introduced various intellectual discourses in areas such as literature and literary conventions, secularism, Islamic thought, and nationalism. This process of intellectual revival took place differently across the Arab enclave, but historians and critics alike vaguely point towards the 1798 Napoleonic invasion of Egypt as the symbolic date that marks the beginning of

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[1] Paul Starkey, *Modern Arabic Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), ix.

this period: the Arab world's reconnection with Europe and the rest of the world. In reality, the Napoleonic invasion, as a historical event, is better attributed to the beginning of the *naḥḍa* in the context of Egypt, rather than the totality of the Arab region. Considering the moving away from this one event as the starting point for the revival, Tarik El-Ariss's study *Trial of Arab Modernity*, defines modernity (*ḥadātha*) as a "somatic condition", whereby political, social, and literary "events" (*aḥdāth*) converge and interact with one another.[2] This reformulation encapsulates the spirit of modernity in the sense that there is a complex negotiation occurring between the past, present and directions for the future. In 20th century Egypt, this manifested through a rise in dissident Islamist political groups which reacted to what was initially a secular dominant discourse and later on, an increasingly neoliberal one. This created the context of secular and Islamic discourses sharing a political space, with the differences between the two blurring in certain regards.

What does it mean to study a man's text in comparison to a woman's text within this modern context? Historically, men's texts and men's literature have not been qualified by the gender of their authors, rather 'men's literature' has just been 'literature'. This gendered qualifier comes into play with the increased discussion surrounding 'women's texts' and 'women's literature' due the increased visibility of women in the public space. Initially, the word 'woman' was a qualifier for an 'Other', a minority within the field of literature. Feminist criticism observed and commented on this phenomenon from various points of view, propelling women's writings to the forefront which in turn brought women's issues into the limelight. That being said, in the case of this dissertation, viewing literature through the lens of feminist criticism does not mean that there is an interest to determine if the author and text are supposedly 'feminist' or not. Rather, feminism is an epistemological framework which takes gender as a category for critical analysis. Labelling an author or text as 'feminist' is a subjective experience that differs according to a reader or critic's personal beliefs.

Taking womanhood and femininity as a locus of analysis also brings up the question of masculinity and the interplay of gender relations within the context of modern Egyptian society. For the purposes of this analysis, the decision was made to focus specifically on women and femininities but comments on the nature of gender relations are inevitably made since the construction of gender identity is a social and relational process. This is

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[2] Tarek El-Ariss, *Trials of Arab Modernity: Literary Affects and the New Political* (New York: University of Virginia Press, 2013), 3.

evident within the literature itself where, in certain cases, the boundary of where acceptable femininity ends and expectations of masculinity begins are made very explicit. The idea of gender consciousness within Arab and Egyptian society is explored, however the focus remains on the way these prescribed gender relations affect the construction of women in literature.Another important qualifier relating to this dissertation is that even though these texts have been produced in an Egyptian Arabo-Islamic context, the interest is not in women and literary representation with respect to Islam as other works in this field have focused on. Rather, Islam as the dominant religion in Egypt is a factor that plays into the formation of literary women alongside other forces which act upon this process of literary creation. Some other elements at play are the consequences of Arab neopatriarchy, temporal postcoloniality, and dominant and subversive political discourses. All these influences must be taken into consideration in connection with the active intentions and ideological background of the respective novelists, who have the authorial power to actively abide by or subvert them. Of course, the scope of this dissertation does not allow for a detailed analysis of all these individual and interplaying milieus: they are vast and well beyond the reach of this dissertation, however they are recognised, and a close reading of the texts helps determine which of these forces are most prominent in the two novels analysed. Overall, this dissertation aims to contribute to the wider scholarly task of the application of feminist, poststructuralist, and postcolonial approaches in the field of Arabic literary studies, with the hope of generating insight into the various factors that interact in the formation of 'women' in modern Arabic literature.

1.3 The Authors and Their Novel
Nawal El Saadawi and Imraʾtani fi imraʾa (1971)
On the 27th of October 1931, the prolific feminist, doctor, and author Nawal El Saadawi was born in Kafr Tahla, Egypt to Zaynab Shoukry El Saadawi, of Ottoman descent, and her Egyptian father Al-Sayyid El Saadawi. Her childhood greatly influenced her later activism, as she learnt fierce self-respect from her mother and resistance against tyranny from her father.[3] El Saadawi graduated in Medicine in 1955 from Cairo University where she went on to work as a doctor, surgeon, and psychiatrist. She furthered her studies outside of Egypt in 1966, with her acquisition of a degree in Public Health at New York's Columbia

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[3] Nawāl Al-Saʿdāwī, *A Daughter of Isis: The Autobiography of Nawal El Saadawi* (London: Zed Books, 1999), 2-7.

University. Her career was not to be limited to the practice of medicine, as she would take up roles of authority at both national and international levels. This includes, but is not limited to, her tenure as the Director General at the Ministry of Health in Egypt, as well as the Assistant General Secretary at the Medical Association in Egypt and later on as a United Nations advisor for the Women's Program in Africa and the Middle East.

El Saadawi's career in the medical field exposed her to the array of troubling experiences Egyptian women went through, especially those in lower economic classes in rural and bedouin Egyptian communities. She founded the short-lived magazine *Health* which was focused on promoting and disseminating medical knowledge. Alongside this endeavour, she experienced growing popularity as an author of fiction. Following her 1959 publication of *Mudhakkirat ṭabība* (*Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*), in 1970 El Saadawi decided to publish a non-fiction work which sparked much controversy throughout Egypt: *al-Marʾa wa-l-jins* (*Women and Sex*). The contents of this book—which discussed matters of circumcision, myths around virginity, and general societal sexual ignorance—triggered a nation-wide censorship on El Saadawi's publications, as well as the loss of her ministerial job. This did not deter her critical stance, instead pushing her to take a more vocal standpoint in her writings as seen in her novella *Imraʾa ʿind nuqṭa al-ṣifr* (*Woman at Point Zero*) published in 1975, and her in-depth analysis of women in Arab society, *al-Wajh al-ʿārī li-l-marʾa al-ʿarabiyya* (translated as *The Hidden Face of Eve*) published in 1977. Her controversial and dissident literary voice resulted in her arrest and imprisonment in 1981, as documented in her prison diaries *Mudhakkirat fī sijn al-nisāʾ* (*Memoirs from the Women's Prison*), only for her to be released a couple of months later following the assassination of then President Anwar Sadat.[4]

Her feminist action extended outside of her publications, founding the Arab Women's Solidarity Association in 1983. Her activism was met with harassment and criticism from both the government as well as Islamist organisations forcing herself and her husband at the time Sherif Hetata—who translated many of her writings to English—to leave Egypt in 1993 for the United States, where she took up an academic post at Duke University in North Carolina.[5] Her return to Egypt in 1996 was not a quiet one, continuing in her activism and even contesting as a presidential candidate in the 2005 Egyptian elections. In old age her activism didn't falter, and she was seen side-by-side with her

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[4] Diana Royer, *A Critical Study of the Works of Nawal El Saadawi, Egyptian Writer and Activist* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2001), 9.

[5] Al-Saʿdāwī, *A Daughter of Isis*, 16-17.

fellow Egyptian citizens protesting in Tahrir Square during the 2011 revolution. Passing away at the age of 89, she left behind a legacy of powerful feminist writings and activism.

The novel *Imraʾtani fi imraʾa* was first published in 1971 in Beirut by the publishing house Dar al-Adab. This novel follows the heroine Bahiah Shaheen, a medical student in Cairo. At the start of the novel, she has just turned eighteen and is waiting for something special to happen, for her individuality to be validated. She has become increasingly alienated by the sameness of the women and men surrounding her, which causes her to contemplate the reasons which contribute to this perpetual condition. The story develops with her increasing individual and social awareness represented as an internal conflict between two women who exist within her. Bahiah struggles against the expectations of her father, her anatomy lecturer Dr Alawi, the intrusive gazes of the social circle she inhabits, and self-policing acts. When she meets Saleem, a fellow student who she instantly connects with, he encourages her to express her individuality and Bahiah learns that she must act and decide what she wants for her path in life.

Naguib Mahfouz and al-Shahhadh (1965)

Naguib Mahfouz was born in Cairo, Egypt on the 11th of December 1911. His family was relatively lower-middle class, highly nurturing and devout Muslims. From a young age, a patriotic nature was instilled in him by his father who was a staunch Egyptian nationalist, and he grew up in a social background of political turmoil. Mahfouz points to the Egyptian Revolution of 1919 against the British occupation of Egypt as one of the great formative moments in his childhood.[6]

The *kuttab* (Qurʾan school) was where Mahfouz's formal education began, which emphasised literacy in reading, writing, and reciting classical Arabic. He remained a diligent student, excelling in the sciences, yet his love for the humanities drove him towards the pursuit of an undergraduate degree in Philosophy at Cairo university, graduating in 1934. It was around this time where his strong beliefs in Western ideals of rationality, secularism, science, and socialism flourished; ideals which he held for much of his life.[7] He began reading for a master's but dropped out due to his newfound passion for authorship, penning his first notable stories around this time. He took up various roles

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[6] Rasheed El-Enany, *Naguib Mahfouz: The Pursuit of Meaning* (London: Routledge, 1993)**,** 5.

[7] El-Enany**,** *Naguib Mahfouz***,** 22 .

within the civil service until he retired in 1971, which certainly impacted certain thematic aspects of his writing.

Mahfouz was an avid reader from his youth and familiarised himself with great literary authors and their works from both the Arab world and the West, namely Mustafa Lutfi al-Manafalutī, Taha Husayn, Salama Musa, Mahmud Taymur alongside Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Franz Kafka, and Herman Melville. His writings are generally divided into 4 phases which reflect different stages of his life and personal philosophy, yet from the beginning of his writing career the political element in his work remained a constant.[8] His early pre-World War 2 writings are characterised by a romanticism towards historical Egypt, especially the pharaonic period, which was a popular cultural feature utilised in the propagation of Egyptian nationalist ideology. Following the war, his novel *Khān al-khalīlī* (1945) marks the beginning of his ventures into the narrative style of social realism. This style is characterised by a strong focus on the unstable and poverty-ridden life of lower-class Cairenes, as well as the lives of those caught in the unrelenting environment of Egyptian bureaucracy. This period of writing is also a testament to Mahfouz's internal (and external) battle between traditional Islamic values and the allure of modern Western ideologies.[9] The exploration in social realism reaches its masterful peak with the *Cairo Trilogy* (writing finished in 1952, published from 1954 to 1957), followed by a period of inactivity after the Nasserist revolution of 1952.

The outcomes of the 1952 revolution marked Mahfouz's next stylistic shift after a short writing hiatus between 1952 and 1959. Apart from his highly allegorical and thematically complex work *ʾAwlād ḥāratnā* (*The Children of Gebalawi*) written in 1959, his writings take a more introspective point of view, with simple plot but intense emotional evocations, highly influenced by the European existentialist movement that was in vogue at the time. Mahfouz's existential explorations turn to one of absurdism and high experimentation in his later writings, seen as a reaction to the events of June 1967 (*al-naksa*).[10] He also turns his focus from novels and novellas to short stories as well as playwriting, using them to convey displays of extreme criticism towards the state of Egypt and Arab society, his writing style reflective of the breakdown going on around him at the time. His work began receiving international attention around this time, culminating in his

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[8] El-Enany, *Naguib Mahfouz,* 22-23.

[9] El-Enany, *Naguib Mahfouz,* 47.

[10] Rasheed El-Enany, *Naguib Mahfouz,* 200.

bestowal of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1988. After an artistic and philosophically fruitful life, Naguib Mahfouz passed away in Cairo on the 30th of August 2006.

Mahfouz's novel *al-Shahhadh* was first published in 1965. The narrative accompanies the protagonist Omar al-Hamzawi, a middle-aged lawyer, married with two young daughters. The reader first encounters Omar at the doctor, who he is visiting to inform of a strange illness that has overcome him. As the novel's events develop, the reader learns that this malady has stemmed from an interaction Omar had with a client about the outcome of a case, who states: "All that matters is that we win the case. Don't we live our lives knowing that our fate rests with God?".[11] The existential anxiety which this statement gives rise to causes Omar to become increasingly disillusioned with his life, including his work, his wife Zeinab and his commitment to family life. He searches for ecstasy in extramarital sexual and romantic escapades, mystic poetry, and finally even total self-annihilation. The reader learns of his idealistic and revolutionary youth where he was involved with an underground socialist political group, a past far-removed from his current bourgeois existence which comes back to haunt him once one of his old friends is released from prison and questions Omar and his friend Mustapha about their new lives. Underlying the text is the subtle exploration of the way Omar's existentialist quest affects the lives of those around him, mainly his wife and daughters, as well as the women he encounters in his affairs. The sacrifices these women make as a result of Omar's actions are explored in detail in the present study.

1.4 Key Terminology

This study involves the usage of various terms which are understood and defined differently in varied contexts. To avoid confusion or lack of clarity, this section will present the working definitions for this dissertation. Talking about 'Woman' as a singular homogenous entity is no longer considered acceptable, and for valid reasons. The main basis for the usage of the term 'woman' is that this is a socially constructed gender category, historically prescribed to 'females' based on the social norms of 'femininity'. Feminist studies have highlighted the diversity of experience of women across national, class, ethnic, racial, and religious boundaries just to name a few. Therefore, when approaching and utilising signifying terms such as the 'Arab woman' and the 'Egyptian woman' one has to qualify their usage and acknowledge that they do not represent all experiences of those being

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[11]Najīb Maḥfūẓ, *The Beggar*, trans. Kristin Walker Henry and Nariman al-Warraki (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 42. .

discussed. 'Arab woman' in this regard, refers generally to a woman living within a culture that has been defined as Arab. Whilst Egyptian society is not necessarily 'Arab', it has undergone a process of 'Arabisation', whereby it takes its native language to be the Arabic language and draws its culture and social norms from traditional 'Arab' conceptions of culture. The novelists chosen for study also identify as 'Arab' who were brought up in traditional 'Arab' and 'Muslim' households and communities.

From this it is important to draw out the meanings of 'Muslim' and 'Islamic', whereby 'Muslim' is a prescribed identity and 'Islamic' involves the adoption of Islam as a way of living. Therefore, one may be 'Muslim' in identity, but not necessarily 'Islamic' in their actions and beliefs for an array of reasons such as apathy, a more secular lifestyle, or total rejection of Islamic practices. Arabo-Islamic 'patriarchy' is defined through the lens of Hisham Sharabi's concept of 'Neopatriarchy', one inclusive of traditional patriarchal social stratification and the contradictory space it inhabits, together with the effects it produces in modernity.[12] This neopatriarchy exists within small-scale, masculine dominated, micro-political interactions of the everyday up to the masculinist political, legal, and economic structures of the state. Lastly, when referring to the 'postcolonial' and 'postcoloniality', this study adopts Françoise Lionnet's frame of reference of the "postcontact": "a condition that exists within, and thus contests and resists, the colonial moment itself with its ideology of domination".[13] This allows for a more inclusive access to the theory, whereby it relates to experiences during and after the colonial period.

1.5 Dissertation Outline

Chapter 1 of this dissertation consists of the introduction above. Chapter 2 presents a detailed discussion on the methodology applied in order to answer the research questions and develop the discussion of the topic at hand. The chosen methodology consists of a comparative approach through the postcolonial and poststructuralist feminist lens. This methodological discussion is followed by a presentation of the scholarly literature reviewed for the purposes of this dissertation. This involves a brief introduction to feminist critical thought, a scoping in on postcolonial and poststructural feminist philosophy and a review

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[12] Hisham Sharabi, *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

[13] Françoise Lionnet, *Postcolonial Representations : Women, Literature, Identity* (Ithaca, U.S.: Cornell University Press, 2013), 4.

of work within the field of Arabic literary criticism that takes gender as an analytical framework.

Chapter 3, 'Gender Consciousness in the Arab Pre-Colonial Literary Imaginary', argues for a more holistic approach to studying gender in Arabic literature by providing a historical contextualisation of gender consciousness within the Arabic literary tradition. Polemics on sexual difference are not a new concept that entered only in modernity, but they have been developing throughout time, constantly affected by historical developments such as the spread of Islam and Islamic doctrine across the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa. However, the differentiation between sex and gender were not considered in the arguments prior to modernity.

Chapter 4, 'The Modern Arab Woman: in History and in Literature', explores what it means to take the 'Arab Woman', specifically the 'Egyptian Woman', as a subject of feminist analysis. What are the implications of using such terms? What does this mean at a time when the basis of the word 'woman' no longer directly signifies those with a biologically female body? The questions circling around this chapter culminate in a detailed outline of the characterisations of the women present in the novels *Imraʾtani fi imraʾa* and *al-Shahhadh*, with this same character analysis bringing out certain differences in the portrayal of women characters on the basis of the gender of the author. Mainly this is through certain archetypical portrayals of women characters present in Mahfouz's novel. Nevertheless, what stands out is the functions of these women within the narrative, as archetypically constructed in the eyes of the main character Omar and his increasing alienation from the people around him. On the other hand, due to the focused lens on the heroine Bahiah, El Saadawi's novel has a more nuanced depiction of a young woman coming-of-age within a restrictive and contradictory patriarchal power structure, however, there is a lack of representation of women in the general narrative.

Chapter 5 'The Discipline and Desire of the Female Body', presents a comparative literary analysis of *Imraʾtani fi imraʾa* and *al-Shahhadh* focused on the overt and subtle discourses on the regulation of the sexed female body found in the novels. The chapter indicates the different regulatory norms at play in the construction and literary representation of the women in the two novels, comparing the distinct ways each narrative shows awareness or possible lack of awareness to the hegemonic neopatriarchal ideologies at play.

Chapter 6, 'Transgressions, Subversions, and Expressions of Agency', is concerned with literary presentations of active subject formation available to the women in the novels.

How do these women, if the choice is available for them, transgress the prescriptions of womanhood that are expected of them? The focus of this chapter is mainly El Saadawi's heroine Bahiah, since the premise of the novel at hand is the exploration of the tension between the 'two women' (*imraʾtāni)* that exist within her; Bahiah the obedient medical student who is set to marry her cousin once she graduates from medical school, and Bahiah the artist who pursues a life of love and dissident political activism. Bahiah's defiance and search for agency is contrasted with Mahfouz's characterisation of Buthayna, the daughter of the protagonist Omar. The subtext of Mahfouz's novel draws parallels between Omar and Buthayna in their interests and understandings of each other, mainly their infatuation with the meaning of existence. However, Buthayna's potential and ability to express agency is halted by the novel's developments. The final chapter concludes the dissertation, presenting a summary of the arguments developed throughout this study guided by the research questions posed in this introduction.

2. Methodology and Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter serves the purpose of firstly detailing the methodology adopted within this dissertation, and secondly presenting a detailed review of the theoretical literature engaged with. In order to address the research questions and objectives presented in the introductory chapter, the next section of this chapter explains and justifies the way the research and literary analysis is carried out and situates itself within the relevant critical tradition. The second purpose of this chapter is to give a brief overview of the diversity of theoretical perspectives existing within feminist scholarship, organically presenting a review of the literature consulted and engaged with prior to and during the writing of this dissertation. The history of feminist political and scholarly intervention is outlined, followed by a detailed review of the specific poststructural and postcolonial perspectives that are the main theoretical basis for the overall cultural and literary analysis of the chosen novels for study. Special attention is given to scholarly works within the field of Arabic literary criticism working with gender as an analytical category, and postcolonial theory.

2.2 Methodology

Feminist studies in modern Arabic literature have traditionally centred around Arab women's literary productions, their implications for the feminist project and the development of Arabic literature in general. This approach within the field has immeasurably benefitted the promotion of Arab women's literary production, which has in turn contributed to the generation of more study and debate on their works. This dissertation locates itself within that tradition of study and is greatly indebted to the work that has come before it.

Where this dissertation departs from traditional methodologies is through the adoption of a gendered comparative approach. The main question that is being asked here is how women and feminine prescriptions in modern Egypt have been constructed and portrayed in the modern Egyptian narrative, and whether the gender of the author affects these literary portrayals. The exploration of this question is embedded in a feminist theoretical approach, with a focus on poststructuralist and postcolonial feminist theoretical literatures. This analytical method is then applied to a close-reading of two modern

Egyptian novels by two prominent authors during the middle and late 20th century: Nawal El Saadawi's *Imraʾtani fī imraʾa* and Naguib Mahfouz's *al-Shahhadh.*

Due to the qualitative nature of this research, an extensive literature review into the expansive field of literary criticism, specifically feminist literary criticism, is carried out. This allows for the opportunity to investigate the strengths and weaknesses in the various subsets of this school of thought. Specific attention is given to works of feminist criticism within the field of Arabic literary studies, as well as criticism relating to Arab women's writing and literary portrayal outside of the feminist framework, assessing the application of such theories by various scholars. As a result of this literature review—presented later on in this chapter—a hybrid of the poststructuralist and the postcolonial feminist theoretical basis is adopted. The choice and suitability of these two frameworks are decided on the basis of the implications they have on fulfilling the research aims, which are the character construction of women and the understanding of these constructions, and their implications, within the contexts of a postcolonial Egyptian society.

A postcolonial feminist theoretical perspective emphasises the importance of understanding gendered and sexual relations within a cultural context, especially for societies, cultures, and individual subjects impacted by colonial rule.[1] On taking colonialism as a point of reference within the study of modern and contemporary Arabic literature, al-Musawi elaborates,

> Aside from the very formation of the colonial subject and the transfer of power to the native elite in a number of ways and struggles, which had already drawn the attention of Franz Fanon, the present is still entangled into a long and complicated history of domination, be it Ottoman since 1517, European or neocolonialist. Passing through colonial and mandated periods, cultures in the Arab World grew and changed in dialogue and confrontation. Reformists, liberal leaders and Islamists are not the only people who are the agents of change, despite their formative influence, for professionals, peasants, groups and guilds are no less dynamic. Women's participation in the struggle for freedom and cultivation of life at large, in urban centers and rural areas alike, refuses homogenization and contests platitudinous surveys of the so called sameness of women's conditions.[2]

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[1] Deepika Bahri, 'Feminism in/and Postcolonialism', in *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*, ed. Neil Lazarus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 200.
[2] Muhsin Jassim Al-Musawi, *The Postcolonial Arabic Novel: Debating Ambivalence* (Leiden, The Netherlands: BRILL, 2003), xxv.

The research undertaken takes these considerations into account, especially with regard to Egyptian women's subject formation that is deeply embedded in the process of decolonisation and neocolonial influences of modernity.

This necessity is realised through a brief historical review of gender consciousness in the Arab world from the pre-Islamic period to late classical period, taken from a literary perspective. The historical review answers questions on the representation and contribution of Arab women in precolonial Arabic literature, focusing on established imagery and tropes in the tradition which leak into the writings of the modern period. Postcolonial feminists alongside poststructuralist feminists also problematize the universalised concept of the 'Woman' and who that term represents. The discussion on what is 'Woman' is followed by a brief history of the Egyptian women's rights movement which, in tandem with western-inspired and Islamic ideological discourse, created the social conditions for the development of an 'Egyptian woman' subject: the subject of this dissertation's study. The presentation of this history alongside the theoretical arguments further enlivens the character analyses of the women in the chosen novels, which in turn contributes to the wider discussions on the topic of what constitutes 'Woman'.

Following the character analysis tracing the multiplicity of women characters in the chosen novels is the comprehensive literary analysis unearthing the neopatriarchal power structure contributing to the way women and femininity are approached in the novels. This is done in a comparative manner, focusing on the author and their influences in making these textual decisions. Here a variety of theoretical perspectives are employed, however, a special importance is given to the philosophical literature of Judith Butler due to their considerations within the concept of gender performativity and a subversive gender politics, the construction of sexed bodies, and the connection between sex, gender, and desire. The analysis is presented on the basis of literary illustrations of the passive construction of sexed female bodies on one hand, and examples of active subjectivity and subversion of the regulatory ideals of womanhood on the other. This division has its benefits in providing a framework from which to explore these facets of character creation and the ways they manifest themselves in the novels. One drawback of this schema is that it may not fully accommodate for the fluidity and exchanges that exist between the ideas of passivity and active subjectivity and subversion, however the discussion of the literary analysis does its best to account for the spectrum of expressions between the two.

Whilst my research works towards shedding light on the ways in which womanhood is presented in the literary production of modern Egypt, due to lack of time and practical

constraints the research and literary analysis focuses on two Egyptian authors and one novel per author. Therefore, the reader must bear in mind that this is not a comprehensive study on the ways women have been portrayed all across the Arab world. The analysis is markedly bound to the Egyptian context, and even through the narrowing of the geographical focus onto one country within the Arabic-speaking and cultural world, one must bear in mind that the works of these authors do not speak for the rest of the Egyptian authors or authors of the same gender. Nevertheless, as products of their time and their societies, these two authors' works most certainly reflects a level of influence from their social contexts and the analysis of their work is bound to shed light onto this topic of research.

2.3 Feminism and Feminist Criticism

2.3.1 Feminism

Feminism in the western world began as an active political movement backed by an ideology of women's emancipation from the structural bonds of the patriarchal system. The development of the movement is usually divided into 'waves' with reference to first-wave feminism and the bold suffragettes, second-wave feminism espousing ideas of sexual and reproductive liberation, and the postmodern third-wave feminism of the present day. Feminist theory developed in tandem by those involved in the movement as well as those who were inspired by the activism. As a result of women's tireless activism and their theoretical production, feminism has become a well-respected academic discipline pushing into the present day with continued research into the conditions surrounding women in all areas of culture and society, and their consequences.

The previous paragraph gives a concise and manicured history of the basic developments in the feminist movement. However, as previously mentioned, this is mostly true for the development of western feminism, more specifically feminist movements in the United States and western Europe. Due to the hegemony of western scholarship, feminist histories usually revolve around the major events that took place in the global 'West'. Chandra Talpade Mohanty highlights the issue of "the global hegemony of western scholarship" and the social and political effects it has beyond academia. "One such significant effect of the dominant 'representations' of western feminism is its conflation

with imperialism in the eyes of particular third-world women."[3] Al-Sharekh reiterates the issue of 'ethnocentrism' within the feminist scholarship and the way westernised forms of feminism have historically been imported into non-western cultures without attention given to the specific conditions of the women in their own socio-political contexts.[4]

This phenomenon is linked to the reason why women's movements in postcolonial societies have hesitated to adopt the term 'feminist' to describe their activities, previously remarked by Mohanty and exemplified in Al-Ali's study.[5] Women engaged in women's rights activism in Arab society have proposed alternative terms to identify themselves and the movement, preferring the term *nissaʾiyya* (a term relating to women and the feminine) rather than *nassaʾwiyya* (Arabic translation of 'feminist'), or simply *munashattat* (activists) concerned with *qadiyyat al-marʾa* (women's issues).[6] El Saadawi reminds feminists active in the west working towards women's liberation in the 'third world' that

> although there are certain characteristics common to these movements all over the world, fundamental differences are inevitable when we are dealing with different stages of economic, social and political development. In underdeveloped countries, liberation from foreign domination often remains *the* crucial issue and influences the content and forms of struggle in other areas including that of women's status and role in society.[7]

In light of the demands and concerns of women in the third world or postcolonial contexts, contemporary studies, discussed later on, have highlighted the importance of the broadening of the view of feminist ideology and feminist history on a global scale, yet this does not mean that 'women's experience' all over the world should be universalised. Discussions surrounding the issues of the gender signifier 'Woman' and more importantly the 'Egyptian Woman' classified as a 'Third World Woman' are brought up in Chapter 4 within the broader considerations of the issues of essentialism and representations in critical theory.

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[3] Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses', *Feminist Review*, no. 30 (1988), 64.

[4] Al Anoud Al Sharekh, 'Angry Words Softly Spoken' (PhD, London: SOAS, University of London, 2003), 1.

[5] Nadje Al-Ali, *Secularism, Gender, and the State in the Middle East: The Egyptian Women's Movement*, Cambridge Middle East Studies 14 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 4.

[6] Al-Ali, *Secularism, Gender, and the State*, 5-7.

[7] Nawal Al-Saʿdāwī, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*, trans. Sherif Hetata, 2nd ed. (London: Zed Books, 2015), xxxv.

For the purposes of this dissertation, it is imperative to advance a working definition of feminism that may carefully encapsulate a broad spectrum of ideas that deal with the investigation of the status of women from politics to popular culture to the family unit, as well as their emancipation from the social and cultural structures of patriarchy. The needs of this dissertation are attended to by a statement made by Miriam Cooke that feminism is "above all, an epistemology … that highlights the role of gender in understanding the organization of society",[8] rather than an ideology claimed by specific groups of people who call themselves feminist. Margot Badran also makes use of the term 'feminist' when speaking about women whose ideas and action pushed forward women's emancipation in Egypt, even if they did not necessarily identify as such.[9] Therefore, following the path paved by Cooke and Badran as well as other scholars in the field, this dissertation applies the terms 'feminism' and 'feminist' to all ideas and thinkers which fall under this epistemological category.

2.3.2 Feminist Literary Criticism

The relationship between feminist thought and literary criticism is undeniable. One could almost argue that the production of criticism is what allowed feminist ideas (and later on, feminist political organisation) to garner as much influence as they did during their conception and adolescence. This can be observed in abundance of early feminist works that employed a degree of literary and cultural criticism in order to illustrate the way in which the patriarchy influenced and continues to influence cultural products such as literary fiction. Feminist texts, namely Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1928) and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), as well as Kate Millet's doctoral thesis *Sexual Politics* (1969) amongst others are pointed towards as examples of the utilisation of feminist literary critical methods in order to conclude that women's status as the 'Other' in literature stems from her subjugated sexual positioning in patriarchal society.[10] Their work displays how a woman's status is sexually determined and embedded in sexual politics, and the way intellectuals such as de Beauvoir and Millet bring this out is through their special focus on male author's depiction of women.

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[8] Miriam Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism Through Literature* (London: Routledge, 2001), ix.

[9] Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1995), 20.

[10] Maggie Humm, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Feminist Literary Criticism* (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), 39, 45.

The ideas elaborated upon during the period of the mid-20th century came to form the basis of two schools of thought within feminist criticism during the 60s and 70s: Anglo-American feminist criticism and French feminist criticism. Whilst these schools of thought refer to their ideas' countries of origin, they do not necessarily always include theorists from those countries. However, their domination in the field is somewhat representative of the pervasiveness of western thought, at least during the early periods of feminist critical thought in the academy. The Anglo-American school owes much of its ideas to the work of Elaine Showalter and her ideas of 'feminist critique' which studies depictions of women in male-authored works, and 'gynocritics' which she defines as:

> related to feminist research in history, anthropology, psychology and sociology, all of which have developed hypotheses of a female subculture including not only the ascribed status, and the internalised constructs of femininity, but also the occupations, interactions and consciousness of women.[11]

Showalter has been criticised for adopting a humanistic and universalist approach whilst also claiming her departure from 'male' theory. Toril Moi explains that Showalter's insistence on women's literature conveying the 'female experience' draws from the patriarchal idea of the 'literary canon'. The categorisation of literature by the element of 'authentic experience' results in the creation of a new literary hierarchy that inadvertently ends up excluding non-white and working class writers.[12] El-Sadda elaborates on how Showalter's humanism creates an obvious dilemma for both women authors and feminist literary critics: how does one go about defining the 'female experience' without risking universalising a dominant cultural experience and as a result erasing those of women from diverse backgrounds?[13] It is difficult enough to represent the experiences of women in one linguistic or cultural group, let alone the experiences of women around the globe.

A departure from Anglo-American's focus on female experience comes with French feminists and the great importance placed on subjectivities, language, and body representations in their literary criticism. Critical perspectives and theories in this school have been highly influenced Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* as well as other

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[11] Elaine Showalter, 'Towards a Feminist Poetics', in *Women Writing and Writing about Women*, ed. Mary Jacobus, Routledge Library Editions: Women, Feminism and Literature Ser. (Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 28.

[12] Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, 2nd ed, New Accents (London ; New York: Routledge, 2002), 77.

[13] Hoda El Sadda, 'Women's Writing in Egypt: Reflections on Salwa Bakr', in *Gendering the Middle East: Emerging Perspectives*, ed. Deniz Kandiyoti (I.B. Tauris & Co, 1996), 129.

disciplines which were garnering a great amount of popularity in the 1970s, such as psychoanalysis, Marxism, poststructuralism, ecofeminism, and utopian feminism.[14] Ideas by French feminists such as Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray have explored the ways in which language and language systems reproduce patriarchy which inevitably leaks into both men and women's literary productions. They all emphasise on women writers' opposition of 'phallocentric language' and women's need for their own literary language, drawing upon women's sexuality, reclaiming images of the body, references to pre-/non-linguistic experiences and interlacing their personal subjectivities.[15] This stylistic approach and its features have been termed '*écriture féminine*' (feminine writing) or '*parler femme*' (female speech).[16] These theories are congruent with the belief of the way 'womanhood' and 'manhood' are socially constructed through dominant language rather than being inherent to one's biological sex, an idea popularised in de Beauvoir's famous statement: "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman."[17]

Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory were drawn upon during the 70s by theorists such as Kristeva, Juliet Mitchell, Ellen Moers and others in order to dig into the unconscious forces present within a literary text. Lacan was especially influential due to his work done on the connection between language acquisition and a child's identification with subjective constructions of 'masculinity' and 'femininity', and due to the unstable nature of these constructions "the idea of femininity will always be open to redefinition".[18] Feminist psychoanalytic critics come under fire due to their utilisation of highly patriarchal theories, where femininity is placed in direct opposition to masculinity due to the "logic of oppositions".[19] However, one cannot ignore how the theories of Freud and Lacan act as a stepping stone for the understanding of the way in which femininity is viewed under patriarchy.

Poststructuralism and deconstructionist practices have been the site in which feminist criticism has thrived following the 1970s. Poststructuralism is usually identified in opposition to structuralist thought which investigates patterns and structures which create meaning and reveals any rules which arise. Poststructuralist practice centres around

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[14] Humm, *A Reader's Guide*, 93.

[15] Humm, *A Reader's Guide*, 94-96.

[16] Humm, *A Reader's Guide,* 97.

[17] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Capisto-Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, Vintage Classics (London: Vintage Books, 2011), 293.

[18] Humm, *A Reader's Guide*, 119–120.

[19] Humm, *A Reader's Guide,* 121.

the way language functions in its specific cultural context, whereby language is no longer studied "isolation from the authority and power structures that control those systems".[20] A pioneering work of this critical discipline is Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1974) in which he draws a strong connection between dominant language and discourse, and 'experts' who define and express these discourses. Poststructuralism appealed to feminists for its focus on the recognition of the processes in which a misogynistic power structure—patriarchy in its various cultural contexts—produces misogynistic texts, as well as concentrating on in-text marginalities and absences. De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is also revisited as a site for theory production by poststructuralist feminists, specifically the issue of 'becoming woman' as highlighted in the quotation above. In poststructuralist feminist criticism, the female body also becomes––using Foucauldian terminology—an 'object of knowledge' and therefore, a site from which patriarchal power is yielded.[21] This theoretical school greatly influences the work of this dissertation, with chosen theoretical literatures engaged with in greater depth in the next section.

Alongside poststructuralist thought grew another school of critical thought which came to be known as postcolonialism. Postcolonial thought is indebted to the works of decolonial thinkers such as Franz Fanon and Edward Said whose writings *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Orientalism* respectfully, are said to be the founding texts of this school of thought. In *Orientalism*, Said explored the ways in which the orientalist Eurocentric gaze created a hegemonic distorted image of eastern cultures in the western imaginary which, placed the idea of the primitive 'Orient' in direct opposition to the civilised 'Occident'.[22] This work developed the idea of "*positional* superiority" of the 'West' over the 'East', taking the effects of empire as a reference point for critical analysis.[23] For the purposes of this research, Said's ideas are not explicitly referenced due to the focus his work placed on the perceptions of western cultures on the 'Orient'. This is beyond the scope and purpose of the present research, which is more interested in the analysis of representations and meanings of femininity the two novels would have generated within the context of Egyptian society. Nevertheless, his ideas most certainly echo in the work of his contemporaries, whose ideas are explored further in this discussion.

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[20] Humm, *A Reader's Guide,* 134.

[21] Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Routledge Classics (London; New York: Routledge, 2002),142.

[22] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), 2.

[23] Said, *Orientalism*, 7.

At its roots, postcolonial thought was highly influenced by feminist theorists in its development such as Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Angela Davis, who adopted analytical categories of gender, race, power, and empire to their critical approaches. Postcolonial thought adopts various frames of reference and analysis from other schools of thought, such as the emancipatory practices of Marxism as well as the deconstructionist practices of poststructuralism and postmodernism. Reina Lewis and Sara Mills summarise the goals of postcolonial feminist practice as "a two-fold project: to racialize mainstream feminist theory and to insert feminist concerns into conceptualisations of colonialism and postcolonialism".[24] Bahri summarises the theoretical application of postcolonial feminist criticism to literary studies as follows:

> A postcolonial feminist perspective requires that one learn to read literary representations of women with attention both to the subject and to the medium of representation. It also requires a general critical literary, that is, the capacity to read the world (specifically, in this context, gender relations) with a critical eye.[25]

Alongside poststructuralist feminist theory, postcolonial feminism's analysis based on the racialisation of patriarchal structure and the importance given to the shortcomings of white western feminist practice makes this analytical lens suitable for the purpose of answering the research questions posed in the previous chapter. The interests and thinkers of the postcolonial perspective are mapped in detail in the next section of this chapter.

Comparative practices are a lively feature in feminist theory, especially within postcolonial and poststructuralist circles. In the article 'Archimedes and the Paradox of Feminist Criticism', Myra Jehlen—alongside the many arguments she makes for the stagnation of feminist criticism at the time of writing—makes the argument for the implementation of a 'radical comparativism' whereby feminist critics and those working within the field of women's studies engage with both women's and men's works and points of view in a comparative manner.[26] Even though this article is rather sceptical towards feminist studies and women's studies in general, it provided a useful criticism towards for feminist scholars ignoring the full picture of literary production which in turn avoids the challenging of dominant discourses in both men and women's literatures. The situation in

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[24] Reina Lewis and Sara Mills, *Feminist Postcolonial Theory : A Reader* (Florence, UK: Taylor & Francis Group, 2003), 3.

[25] Bahri, 'Feminism in/and Postcolonialism', 200.

[26] Myra Jehlen, 'Archimedes and the Paradox of Feminist Criticism', *Signs* 6, no. 4 (1981): 575–601, http://www.jstor.org.ejournals.um.edu.mt/stable/3173733.

feminist circles has evolved since the publishing of that article in the early 1980s however the idea of a radical comparativism has informed the way this dissertation engages with a man's literary perspective alongside a woman's, and the challenging of preconceived notions regarding the content of their writing.

2.4 Main Themes in Poststructuralist and Postcolonial Feminist Thought

Following the survey on the various schools of thought existing within feminist criticism, the choice was made that theories based on postcolonial and poststructuralist feminist ideas would be most suitable for the purposes of this dissertation. These two schools of thought emphasise the relationship between power structures and knowledge production as was presented in the work of Foucault and Said. Both schools also resist overarching meta-narratives and universalism, in a similar manner to postmodern thought, but on the basis of this idea of power creating knowledge. Postcolonial feminist thinkers such as Chandra Mohanty recognise the way the relative power that comes with the proximity whiteness—especially following the proliferation of white feminist movements in the west—creates a hierarchy of womanhood within western feminist circles which affects knowledge production, with 'Anglo-American Women' as the primary referent and 'Third World Women' as the Other: "Clearly, western feminist discourse and political practice is neither singular nor homogeneous ... however, it is possible to trace a coherence of effects resulting from the implicit assumption of 'the west' ... as the primary referent in theory and praxis."[27] Due to postcolonial feminism's critical nature towards dominant discourse, from its inception it was also self-reflexive, engaged in constant critique with itself. A focus was placed on subjectivities, language usage and the fixity of meaning, both externally as well as internally. A concern certain postcolonial feminist theorists share with poststructuralists is the usage of the word 'Woman' and who exactly this word applies to. Due to the general shift in the understanding of gender from biologically determined to socially be constructed, the signifiers 'man' and 'woman' could no longer be used and understood generically across cultures; they became essentialist terms with ideals of masculinity and femininity attached to them which was politically problematic for feminist activists. Judith Butler's contributions to this field, mainly the works of *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), have made a considerable impact on the reformulation of the idea of

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[27] Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses', *Feminist Review*, no. 30 (1988), 61.

'Woman' as the sole feminist subject and as the only point of identification for feminist practice. As a point of clarification, any references made to Judith Butler will be employing the singular they/them pronouns to respect their non-binary personal and legal identification.

Butler, prior to the publishing of their two aforementioned publications on the manifestations of power in the development of sex and gender, first presents their idea on gender performativity in an essay entitled 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory'. This essay argues for the reformulation of gender as "constituted" rather than "naturalized", and therefore they are able to be "constituted differently".[28] Here, Butler revisits Simone de Beauvoir's statement "one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman", interpreting gender as an "identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*."[29] This places gender expression within the historicised body; a body which reflects and reproduces its historical context. The 'body' becomes a site for resignification in Butler's work:

> Gender is not passively scripted on the body, and neither is it determined by nature, language, the symbolic, or the overwhelming history of patriarchy. Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure, but if this continuous act is mistaken for a natural or linguistic given, power is relinquished to expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various kinds.[30]

This understanding of gender leads to Butler's idea of the 'politics of performative gender acts' understood as "one which both redescribes existing gender identities and offers a prescriptive view about the kind of gender reality there ought to be".[31] This feminist politics is neither reformational nor revolutionary but a subversive one. In literary criticism, this provides the critic a locus for analysing gender constitutions and teasing out the passive and active influences at play. Gender being performatively produced does not mean it is an expression of agency, rather, it is the forcible reiteration of norms that have gained discursive power through time. Lloyd reiterates: "The norms repeated are thus both deeply imbricated in relations of domination, reprimand and control (think of the risks that attach

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[28] Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (December 1988), 520.
[29] Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution', 519.
[30] Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution', 531.
[31] Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution', 530.

when gender is done wrongly) *and* they are inescapable".[32] Nevertheless, Butler views constituted subjects as able to act and express agency precisely in the moment they are subjected by power. The repetition of gendered acts opens up the possibility of deviation from norm.

> construction is neither a single act nor a causal process initiated by a subject and culminating in a set of fixed effects. Construction not only takes place *in* time, but is itself a temporal process which operates through the reiteration of norms; sex is both produced and destabilized in the course of this reiteration. As a sedimented effect of a reiterative or ritual practice, sex acquires its naturalized effect, and, yet, it is also by virtue of this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions, as that which escapes or exceeds the norm, as that which cannot be wholly defined or fixed by the repetitive labor of that norm. This instability is the *de*constituting possibility in the very process of repetition, the power that undoes the very effects by which "sex" is stabilized, the possibility to put the consolidation of the norms of "sex" into a potentially productive crisis.[33]

Turning back to the idea of a subversive gender politics, Butler, unlike theorists such as Kristeva or Žižek, does not view acts of subversion as outside culture or presupposing culture. Butler views the concept of 'subversion' as actions that are able to transform the symbolic order within a culture's sign system. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler concludes by discussing subversion as the site for feminist agency and action, an idea with this dissertation adopts for the analysis of women's expression of agency within a restrictive social context:

> If the rules governing signification not only restrict, but enable the assertion of alternative domains of cultural intelligibility, i.e., new possibilities for gender that contest the rigid codes of hierarchical binarisms, then it is only *within* the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible.[34]

Subversion and expressing dissident agency are therefore involved with resignification through repetition in order to make previously unintelligible existences 'matter', in the

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[32] Moya Lloyd, *Judith Butler: From Norms to Politics*, Key Contemporary Thinkers (Cambridge: Policy press, 2007), 63.

[33] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*, Routledge Classics (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2011), xix.

[34] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge Classics (New York: Routledge, 2006), 198–9.

same way that dominant modes of understanding gendered bodies came about in the first place.

Postcolonial theories are also interested in the 'body' as a point for critical analysis as new discourses of the body emerged based on nationalist discourses. Understanding of the idea of the 'sexed female body' as discussed by Butler compliments the understanding of the 'body' in postcolonial theories and criticism. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler contends how the understanding of bodies through the concepts of sexual difference makes it impossible to understand those bodies—or even consider the viability of these bodies— which exist outside the regulatory norm.[35] Butler adopts Kristeva's concept of the 'abject' and 'abjection' as presented in her work *Powers of Horror*, to look at 'abject bodies' whereby 'abjection' is a process of 'othering', of rejection, which in itself creates the 'beings' unable to claim subjecthood.[36] The abjection of nonconforming bodies relates to postcolonial feminism due to the differences that exist in the consideration of non-western bodies and their contingent and shifting boundaries of meaning. On this Meryem Ouedghiri Ben Ottman writes:

> The post-colonial experiences, having initiated major reconsideration of cultural values all over the world, were particularly intense over issues of the female body as a marker of cultural struggle, and where new definitions of the body were emerging as part of newly defined cultural entities be they nation states or other national constructs.[37]

Women's bodies in postcoloniality were ascribed various meanings and co-opted by discourses of nationalism. On one hand they represented the traditional, the pure and untouched by the intrusive colonial fingers. On the other hand, with the increase of hybridisation and women's increased access to different cultural influences, the woman's body paradoxically signified the impure, "polluted or sickened by 'diseases' of Western influence."[38] Postcolonial thought pushes the scholar or critics to adopt a critical and nuanced approach to the oppression of women in the so-called 'Third World'. This is especially true when approaching topics relating to the body such as female excision and

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[35] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, xii.

[36] Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, xiii; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge Classics (New York: Routledge, 2006), 181.

[37] Meryem Ouedghiri Ben Ottmane, 'The Palimpsestic Body In Arab Women's Writings' (PhD, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2000), xiii.

[38] Therese Saliba, 'On the Bodies of Third World Women: Cultural Impurity, Prostitution, and Other Nervous Conditions', *College Literature* 22, no. 1 (1995), 133.

infibulation, also called Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), and topics such as veiling and spatial practices such as seclusion. It is imperative to listen to the voices of the women experiencing these situations, rather than assuming that they need a voice or need to be spoken for, in order to "set the agenda for political action."[39] When adopting a postcolonial lens, there is an added imperative present interpretations and judgements in light of the dominant and subversive discourses of the women in those societies, rather than imposing an outsider perspective on the issues that pertain to them.

2.5 Gender Studies and Postcolonial Endeavours in Western and Arab Scholarship of Arabic Literature

This section is concerned with the proliferation of studies on the Arab women's writing as well as Arab women's literature. However, only in the past couple of decades has the application of feminist theories been a productive endeavour within the field. Recently, scholars in Arab countries have turned to problematising the concepts of 'sex' and 'gender' in the Arabic language and the correlation certain shortcomings in terminologies may have to the lack of proliferation of 'feminist studies' and 'gender studies' in the Arab world. Specifically, this refers to the lack of knowledge production in the Arabic language on these concepts.

In an article entitled 'Translating Gender', Samia Mehrez considers the issue of the lack of consensus by women scholars in the Arab world on the word 'gender'; the social construction of norms and behaviours attributed to 'biological sex' which in Arabic is signified by the word *jins*.[40] Mehrez displays a preference for the adoption of the term '*janūsa*' to signify 'gender', as it reflects the ability for the Arabic language to generate new terminology. However, this word has not yet been adopted in scholarly discourse, with words such as *nawʿ* (type, species) or the English transliteration of 'gender', *jinder*, utilised instead. Hodda Elsadda, whose discourse on the topic is translated and constantly referred to in Mehrez's paper, takes the issues highlighted in 'Translating Gender' and puts forward the conclusion that Arab feminists in the field have a responsibility in "creating new meanings, and talking strategies", as "knowledge produced in the margins of power is often

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[39] Reina Lewis and Sara Mills, *Feminist Postcolonial Theory : A Reader* (Florence, UK: Taylor & Francis Group, 2003), 9.

[40] Samia Mehrez, 'Translating Gender', *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 3, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 106–27.

more in touch with specific realities, and is therefore a 'situated knowledge'".[41] Hence, the variety of Arabic terms that connote 'gender as the social construction' should not be viewed as a drawback, but a phenomenon that highlights diversity of discourses and research being carried out in the field.

Knowledge production and scholarship in the west and its focus on women in Arabic literature was initially dominated by studies of the images of women in Arab men's novels. In the cases of Naguib Mahfouz's literature, articles were being produced on the symbolic roles and representations of women in his novels, as seen in Francis X Paz's 'Women and Sexual Morality in the Novels of Najīb Maḥfūẓ' (1970) and Ibrahim El-Sheikh's 'Egyptian Women as Portrayed in the Social Novels of Najīb Maḥfūẓ' (1982). For example, El-Sheikh decides to base his analysis on the identification of 5 archetypal female characters; "The poor woman", "The middle class woman", "The aristocratic woman", "The mother", and "The new up-to-date woman".[42] These two articles do not base their categorisations on any form of theoretical framework, but rather present their own interpretations on organic categories that they may recognise as well as on the basis of the roles women have historically played in Arabic literary works, especially in the writings of men. There is a level of awareness to this, especially when El-Sheikh concludes by commenting on the way that Egyptian women in Mahfouz's novels are limited to his "socio-political and cultural perspective" where "women", especially those from aristocratic backgrounds or educated women, "are used either to criticize aristocracy or to propagate modernity with little or no effort to make them an integral part of their setting."[43]

In her non-fiction work *The Hidden Face of Eve*, published in 1977,Nawal El Saadawi dedicates a section of her analysis to the traditional portrayals of women in Arabic literature, with a portion of thechapter 'The Heroine in Arab Literature' focusing in on the writing of Mahfouz. Her critical analysis which brings up various representations of women, whilst applauding his departure from traditional portrayal of women as controlled by their sexual desires, highlights the role of the prostitute in Mahfouz's work due to his

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[41] Hoda Elsadda, 'Gender Studies in the Arab World: Reflections and Questions on the Challenges of Discourses, Locations and History', in *Arab Feminisms: Gender and Equality in the Middle East*, ed. Jean Makdisi, Noha Bayoumi, and Rafif Rida Sidawi (London: I. B. Tauris & Company, 2014).

[42] Ibrahim El-Sheikh, 'Egyptian Women as Portrayed in the Social Novels of Najīb Maḥfūẓ', *Al-ʾArabiyya* 15, no. 1/2 (Spring & Autumn 1982), 133.

[43] El-Sheikh, 'Egyptian Women', 143.

focus on the economic conditions in Egypt that cause women to resort to sex work.[44] *The Hidden Face of Eve* is also a valuable resource for the insight it provides on the conditions of Arab women living in the 20th century. Whilst it is definitely not a comprehensive account encapsulating the diversity of Arab women's experiences, it sheds light on certain shared experiences common for women living under conservative cultural conditions that El Saadawi came in contact with during her work as a doctor, and even experienced herself.

A recent study carried out by Ken Seigneurie entitled 'Modern Nihilism and Naguib Mahfouz's Faith in Liberalism' (2021) moves beyond the attribution of symbolic roles to the women characters in Mahfouz's novels. In this paper, Seigneurie considers *al-Shahhadh* as one of Mahfouz's existentialist novels in which he explores liberal thought. As a result of Seigneurie's close reading of the text as well as the consideration of previous analyses of the text, he concludes that:

> The narrative spotlight on the character of ʿUmar is almost total as he is the central consciousness in every scene. Indeed, one critic sees other characters as mere versions of ʿUmar, "the intellectual pillar of the entire novel." Critics usually identify Mustafa and Uthman as the next most important characters. As representatives of classical and progressive branches of liberalism, each responds to authoritarianism in complicity or revolt. ʿUmar's wife, Zaynab, attracts relatively less attention as she is established early in the novel as a "symbol of kitchen and bank," corpulent and conventional in her ideas and priorities. The mistresses, Margaret and Warda, attract even less critical attention. Likewise, the couple's daughters, the toddler Jamila and fourteen-year-old Buthayna, are effaced compared to ʿUmar's high-profile boon companions. Yet female characters, especially Zaynab and Buthayna, convey the text's bid to redeem not just ʿUmar but the liberal project as a whole.[45]

Seigneurie acknowledges the 'palimpsestic subtext' of the novel in which the women characters, especially Omar's daughter Buthayna, provide an alternate reading whereby Buthayna's faith in contrast to Omar's lack of faith provides an opportunity for a productive consideration of existentialism rather than an escape to nihilism. In this sense, Seigneurie moves away from simplistic consideration of the symbolic values tied to women characters

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[44] Nawal Al-Saʿdāwī, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*, trans. Sherif Hetata, 2nd ed. (London: Zed Books, 2015), 333–340; Nawāl Al-Saʿdāwī, *Al-wajh al-ʿārī li-l-marʾā al-ʿarabiyya* (Windsor: Hindāwī, 2017), 99–107.

[45] Ken Seigneurie, 'Modern Nihilism and Naguib Mahfouz's Faith in Liberalism', *Middle Eastern Literatures* 24, no. 3 (2 September 2021), 178.

as done previously by El-Sheikh or Rasheed el-Enany's readings of Mahfouz's work in *Naguib Mahfouz: the Pursuit of Meaning* (1993).[46]

With the increased visibility of Arab women's writings as a result of a wave of translation, western scholarship on their work became a point of interest, especially amongst feminist scholars in the field of Arabic literature. Fedwa Malti-Douglas' study *Woman's Body, Woman's Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing* (1992) presents a historically contextualised criticism of Arab and Islamic women's representation and literary production, revealing "a dialectic … between mental structures involving women and sexuality in the modern age and their antecedents in the classical period".[47] She also claims that thecreative reaction by Arab women writers is through the use of their bodies and embracing their sexuality where they are then able to move beyond it. Malti-Douglas has also engaged directly with the work of Nawal El Saadawi in *Men, Women, and God(s): Nawal El Saadawi and Arab Feminist Poetics* (1995). This study looks at common tropes and features in the work of El Saadawi, which has greatly influenced the manner in which her works have been approached in this dissertation, in both the close reading and the presentation of the findings. Malti-Douglas argues that El Saadawi's work has contributed to the creation of a feminist poetics for Arab women, based on the subversions of traditional patriarchal discourses on women, such as playing with the power politics of the gaze as well as the rejection of the norms placed on the female body that are enforced since childhood.[48]

In her doctoral dissertation 'Angry Words Softly Spoken' (2003), Al Sharekh employs Showalter's historical division of the development of feminist literary consciousness outlined in *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) to her comparative study of Arab and English women writers. The 'Feminine' stage represented women's imitations of male literary production, which included the reproduction of patriarchal tropes and imagery. She assigned this stage to Charlotte Brontë and Layla al-ʿUthman. The 'Feminist' stage represents a total rebellion against male-dominated society and literature which she represents through the works of Sarah Grand and Nawal El Saadawi. Finally, she identifies

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[46] A synopsis and brief consideration of *al-Shahhadh* in el-Enany's comprehensive work of Mahfouz's writings can be consulted in Rasheed El-Enany, "The Beggar", in *Naguib Mahfouz: The Pursuit of Meaning* (London: Routledge, 1993), 107–10.

[47] Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), 4.

[48] Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Men, Women, and God(s): Nawal El Saadawi and Arab Feminist Poetics* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1995).

the 'Female' stage, expressed in the writings of Virgina Woolf and Hanan al-Shaykh. This stage represents women's new found self-awareness, the realisation they can break free from both reproducing male literature or rebelling against it, and truly focus on representing the 'female experience' in their works.[49] It seems the inspiration for the assignment of the Arab authors to their respective stages reflects the categorisation utilised by her doctoral supervisor Sabry Hafez in his article 'Sexual Politics and Narrative Strategies in Modern Arabic Literature' (1995), who labels the 'Female' stage in women's narratives as a more 'sophisticated' type of literary production.[50] Whilst the thesis and article don't necessarily employ these categories as coming in successive stages as was done by Showalter, they still place a great emphasis on the arrival to the 'female' stage, which is based on the humanistic and hierarchical idea of representing the female experience and has been the subject of much debate in feminist circles

Even though in his article, Sabry Hafez employs an Anglo-American typology of the development of Arab women's narrative production, his criticism is clearly influenced by French feminist criticism and deconstructionism with a section of his article focused on drawing the relationship between "Gender, Language and Identity" and the patriarchal linguistic symbolism in Arabo-Islamic culture.[51] He skillfully picks apart the "divinity bestowed upon men" within the "masculine language of the Qurʾān" which has shaped Arabs and Muslims' understanding of the status of masculinity and femininity.[52] This language has been historically guarded by Islamic scholars and Arabic linguists which represent the system of power upholding patriarchal linguistic and cultural values.

Masculinist interpretations of Islam and Muslim women's literary renegotiation of this rhetoric is explored in Miriam Cooke's *Women Claim Islam* (2001). This dissertation is indebted to this work in its exploration of Nawal El Saadawi's style of Islamic feminism whereby Cooke points towards El Saadawi's novels and their exploration of misogynistic tropes against women found within Islamic culture, and detaching them from the notion of God and the Qurʾan.[53] Cooke's interpretation displays El Saadawi's critical connection of

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[49] Al Sharekh, 'Angry Words Softly Spoken', 3.

[50] Hafez, 'Sexual Politics and Narrative Strategies in Modern Arabic Literature', 34.

[51] Hafez, 'Sexual Politics and Narrative Strategies', 16-19.

[52] Hafez, 'Sexual Politics and Narrative Strategies', 17.

[53] Miriam Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism Through Literature* (London: Routledge, 2001), 78.

Islam with the other Abrahamic religions and the role they place in the "patriarchal neocolonial system".[54]

More recently, postcolonial criticism has been a site for engagement within the field of Arabic literary studies, especially with regards to Arab women's writing and engaging with women's issues. In his insightful work of research, *The Postcolonial Arabic Novel: Debating Ambivalence* (2003), Muhsin Jassim al-Musawi both integrates Arab women's literatures within the general text and discussion of postcolonial issues, and dedicates an entire chapter to women's issues specifically. In doing so, al-Musawi recognises the fact that women's issues are a significant contribution to the matters within postcolonial Arabic literature whilst also creating the space to highlight and promote Arab women's writings and the issues that pertain to them. The specific sites of discussion identified in al-Musawi's text include the female body, the issue of veiling, the connection between identity and nation, expressions of desire, divorce, women's ancestries, masculinist discourses around women, and the reclamation of those discourses.[55]

Valassopoulos' choice to engage with postcolonial theory is based on the field's "commitment to to interdisciplinarity and its refusal to compartmentalise cultural production based on ideas of low and high culture", which she views as conducive to the study of Arab women's writing.[56] Valassopoulos' work *Contemporary Arab Women Writers: Cultural Expression in Context* (2007) was highly conducive to the writing of this dissertation in its regard for theoretical interdisciplinarity—especially due to the close attention given to feminist and gender theory—as well as new insight into the early fictional writings of El Saadawi, in which *Imraʾtani fi imraʾa* is considered. Whilst carrying out a survey and analysis of Arab women's writings, Valassopoulos draws out conclusions with thought-provoking implications regarding the contribution of women to Arabic literature as a whole. One of these observations is on the topic of women's agency within modern Arabic narratives:

> whilst 'compelling and sympathetic female characters' have been created by Arab male authors, women's *agency* becomes a more significant theme for

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[54] Cooke, *Women Claim Islam*, 80.

[55] Muhsin Jassim Al-Musawi, *The Postcolonial Arabic Novel: Debating Ambivalence* (Leiden, The Netherlands: BRILL, 2003), 205–54.

[56] Anastasia Valassopoulos, *Contemporary Arab Women Writers: Cultural Expression in Context* (London: Routledge, 2014), 25–6.

contemporary women writers, as does the 'process of breaking down stereotypical ways of thinking about women's behavior and belief'[57]

This statement is important when considering the construction of women in narrative through a comparative approach, and one to be revisited within the concluding remarks from the analysis of the current study.

This section is not a comprehensive review of all the Arabic literary studies carried out engaging with gender theories and postcolonial theories, that is a task which is beyond the remit of this study. However, the research and writings discussed above have guided and informed the methodological approach of this dissertation, adopting certain techniques, improving on them or completely straying clear.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the methodological approach of this dissertation which involves a socio-historical survey of the Arabic literary tradition carried out taking gender as a category of critical analysis alongside a close-reading of the texts *Imraʾtani fi imraʾa* by Nawal El Saadawi and *al-Shahhadh* by Naguib Mahfouz. This chapter also reviews various theoretical approaches in feminist criticism in order to decipher the best theoretical techniques for purposes of exploring the research questions posed in this dissertation's introduction. Through the adoption of poststructuralist and postcolonial lenses, the review concluded with a close look at the works produced in the field of Arabic literary studies that employ the same or similar approaches. These studies are critically considered for their strengths and weaknesses with regards to the way they may be utilised and reproduced for this current research.

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[57] Valassopoulos, *Contemporary Arab Women Writers*, 114 original emphases.

3. Gender Consciousness in the Arab Pre-Colonial Literary Imaginary

3.1 Introduction

Literature may be described as a site for the exploration and discussion of pertinent ideas existing within a given cultural sphere. This chapter looks towards the past, drawing upon key texts in the sacred and profane corpus of Arabic literature in order to establish the historical basis of Arabic gender discourse, specifically pertaining to the 'woman' (*al-marʾa*). Poetry was viewed as the highest art form in the Arab cultural zeitgeist. Poets were deemed to be pillars of cultural and linguistic mastery. This tradition has its origin in the pre-Islamic period, *al-Jāhiliyya* in Arabic, and featured both men and women orators, composing masterful odes about tribal politics, lost love, journeys through the desert amongst so many others. Whilst narrative forms existed and even thrived during the medieval period, and this chapter will involve examples of certain popular narrative forms, it was the poetic ode that represented the pinnacle of artistic mastery.

A secondary intention of this chapter is to demonstrate the ways in which each literary period builds on its predecessors, taking certain influences and leaving other things behind. This idea directly extends into the realm of literary discourse surrounding women and characteristics of femininity in the Arabic tradition, and how they have come, and gone, and come back again; a tradition that remains constantly in dialogue with itself across time.

3.2 Sexual Difference in Pre-Islamic Arabic Literature

The first known records of Arabic literary writing constituted the poetic productions known as the *qaṣīda* (the ode) and the *qiṭʿa* (the short piece), and these were a prominent feature of the cultural landscape during the *Jāhiliyya*. These poems remain part of the Arab consciousness as progenitors of the long, sophisticated literary tradition to follow. Puerta Vílchez's study on the aesthetic values of classical Arabic writing emphasises the sensual and intuitive nature of the oral poetic tradition of pre-Islamic period. He states how "the pre-Islamic poet takes man, rather than the divinity, as the measure of all things", continuing to explain how most of these images, being tied to the material world, are

heavily centred around descriptions of nature and the beauty of the ideal female form.[1] The depiction of the 'woman' and 'feminine beauty' in pre-Islamic poetry gave birth to the recurrent imagery and metaphors of the forthcoming literary trends in Arabic literature. These images were also closely linked to the strict code of conduct present in pre-Islamic Arabian society which included *ghayra* (jealousy) and *najda* (assistance for the weak, which included women).[2]

These poetic values and imagery are exemplified in the following excerpt from the mostly undisputed *faḥl* (stallion) Imru' al-Qays and his infamous *muʿallaqa* (suspended ode), which is viewed as a revered source for the extraction of pre-Islamic imagery:[3]

<div dir="rtl">

هَصَرْتُ بِفَوْدَي رَأْسِهَا فَتَمَايَلَتْ   عَلَيَّ هَضِيمَ الكَشْح رَيَّا المُخَلْخَلِ

مُهَفْهَفَةٌ بَيْضَاءُ غَيْرُ مُفَاضَـةٍ   تَرَائِبُهَا مَصْقُولَةٌ كَالسَّجَنْجَـلِ

كَبِكْرِ المُقَـانَاةِ البَيَاضَ بِصُفْـرَةٍ   غَذَاهَا نَمِيْرُ المَاءِ غَيْرُ المُحَلَّـلِ

تَـصُدُّ وَتُبْدِي عَنْ أَسِيْلٍ وَتَتَّقِـي   بِـنَاظِرَةٍ مِنْ وَحْشِ وَجْرَةَ مُطْفِلِ

وجِيدٍ كَجِيْدِ الرِّئْمِ لَيْسَ بِفَاحِشٍ   إِذَا هِيَ نَصَّتْـهُ وَلاَ بِمُعَطَّـلِ

وفَـرْعٍ يَزِيْنُ المَتْنَ أَسْوَدَ فَاحِـمٍ   أَثِيْثٍ كَقِنْوِ النَّخْلَةِ المُتَعَثْكِـلِ

غَدَائِرُهُ مُسْتَشْزِرَاتٌ إِلَى العُـلاَ   تَضِلُّ العِقَاصُ فِي مُثَنَّى وَمُرْسَـلِ

وكَشْح لَطِيفٍ كَالجَدِيْلِ مُخَصَّـرٍ   وسَاقٍ كَأَنْبُوبِ السَّقِيِّ المُذَلَّـلِ

وتَعْطُـو بِرَخْصٍ غَيْرَ شَثْنٍ كَأَنَّـهُ   أَسَارِيْعُ ظَلْبِي أَوْ مَسَاوِيْكُ إِسْحِـلِ

تُضِيءُ الظَّلامَ بِالعِشَاءِ كَأَنَّهَـا   مَنَـارَةُ مُمْسَى رَاهِبٍ مُتَبَتِّـلِ

</div>

I drew her temples toward me, and she leaned over me
With a slender waist, but full where her anklets ring.

Her skin white, her waist thin, not full

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[1] José Miguel Puerta Vílchez, *Aesthetics in Arabic Thought: From Pre-Islamic Arabia through al-Andalus*, trans. Consuelo López-Morillas, Handbook of Oriental Studies Section 1, The Near and Middle East, volume 120 (Leiden Boston: Brill, 2017), 35.

[2] A.F.L Beetson et al., eds., *Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period*, The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 27.

[3] Marlé Hammond, *Beyond Elegy: Classical Arabic Women's Poetry in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), Hammond's chapter 'On Stallions, Viragos, and Tears' closely investigates the contested hyper-masculine idea of the poetic *fuḥūl* as well as this term's complicated relation with women poets.

Her collarbone shone like a polished mirror.

Like the first inviolate bloom, white mixed with yellow
Nurtured on water, limpid, unmuddied.

Now hiding, now baring a cheek full and smooth,
She guards herself with the glance of a wild doe at Wajrah with fawn.

Her neck, like the neck of a white antelope,
Is not overly long when she raises it, nor lacking in ornament.

A jet-black head of hair adorns her back,
 Full and thick like dates upon a cluster-laden palm.

Some locks are secured on top, while others
Stray between the braided and the loose.

Her waist is as fine as a twisted bowstring, trim;
Her calf like a papyrus reed, well-watered, tender.

She takes with fingers smooth, uncalloused, as if they were
The soft dry worms of Zaby Dune or the tender twigs of *ishil* trees.

At nightfall she lights up the dark
Like the lamp in the night-cell of a hermit monk.[4]

These verses contain various sensory and sensual images of the innamorata, providing what Puerta Vílchez calls "one of the clearest models of the pre-Islamic aesthetic vision".[5] Her body is lean (*ghayru mufāḍatin*), yet full in certain desirable areas such as the ankles (*rayyā l-mukhalkhali*). Her complexion is pale (*bayḍāʾ*) to the point where she is luminous, likened to a lamp (*manāratu*), and radiant "*ka-l-sajanjali*" (like a mirror). According to Puerta Vílchez, when ascribing the image of radiance and luminosity to a woman it emphasises her features of beauty and fertility.[6] Her pale complexion is then contrasted with her thick, black hair (*farʿin … al-matna aswadu fāḥimin*) which falls on her back. The look she gives him (*nāẓiratin*) reminds him of that of wild game (*waḥshi*) translated here as a 'doe', trying to protect its offspring with its wide-eyed gaze.[7] She is vulnerable at this moment, trying to protect her 'fawn' which in the case of this poem, alludes to her physical body. The poetic connection of women to the doe and gazelle is of great importance as it remains

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[4] Original Arabic excerpt and English translation of Imruʾ al-Qays' *muʿallaqa* taken from Kevin Blankship et al., *Al-Muʿallaqāt li-jīl al-alfiyyah (The Muʿallaqāt for Millenials)* (Saudi Arabia: King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture (Ithra), 2020), 60-65.

[5] Puerta Vílchez, *Aesthetics in Arabic Thought,* 37.

[6] Puerta Vílchez, *Aesthetics in Arabic Thought*, 39.

[7] Translation taken from Hans Wehr w–ḥ–sh

popular in Arabic literature to this day. Ironically, in Mahfouz's novel, we see the image of the slender gazelle being ascribed to our protagonist, Omar, when his friend Mustapha, congratulates Omar's weight loss by saying, "ʾarāk fī rashāqa al-ghazāl, bravo..".[8] An impudent subversion on Mahfouz's end, with an image usually ascribed to women. With examples seen in the *muʿallaqāt* such as the one of Imruʾ al-Qays, we can roughly deduce the simile's point of origination.

The excerpt above clearly shows the liberal nature in which women were described. Male poets boasted of their sexual escapades with various women, which was a frequent source of inspiration for their compositions. Women's poetry at the time, on the other hand, was strictly limited in theme and form, as seen in the recorded poems available. This theme mostly deals with elegy (*rithāʾ*) and most poetic productions were in the short *qiṭʿa* form. This is best exemplified by Tumāḍir bint ʿAmr ibn al-Sharīd, culturally known as al-Khansaʾ, and her masterful eulogy dedicated to her brother Sakhr.

<div dir="rtl">

يذكّرني طلوعُ الشمس صخراً   وأذكره لكلَّ غروبِ شمْسِ

ولولا كثرة الباكـين حولــي   على إخوانهم لَقَتَلْتُ نفسي

</div>

> The rising and setting of the sun
> keep turning on my memory of Sakhr's death.
>
> And only the host of mourners crying
> for their brothers saves me from myself.[9]

Lamentation (*niyāḥa*) was a woman-oriented activity in pre-Islamic tribes, with these women performing all sorts of ritualistic actions, including the singing or recitation of their poetry. The excerpt refers to "*al-bākiyyin*" (mourners/crying people), mourning their fallen brothers. Hammond mentions how *niyāḥa* and its practices were condemned by the Prophet Muhammad, stating that "it is possible that this disapproving stance indirectly contributed to a decline in women's poetic output after the coming of Islam."[10] Yet, this condemnation did not wipe out the practice of *niyāḥa*. Throughout the rest of the elegiac poem, al-Khansaʾ makes various references her tearful eyes, keeping within the conventions of the genre.

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[8] Najīb Maḥfūẓ, *Al-Shaḥḥadh* (Egypt: Dār al-Shurūq, 1975).

[9] Arabic and English translation from Abdullah Udhari, ed., *Classical Poems by Arab Women* (London: Saqi Books, 1999), 60.

[10] Hammond, *Beyond Elegy*, 4.

Interestingly, Imruʾ al-Qays's *muʿallaqa* begins with the phrase " I stop crying" as if to distance himself from the feminine act.

Hammond's work identifies the existence of a "poetic division of labour", where women poets were remembered for the composition of poems for the fallen men in their lives and invoking ritualistic blood vengeance towards enemy tribes.[11] This led to the view of women poets as only capable of producing "mono-thematic" poetry, a term which Hammond ascribes to critics such as Ahmad al-Hufi.[12] Most male critics have been quick to describe women's natural propensity for *rithāʾ* due to being emotional beings and 'weepy'.[13] This overlooks any other forms of expression that may have occurred in the surviving pre-Islamic poetic excerpts such as invective poetry (*hijāʾ*) or poetry of praise (*fakhr*). In fact, Al-Hufi compares men's and women's pre-Islamic *rithāʾ*, pointing out the way women elegists have portrayed their bodies as weak due to their sadness, as opposed to men who remain strong and endure their pain (*tajallud*).[14] Hammond does not believe in the notion of women's confinement to *rithāʾ*, instead she sees it as the vehicle for pre-Islamic women poets (as well as women poets in later periods) to take established tropes and re-present them from a feminine point of view, merging the masculine *qaṣīda* structure and feminine aesthetic; a notion in line with the French feminist ideal of *écriture féminine*. These tropes were not just from the elegiac form (*marthiya*), but also other genres, which negates Al-Hufi's overt generalisation of their poetry.[15]

3.3 The Arrival of Islam (622–750 CE)

In his lecture *Poetics and the Influence of the Qurʾān*, Adonis makes a concluding statement regarding new aesthetic principles which came to affect the production and criticism of Arabic poetry following the revelation of the Qurʾan:

> A new conception of what constituted beauty in the poetic text was evolved. The clarity of the pre-Islamic oral tradition was no longer a standard of beauty capable of arousing passion. On the contrary, al-Jurjānī and others came to see it as the antithesis of what was poetical. True poetic beauty was to be found in ambiguous, difficult texts which permitted a variety of interpretations and offered a multiplicity

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[11] Hammond, *Beyond Elegy*, 3.

[12] Hammond, *Beyond Elegy,* 6.

[13] Hammond, *Beyond Elegy,* 48.

[14] Al-Hufi's comparison has been conveniently summarised in Hammond, *Beyond Elegy,* 179, as part of the monograph's appendices.

[15] Hammond, *Beyond Elegy,* 50; 58.

of meanings, texts which 'the spirit can approach in all manner of ways', as al-Rummānī expresses it.[16]

How does this statement relate to the portrayal of women after the arrival of Islam? It may represent the way aesthetics and imagery slowly but surely shifted from one based in the material and sensual world of the pre-Islamic period, to one of a spiritual quality, dominated by metaphors and statements clouded by ambiguity. This was bound to, and did, affect the way women were portrayed and perceived. The Qurʾan and prophetic sayings and traditions (*hadīth*), may therefore be read as works of literature in which one may extract images and mentions of women, and how this influenced the generation of literary works to come.[17]

Discussions on Islam's impact on the lives of women in Arabia have been read and interpreted as ideologically motivated. Many of the studies circulating this subject have been described by Leila Ahmed as "a literature of assertion rather than evidence."[18] On one hand there are Muslim apologists who push forward the idea that the arrival of Islam ameliorated women's conditions from the way they were in pre-Islamic Arabia. This is mainly attributed to the condemnation and elimination of female infanticide, the limitation of unhindered polygamous practices, and the introduction of the right to property inheritance for women. On the other end of the spectrum are certain Orientalists who claim that pre-Islamic society was a matriarchy, with matrilineal heritage given far more importance than patrilineal.[19]

With the insufficient concrete evidence on the pre-Islamic age, it is difficult to come to such determined conclusions, yet there is agreement that an immense shift was felt with regards to sexual and marital relations in the newly formed Muslim society. Pre-Islamic sexuality was freely expressed, with many children born outside of a strict patrilineal lineage. In her work *Beyond the Veil*, Fatima Mernissi takes great care in explaining the extent into which "Islam integrated the sexual instinct in the social order"[20], regulating it

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[16] Adunis, 'Poetics and the Influence of the Qurʾān', in *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, trans. Catherine Cobham (Saqi Books, 1990), 52.

[17] Fatima Mernissi's publication *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (1991) focuses on the way *hadīth*—apart from Qurʾanic scripture—came to be an imperative source of reference in the creation of Islamic law and custom, especially in the way it pertained to Sunni Muslim women's lives, rights, and responsibilities.

[18] Leila Ahmed, 'Women and the Advent of Islam', *Signs* 11, no. 4 (Summer 1986): 665–91.

[19] For more information on this theory see, W. Montgomery Watt, *Mohamad at Medina* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956)

[20] Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Muslim Society* (London: Saqi Books, 2011), 30.

to the sphere of marriage and concubinage. She takes verses from the Qurʾan, as well as mediaeval works of Qurʾanic interpretation, to draw out the implicit belief that women's sexuality has an immense power over men that can throw them into chaos; *al-fitna*. The word *fitna* is interesting to consider when connoted to the sexed female body, with meanings ranging from 'charm' and 'intrigue' to 'temptation' and 'discord'. Mernissi summarises the role of sexual relations between men and women in Muslim society as such: "Men have the right to sexual satisfaction from their wives so that they will be less vulnerable to the attraction of other women. And women must be sexually satisfied so that they do not try to tempt other men to fornication".[21] *Sūrat Yūsuf* (The Prophet Joseph) brings the idea of women's uncontrollable sexuality into focus. In the sūra, we read the story of the wife of al-Aziz, the Egyptian Chief Minister who bought Joseph, and how she trapped Joseph in a room in an attempt to seduce him. The story as told by the Qurʾan (12:24–28) goes:

وَلَقَدْ هَمَّتْ بِهِ وَهَمَّ بِهَا لَوْلَا أَن رَّءَابُرْهَانَ رَبِّهِ كَذَٰلِكَ لِنَصْرِفَ عَنْهُ ٱلسُّوءَ وَٱلْفَحْشَاءَ إِنَّهُ مِنْ عِبَادِنَا ٱلْمُخْلَصِينَ ٢٤

وَٱسْتَبَقَا ٱلْبَابَ وَقَدَّتْ قَمِيصَهُ مِن دُبُرٍ وَأَلْفَيَا سَيِّدَهَا لَدَا ٱلْبَابِ قَالَتْ مَا جَزَآءُ مَنْ أَرَادَ بِأَهْلِكَ سُوءًا إِلَّآ أَن يُسْجَنَ أَوْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ٢٥

قَالَ هِيَ رَٰوَدَتْنِى عَن نَّفْسِى وَشَهِدَ شَاهِدٌ مِّنْ أَهْلِهَآ إِن كَانَ قَمِيصُهُ قُدَّ مِن قُبُلٍ فَصَدَقَتْ وَهُوَ مِنَ ٱلْكَٰذِبِينَ ٢٦

وَإِن كَانَ قَمِيصُهُ قُدَّ مِن دُبُرٍ فَكَذَبَتْ وَهُوَ مِنَ ٱلصَّٰدِقِينَ ٢٧

فَلَمَّا رَءَا قَمِيصَهُ قُدَّ مِن دُبُرٍ قَالَ إِنَّهُ مِن كَيْدِكُنَّ إِنَّ كَيْدَكُنَّ عَظِيمٌ ٢٨

> She advanced towards him, and he would have done likewise, had he not seen a sign from his Lord. This is how We kept evil and indecency away from him, for he was truly one of Our chosen servants.
>
> They raced for the door and she tore his shirt from the back, only to find her husband at the door. She cried, "What is the penalty for someone who tried to violate your wife, except imprisonment or a painful punishment?"
>
> Joseph responded, "It was she who tried to seduce me." And a witness from her own family testified: "If his shirt is torn from the front, then she has told the truth and he is a liar

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[21] Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil,* 52.

But if it is torn from the back, then she has lied and he is truthful"

So when her husband saw that Joseph's shirt was torn from the back, he said to her, "This must be an example of the cunning of you women! Indeed, your cunning is so shrewd!

<div align="right">(quran.com/12)</div>

Whilst at first glance this may be read as an episode about a specific woman's wrongdoings, the final verse ascribes the sin carried out by al-Aziz's wife to all women. The cunning (*kayd*) of one woman is a testament to the cunning of all women (*kaydikunna*). Malti-Douglas explains that the subtext throughout the story is about "women's absence of self-control in the face of physical beauty".[22]

It was therefore seen as imperative for early Islamic society that women's chaos-inducing sexuality be controlled in order to establish a 'harmonious' patrilineal society. This has reflected culturally, prevailing to the modern period, where women are viewed as easily corrupted by their senses, and therefore it is up to the male community to protect them at all costs. In El Saadawi's novel, Bahiah's 'morals' (*al-ʾakhlāq*) become an urgent topic of debate following her arrest at the protest. The men of the family convene in this claustrophobic scene:

All the men of the family met. They sat round the table devouring stuffed chicken. After lunch they sat smoking in the hall, picking their teeth with toothpicks; their bellies swelled over their thighs like pregnant women and their fat flabby bottoms filled the big bamboo chairs. Each would belch audibly, clear his throat and say something in a coarse deep voice that was not his own. 'In my opinion, we should take her out of school. Universities corrupt girls' morals.'	اجتمع رجال العائلة الكبيرة، وجلسوا حول المائدة يلتهمون الفراخ المحشية، وبعد الغداء جلسوا في الصالة يدخنون، ويسلكون أسنانهم من اللحم بأعواد الخلة وقد ارتفع بطن الواحد منهم فوق فخذَية كالمرأة الحامل، وملأت أليتاه السمينتان المترهلتان المقعد الأسيوطي الكبير. ويتجشأ الواحد منهم بصوت عالٍ، ثم يتنحنح ويقول بصوت خشن رزين (ليس هو صوته الحقيقة): أنا رأيي أن نخرجها من الجامعة، الجامعة مفسدة لأخلاق البنات.
Another replied, 'I think we should marry her off as soon as possible: marriage is the strongest protection for girls' morals.'	ويرد الآخر: أنا رأيي أن نزوّجها بأسرع ما يمكن، فالزواج هو الحصن المنيع لأخلاق البنت.
A third said, 'it's my opinion	ورد الآخر: أنا رأيي أن نفعل

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[22] Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), 50.

that we should do both: take her out
of medical school and marry her off.
We already have a groom.'[23]

الاثنين معًا, بعبارة أخرى نخرجها
ونزوجها, والعريس موجود.[24]

Bahiah's morality, including her sexuality, are to be controlled through marriage and departure from education. In her work *Female Sexuality in the Early Medieval Islamic World* (2020) Pernilla Myrne traces the origins of this practice within early Islamic societies, exploring the way the Qurʾan and Prophetic traditions helped Islamic scholars in the first centuries of Islam obtain this control. The tradition and regulations around marriage, whilst amended by Islamic law, retained an aspect of what is identified as the pre-Islamic tradition of "proprietary sexual ethics"[25] where women's sexuality is commodified through the marriage contract (*nikāḥ*), but regulated to the point where all pre-Islamic forms of *nikāḥ* were abolished, for example polyandry.[26] Myrne explains, "In the Qurʾan, bridewealth is instead understood as a compensation for the rights of having sexual intercourse and this compensation should be paid to the woman herself … A woman's sexual capacity is her own property".[27] However, even with the introduction of these God-given rights for women with regards to the ownership of their sexuality, the proprietary sexual ethics of the pre-Islamic period didn't become a thing of the past. Myrne explains that this is seen in the way marriages were carried out, as well as the continuation of slave concubinage: "There was an ambiguity in the emerging Islamic law in regard to free women, as their sexual availability was seen as a commodity at the same time they were regarded as individual moral subjects".[28] Women still couldn't enter a marriage contract by themselves, as they needed the permission of their father or the authoritative male relative involved. In the same manner, women were still married off against their will if it was the desire of the male relative for it to be done, as we read above in the case of El Saadawi's heroine Bahiah.

Regardless of the new religious texts and doctrine especially with regards to poetry and poetic function in Islam, during the early Islamic period and the Umayyad Dynasty,

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[23] Nawal Al-Saʿdāwī, *Two Women in One*, trans. Osman Nusairi (London: Saqi Books, 2020), 110.

[24] Nawāl Al-Saʿdāwī, *Imraʾtāni fī Imraʾa* (Windsor: Hindāwī, 2020), 70–1.

[25] Pernilla Myrne, *Female Sexuality in the Early Medieval Islamic World*, The Early Medieval Islamic World (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), 70.

[26] Ahmed, 'Women and the Advent of Islam', 670.

[27] Myrne, *Female Sexuality,* 69.

[28] Myrne, *Female Sexuality*, 69.

poetic style, form, and imagery did not differ that much from that of the pre-Islamic period. Beetson et al. describe the development as such:

> Poetry acquired a new direction, becoming linked with the state and Islam. It was not destined, however, to stick to expounding Islamic ideals during the Umayyad period. Poets were to become propagandists of a political regime and eulogy, mostly written for reward, was to become a cult, the most important theme in Arabic poetry. … To most of those poets Islam was a social and political framework, not a deep spiritual experience.[29]

Poetry revolving around illicit escapades with women continued, regardless of Islam's new regulations on relations between the sexes. Love poetry and erotic poetry increased in popularity in Hijaz in the face of political instability. It was love that felt more real than any of the new, abstract political ideas and systems that came and went.[30] Political instability and the rapidly changing environment, whilst challenging, proved to be a site for Arab women, and non-Arab women in newly conquered lands, to renegotiate their social position in light of the new religion. In this regard Hammond points to Laylā al-Akhyaliyya, a famous Umayyad elegist known for her mournful but erotic elegies (*marāthī*) composed for her dead lover, Tawba.[31] Scenes of her lover's death are intermixed with her own amorous and erotic gaze. However, all glory is given to her lover, with her gaze there to capture his final moments which she immortalises in her poem. The eloquence by which she does this shows us that women were involved in man's world, and she has been given the tools and voice to tell his history. Unfortunately, this didn't extend much to documenting the lives of women. This 'documentation', whilst scant, comes up later on in the *adab* compilations of the Classical period and was an endeavour mainly carried out by men.

3.4 *Adab* and Women's Poetry of the Classical Period (750–1258 CE)

Literary works of the classical period emerged against the backdrop of their literary predecessors as well as the influence of now-established Islamic-caliphal society. Arabic literature also expanded into the field of scholarship and anthology (*adab*), with a broad

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[29] A.F.L Beetson et al., eds., *Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period*, The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 393–4.

[30] Beetson et al., eds., *Arabic Literature*, 420.

[31] Marlé Hammond, *Beyond Elegy: Classical Arabic Women's Poetry in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 78–84.

"scriptorial establishment", as Malti-Douglas describes it, largely dominated by males.[32] This meant that both religious and secular discourses as propagated by their literary works were embellished by a scribe's personal beliefs spanning an array of topics, and this most certainly involved their view of women and their role in society. Malti-Douglas's study on gender discourse in Arabic literature looks at the rise in popularity of *adab* anecdotal histories written in the classical period. In *adab* works, women's actions and poetic production were always relegated to their sex and defined by it, whilst anecdotes around men are categorised by any quality, both physical and characteristically, never by their sex. In fact, sections on women have also included men with distinct physical qualities, abnormalities, or disabilities, linking women to the realm of physicality and marginality.[33]

Certain *adab* works written during the Abbasid period, focused specifically on the words and ways of women, such as Abū al-Faḍl Aḥmad ibn Abī Ṭahir Ṭayfūr's *Balāghāt al-nisāʾ (Instances of the Eloquence of Women)*. Nancy Roberts scopes in on this work, looking at three specific passages and asking questions "as to what purpose the male 'scriptor' or 'redactor' had in mind when recording such accounts."[34] She identifies a distinct commonality existing within the three anecdotes; these are anecdotes showing the assertiveness of these three women and their ability with words.[35] There also seems to be an underlying understanding that the assertiveness of these women did not align with accepted socio-religious conduct for women at the time since they directly challenge an authoritative male figure – for example the Hashemite ʿArwā bint al-Ḥārith ibn ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib confronting the Umayyad Caliph Muʿāwiyah ibn Abī Sufyan for his usurpation of the caliphate. Maybe their position as "mere women" allowed them to speak their minds in a way that men would never be able to, and so the compiler allowed these women to indirectly speak on his behalf.[36] This adds another dimension to the role, voice, and representation of women at the time; not always heard, but certainly not ignored.

Malti-Douglas focuses on the *adab* compilation *Kitāb al-'unwan fī makāyid al-niswān* by Ibn al-Batanūnī, which as opposed to Ibn Ṭayfūr's work on women's eloquence, invokes a more extremist branch of male judgement and fear of women. This work of prose was written with the tone of creating a bond of homosocial male solidarity against the *kayd*

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[32] Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word*, 53.

[33] Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word*, 30.

[34] Nancy N. Roberts, 'Voice and Gender in Classical Arabic Adab: Three Passages from Aḥmad Ṭayfūr's "Instances of The Eloquence Of Women"', *Al-'Arabiyya* 25 (1992), 52.

[35] Roberts, 'Voice and Gender', 54.

[36] Roberts, Voice and Gender', 56.

of women. The previously quoted story of the prophet Joseph and al-Aziz's wife is the backdrop to which he lays out his arguments with regard to women's treachery. In fact Surat Yūsuf, verse 28 reappears consistently throughout the text to remind the reader of *kaydikunna.* He also repeatedly invokes the protection of God from women and this guile of theirs.[37]

Whilst male scriptors were undoubtedly at the forefront of written production, Hammond pushes back against Malti-Douglas' idea of the exclusive male scriptoral establishment and that the world of writing and prose production was "closed" to women[38]. Slave girls and women (*jawārī*) in court culture were commonly educated in writing and poetic production for purposes of entertainment, and so the realm of writing was open to them. Hammond elaborates by recounting how *jawārī* "are described as having self-promoting or flirtatious verses written somewhere on their persons, apparently in hope of provoking a response from a male admirer".[39] These women were actively writing and decorating themselves and their surroundings with their poetry. It is interesting to note that most of the writing happened on their person, so they are effectively speaking through their bodies. This bodily form of expression appears constantly in mediaeval women's poetry, and this was especially evocative due to the ability of these women to take motifs employed by male poets and subvert them in their own productions. Take this excerpt from a poem composed by Cordoban poet Ḥafṣa bint al-Ḥājj ar-Rakūniyya to her lover, the poet Abū Jaʿfar, asking for a meeting together:

<div dir="rtl">

أزوركَ أم تـزور فـإنّ قلبي   إلى مـا تـشتهي أبداً يميلُ

فَـثَغري مورد عذب زلال   وَفـرع ذُوابتي ظلٌّ ظليلُ

وَقـد أمّـلت أن تظمى وتضحي   إذا وافى إليك بيَ المـقيلُ

فَـعجّل بـالجوابِ فما جميل   أناتُك عَن بثينة يا جميلُ[40]

</div>

Shall I visit you or shall you visit me?
For my heart always bows to what you long for;

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[37] Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word*, 54–56.

[38] Hammond, *Beyond Elegy,* 15–17.

[39] Hammond, *Beyond Elegy*, 17.

[40] Abdullah Udhari, ed., *Classical Poems by Arab Women* (London: Saqi Books, 1999), 227.

My mouth is a source of clear sweet water,
and the hair of my head is a leafy shade.

I hoped you were thirsty and struck by the sun,
when the noon hour would bring me to you;

Give me answer quickly: it is not nice o Jamīl,
that you keep Buthayna waiting.[41]

In the second and third verses, Ḥafṣa makes use of images where she compares her body to a garden ready to welcome her lover. This was a poetic motif commonly employed by men at the time to describe women, however with the last verse of the poem she subverts the basis of the analogy. Instead of placing herself in the passive role of waiting for her lover to visit (her garden/body), she expresses agency. Poetic excerpts, recorded in *adab* compilatory works, by Arab (and non-Arab Muslim) women from this period tell us that even though their levels of expression had been hindered in the well-established Islamic society, they were still determined to make their voices heard. Their bodies were the medium, and the consequent subversion of motifs mystified their voices and message.

3.5 Echoes of Shahrazad: Women, Orality and Narration

Popular literary forms, outside of the elite compositions of the poetic odes and scholarly prose, were prevalent and running parallel to their documented, formal counterparts. Popular literature was more widely available to the general public, with simple or even colloquial language. This was mainly transmitted orally, and therefore it wasn't considered as part of the literary canon, with written literature considered to be of higher skill and value.

The mediaeval popular frame story known as *Alf layla wa-layla* (*The Thousand and One Nights* or *The Arabian Nights*) is the best surviving example of this form, mainly as it has been penned down by various scriptors in varying forms. What remains constant, to a certain extent, is the frame story which has the various stories of the *Nights* embedded within it. What also remains constant is that the main narrator of these countless and changing stories remains the heroine of the frame, Shahrazad. It is through her words (and the desire they create) that she manages to save herself from the misogynistic and deadly

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[41] Translation taken from Arie Schippers, 'The Role of Woman in Medieval Andalusian Arabic Story-Telling', in *Verse and the Fair Sex: Studies in Arabic Poetry and in the Representation of Woman in Arabic Literature*, ed. Frederick de Jong (Utrecht: M. Th. Houtsma Stichting, 1993), 149.

wrath of King Shahriyar, following the trauma incurred by adultery and '*kayd*' of his wife, his brother Shahzaman's wife, and the indentured woman of a djinn they encounter. She does so by telling a new story to him every night, with the help of her sister Dunyazad who rouses her to begin telling the stories and then stops her sister right before each story's resolution. The frame generally ends with Shahrazad becoming pregnant with one or three children throughout the nights, and King Shahriyar falling in love with her honest nature and spoken eloquence, 'curing' him of his 'illness' and marrying Shahrazad, restoring peace in his Kingdom.

Al-Samman identifies a contradictory double role (*al-dūr al-muzdawij*) in Shahrazad. In an attempt to save her life and the lives of other women, Shahrazad becomes a mistress of narration (*sayyida al-sard al-qiṣaṣī*), a symbol of women's wit and eloquence and a legendary source of inspiration for Arab women writers. Yet, in spite of this role, once King Shahrayar has been 'cured' of his misogynistic madness, she is once again relegated to being just another character in the story of the king (*mujarrad shakhṣiyya min shakhṣiyyat al-kitāb*). The orality of her narration, in face of the written framestory, is also symbolically devalued once it has served its purpose within the framework. She is confined to the realm of orality:

إسناد دور الراوي العام ... يُجرّد شهرزاد من دورها الأصلي بوصفها, قاصّة الكتاب الحقيقة, ويحولها إلى مجرد زوجة وأم, بعد الحكم على مخطوطتها بأن تظل حبيسة خزانة السلطان, وكأنه محا دورها بوصفها راويةً, وسيطر عليها أدبية وجسدياً.[42]

She is not the narrator of the frame story itself, therefore she is relegated to the role of wife and mother. Nevertheless, with all the elements involved within *Alf layla wa-layla*, Shahrazad's role is undoubtedly the one that sticks out the most. Malti-Douglas interestingly points out the way that Shahrayar's words are linked to the desire she rouses in the King away from the consummation of their marriage and her subsequent murder to her unresolved narrative:

> Shahrazâd shifts the problem of desire from the area of sex, the realm of Shâhriyâr's trauma, to the superficially more distant and more malleable world of the text. Her storytelling teaches a new type of desire, a desire that continues from night to night, a desire whose interest does not fall and which can, therefore, leap the intervening days. In sexual terms, this is a replacement of an immature male pattern of

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[42] Hanadi Al-Samman, 'Anxiety of Erasure: Arab Women Writers between Shahrazad's Memory and the Nightmare of Infanticide', *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 30 (2010): 75.

excitement, satisfaction, and termination with what can be called a more classically female pattern of extended and continuous desire and pleasure.[43]

Relations between the sexes are renegotiated and retaught. Her body and her creative mind come together in order to shape the narrative, and change the course of the story from one about a King who has set his intent on murderous vengeance to one where harmony, in the kingdom and between the sexes, is restored. Shahrazad's words not only saved her life, but the lives of the women who would have taken her place had she not carried out her duty properly.

Shahrazad and her conception of women's narrative control echo throughout the literary productions of the modern period. In Arab women's novels (and even in men's) negotiation between the sexes is brought up both literally through the explicit characterisation of Shahrazad, and figuratively in the actions of characters within the novel or the narrator.[44] This style of writing and narration has echoes in El Saadawi's work. Her novel *Suqūt al-imām* (The Fall of the Imam, 1987) draws on the frame story of the Nights as well as characters of Shahrazad and Shahriyar quite potently, in what has been called "a recasting of the patriarchal system that pervades the Islamic and Judeo-Christian religious traditions".[45]

More subtly in *Imraʾtani fi imraʾa*, Bahiah's changing world and psyche is negotiated within the text. Bahiah also experiences a level of duality like Shahrazad (as highlighted previously by Al-Samman) with exertion of free will on one hand, and conforming to social expectations on the other. Two well educated women with immense artistic capabilities—Bahiah as a visual artist and Shahrazad as a *rawiya* and *adība*—who are also reduced to their prescribed social roles with Bahiah being expected to follow what has been laid out for her by her family, and Shahrazad becoming wife and mother when her role as storyteller ends. Even so, Bahiah's narrative progression directly opposes that of Shahrazad. It is at the end of the frame story that Shahrazad's role has been redirected, whilst Bahiah emerges as an artist and agent of freewill towards the end of El Saadawi's

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[43] Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word,* 22.

[44] This phenomenon is discussed in works such as, Hanadi Al-Samman, *Anxiety of Erasure: Trauma, Authorship, and the Diaspora in Arab Women's Writings*, 1st ed., Gender, Culture, and Politics in the Middle East (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2015); Susanne Enderwitz, 'Shahrazad Is One of Us: Practical Narrative, Theoretical Discussion, and Feminist Discourse', *Marvels & Tales* 18, no. 2 (2004): 187–200; Fedwa Malti-Douglas, "Shahrazad Feminist," in *The Arabian Nights Reader,* ed. Ulrich Marzolph, 347–64 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2006).

[45] Fedwa Malti-Douglas, 'Shahrazād Feminist', 353.

narrative. This of course is a testament to the passage of time between the classical heroine and the modern one and the social developments that Arab women were subsequently able to take advantage of.

3.6 Putting Literary History into Perspective

Gender consciousness is not a new concept in Arab-Muslim society. Looking at the topic from a linguistics and translation perspective, Samia Mehrez discusses the origins and nuances of the word for gender in Arabic–*jins* (جنس)–and the way it entered the Arabic vocabulary:

> The history of the concept of gender in the Arab context is a history of cross-cultural communication and translation of knowledge. It is also a history of relations of power at a specific historical juncture, between civilizations within that exchange. In Ibn Mandhur's *Lisān al-'Arab*, one of the most commonly used classical Arabic language dictionaries, the entry for the noun jins (which currently signifies sex, kind, or species, in Arabic) states that the word is considered muwallad, i.e. not truly old Arabic, introduced later into the language. Indeed, the word jins is simply absent from the Qurʾanic text. The noun jins is derived from the Greek word genus (from which the word gender is also derived) and was brought into Arabic as is. Jins is basically a transcription rather than a translation of the Greek word. Once transcribed as jins, the noun takes on a new life that obeys the possibilities of the linguistic realm in which it now exists and becomes one of the living testaments of this early cross-cultural hybridization[46]

To ascribe gender consciousness to modern 'western ideology' does a great disservice to a recorded history of cultural exchange as well as the intellectual wealth of Arab thought. The word holds a wealth of meaning that doesn't exactly translate to the English language. Looking at the usage of the word and the discourse surrounding it is given more importance and meaning. As delineated throughout this chapter, it is true that most discourse surrounding women throughout this history is dominated largely by men:

> Arab poetry overflows with the adoration of women to the point of obsession, but for centuries, the poetry by women compared to that of men has been almost nonexistent. Only a few isolated poems by women exist—and they often speak about men.
>   Women's voices in Arab culture were considered "awara", something to hide, to guard, to "own" by men of the family or tribe. If not hidden, they may cause

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[46] Samia Mehrez, 'Translating Gender', *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 3, no. 1 (Winter 2007), 109.

shame. This has created an imbalance in the literary terrain of Arab culture, with half of the population artistically silenced.[47]

Regardless of these setbacks, women's voices echo throughout this chapter as a reminder that this limitation could never completely hinder their expression. Nevertheless, male voices still reveal how gender consciousness is not a product of western involvement in the Middle East, but a process which has been constantly discussed and renegotiated throughout the Arab world.

What changed with modernity, with regard to discussion on gender and gender roles, is the overt presence of women within the discourse. No longer were the men the dominant voices in gender-based discourse; Arab women had the ability to speak for themselves about their experiences, re-writing their obscured history on their own terms. The introduction of western feminist thought in the Arab world undoubtedly had a role to play, giving Arab women the tools and cultural capital in which to bring forward their own ideas. No longer were the men the dominant voices in gender-based discourse, Arab women had the ability to speak for themselves about their experiences, re-writing their obscured history on their own terms.

Western feminist thought was certainly adopted in the creation of Arab feminisms, this however does not mean that one should shy away from its ideas for fear of being seen as cultural or ideological colonialism. It is more productive to explore what Valassopoulos calls "the conscious selective use of Western and other feminist theories" by Arab feminists (alongside other postcolonial feminists) and the way this has helped establish "a cross cultural feminism and transnational feminism that continuously works to avoid pitfalls and misrepresentations".[48] It is true that "local and Western discourses are ever present when we speak of Arab feminism because they cannot be discursively separated", but this should not undermine the efforts of Arab women to reconcile and negotiate Western ideas into their specific cultural contexts.[49] The next chapter investigates the development of feminist thought within the colonial and postcolonial Egyptian context, where a more detailed account is given of the way western feminist thought has been negotiated and redressed for the Arab context.

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[47] Ibtisam Barakat, "Restoring Women's Voices to Mainstream Arab Literature," *Literary Hub* (blog), April 16, 2020, last accessed February 21, 2023, https://lithub.com/restoring-womens-voices-to-mainstream-arab-literature.

[48] Valassopoulos, *Contemporary Arab Women Writers*, 14.

[49] Valassopoulos, *Contemporary Arab Women Writers,* 16.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter traces the literary basis for the existence of a specific Arab-Islamic gender consciousness in the pre-modern era, beginning from pre-Islamic Arabia to the height of the classical period. However, due to the lack of separation between the ideas of sex and gender, this gender consciousness manifests through discussions on what was seen as fundamental sexual differences. To a certain extent, literature itself was viewed as gendered especially in the realm of poetry, with heroic odes being prescribed a masculine quality whilst the *marthiya* was feminine, and more suited for women poets. Deeper inspections into these claims obscures the lines between the two, but a strong belief regarding women's propensity for lament was upheld. There is also the first documentation of the emergence of long standing imagery, and the way they relate to the sexes such as emphasis on eyes, the gaze and tears.

Feminine and masculine sexualities were reordered with the arrival of Islam, with Islamic scripture regulating sexual relations into one strict marital contract. Women's sexuality was emphasised upon due to the *fitna* that it may cause, an idea which was reflected in the literary works which were to follow. Even with the newfound restriction on female sexuality, poetic productions by women following Islam continue to include an element of speaking through the body and playing around with desire. Their poetic speech whilst scant, was recorded so whilst women were not always heard, they were certainly not ignored due to the way they managed to subvert masculine imagery.

Women's eloquence was personified in the legendary figure of Shahrazad embodied within the frame story of *Alf layla wa-layla* where she takes on the figure of an adība and a masterful narrator, taking control with her narrative and preventing an untimely death at the hands of a misogynistic king. She renegotiates relations between the sexes with the masterful narrative that exhibits a level of gender consciousness. This skill is echoed within works of both women and men in the modern period, and also extends outside of the realm of the Arabic literary tradition. A connection is drawn between Shahrazad and the Sadaawian heroine of *Imraʾtani fi imraʾa*, Bahiah Shaheen, where their conflicting double roles are identified but is one which Bahiah deviates from when she manages to break away from socially prescribed gender roles. The next chapter shifts into the modern period, considering the construction of the 'Arab woman' in modern Egyptian history and literature, and the way this translates into two novels analysed.

4. The 'Modern Arab Woman': in History and in Literature

4.1 Introduction

This chapter is concerned with the questions that arise over the definition of the 'Woman' or 'women' as well as the issues regarding the representation of those signified under this term. These questions are the basis that will inform the interpretation of the representations of the women and girls constructed in the novels chosen for study. The main arguments presented for the discussion of 'Woman' are from the theoretical developments made in the works of Judith Butler, mainly *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*. The ideas present in Butler's work are complemented by writings on the idea of a 'Third World Woman' as presented in works of postcolonial feminists such as Chandra Mohanty and Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak. Their work centres around the ideas of essentialism, representation and universality. This discussion acts as a precursor to the question of what makes a modern 'Egyptian woman', looking at historical, sociological and literary works that take up this issue. The presentation of these discourses culminates in an interpretation of the multiple configurations of the women in El Saadawi's and Mahfouz's novels. The character analysis is connected with the social and historical context of 20th century Egypt, where key differences between the authors, in the way they construct women characters, are identified.

4.2 What is a 'Woman'?

Early academic feminist practice was very much consumed by the goal of creating a universal account of women's experience, regardless of background. This universal identity and language was important in order to fight for the "political visibility" of the 'woman' within male dominated spaces.[1] In her seminal work, *The Second Sex* (first published in 1949) Simone De Beauvoir examines the genealogy of male domination in western societies and the way it constructs the hierarchy of masculinity over femininity. Within western cultural systems, the man is the 'subject' whilst the woman is viewed as the 'Other', unable to exercise subjectivity due to her status as the inferior sex. This led De Beauvoirto the conclusion that women *become* women they aren't born as such. This work

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[1] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge Classics (New York: Routledge, 2006), 2.

opened up the possibility for the examination and contestation of 'sex' and 'gender' as social markers within the fields of sociology, anthropology, and even literary studies, with sex referring to biologically rooted differences, whilst the word gender encapsulates the cultural norms deeply tied to the ideals of 'man' or 'woman'.

The aforementioned direction in the discussion of what makes up cultural gender differences inevitably brings up the question of what the gender marker 'woman' or 'women' actually means and who it refers to. Specifically with regards to the usage of the singular, uppercase 'w' word, 'Woman', the user is attempting to theorise a singular point of relation that applies to all women. This, as we will come to see, is an impossibility due to the diversity of experiences that come with the increasingly expansive and diverse representations of global womanhood. [2]

Dealing with the differences between women has become the work of various feminist groups such as Diversity Feminists, Différance Feminists and Intersectional Feminists. Lloyd identifies the basic questions that these feminists ask themselves in pursuit of their theoretic formulations: who does feminism liberate when the existence of the woman is challenged? Who is represented if women cannot be properly represented? How does feminism justify claims for universal justice in the presence of different, unstable, and fluid identities? If subjects, as defined by poststructuralism, are constructed in the light of dominant discourses, how do they go about challenging and overcoming the structures that perpetuate their oppression?[3]

These questions have been a locus for deconstruction within certain branches of feminism, namely by poststructuralist and postcolonial feminism. Within the realm of feminist poststructuralism, Judith Butler has emerged at the forefront with new theorisations of 'gender' and 'sex', as well as the performativity of gender. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler heavily deals with the juridical construction of the 'woman' as an engendered 'subject' and the 'recipient of feminism', and the implications this has on feminist politics.[4]

The universal subject of 'woman' as well as universal 'patriarchy' breaks down when it faces different historical and cultural contexts. Another "split", Butler states, "is

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[2] Moya Lloyd, *Judith Butler: From Norms to Politics*, Key Contemporary Thinkers (Cambridge: Policy press, 2007), 5.

[3] Lloyd, *Judith Butler*, 6–7.

[4] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 3–4.

introduced in the feminist subject by the distinction between sex and gender."[5] They view both gender and sex as culturally constructed, with the juridical conception of 'sex' based on scientific or historical discourses that serve a social and political purpose, therefore Butler contends that gender or gendering processes precede sex. In *Bodies That Matter* sex is viewed through the Foucauldian concept of the 'regulatory ideal'. Butler talks about the way the creation of gender binary has, in turn, given strength to the ideas of sex binary and the subsequent normalisation of both in heteronormative society. They write:

> The category of 'sex' is, from the start, normative; it is what Foucault called a 'regulatory ideal'. In this sense, then, 'sex' not only functions as a norm, but is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs, that is, whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce—— demarcate, circulate, differentiate——the bodies it controls. ... 'sex' is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time. It is *not a simple fact or static condition* of a body, but *a process whereby regulatory norms materialize 'sex'* and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms.[6]

This process led to the naturalisation of 'sex', as something that exists outside the confines of culture, when to Butler and their tracing of the genealogy of the concept, it seems that 'sex' itself is a gendered category: "gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which 'sexed nature' or 'a natural sex' is produced and established as 'prediscursive,' prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts."[7] The status of being 'natural' or 'biological' being ascribed to 'sex' is hardly debated in feminist circles. However, this heteronormative framework, according to Butler, is also 'culturally intelligible'. Since it "generates a series of ideal relations between sex, gender, and desire", with sex coming first and desire last, gender expressions and desires outside of the framework are not recognised or given legitimacy, but rather given the label 'unnatural'.[8]

In their discussions on the process of gendering, Butler revisits De Beauvoir's infamous remark, "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman".[9] It is this phrase, as well as De Beauvoir's works of feminist existential phenomenology, that lead Butler to the formulation of their idea of gender performativity. Butler concludes that gender is

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[5] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 8.

[6] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*, Routledge Classics (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2011), xi-ii (emphases mine).

[7] Lloyd, *Judith Butler*, 31–2.

[8] Lloyd, *Judith Butler*, 34–5.

[9] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Capisto-Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, Vintage Classics (London: Vintage Books, 2011), 293.

performative action that produces a gendered subject. They use the example of drag performance to explain how "*in imitating gender, drag implicity reveals the imitative structure of gender itself*", which brings into question its implied 'naturalness'— a parody of a parody.[10] Gender, as well as the subject themselves, exist by means of actions such as gestures, speech, practices and so on.

So what does this all mean for the 'woman'? Butler's work reveals that being a woman is truly a matter of performativity, the daily act of reiterating womanhood through action rather than any predetermined biology. Whether this daily affirmation is an act of free will or not is contestable, however, one presents the regulatory ideal of woman, or subverts that ideal in their performance of gender. Therefore, heteronormative structures in non-western contexts and their juridical constructions of gender and sex govern the ideals, which in turn dictates the legitimacy of the subjects within that cultural framework. This is important when dealing with the idea of the 'Third World' or 'Postcolonial' woman because of the exclusionary assumption in the unified notion of women.

In fact, in the article, 'Manifesto Against the Woman', Mona Kareem deals with the implications of the implicit exclusion in the word 'Woman', singular form with a capital 'W', when employed in western feminist thought.

> I thus write this manifesto against the Woman. Against the Woman who erected her phallus in my direction and policed me. I do not write against women, for no women can be spoken with or about. I write against the Woman, this single bothersome entity.[11]

The statement above occupies the minds of those who write from a third world or postcolonial feminist perspective. This issue was explored in depth in the essay 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses', where Chandra Mohanty verbalises the way women in the 'Third World' have been essentialised and weaponised in the west, as victims of Third World patriarchy. This perpetuates a cultural colonisation which involves "a discursive or political suppression of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question", which in this case is the multitude of women that fall under the constructed monolith of the 'Third World Woman'.[12] This analytical category of 'Third World Woman'

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[10] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 187, original emphasis.
[11] Mona Kareem, 'Manifesto Against the Woman', *Jadaliyya*, January 14, 2016, last accessed December 20, 2022, https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/32849/Manifesto-Against-the-Woman.
[12] Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses', *Feminist Review*, no. 30 (1988): 61.

is presented in direct opposition to western women who are "educated, modern, … having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the 'freedom' to make their own decisions."[13]

Essentialist practices aim to reduce differences within an identity category towards the aim of political and representative unity, at the expense of the celebration of those differences. The construction of the 'Third World Woman' within western thought also contends to the idea of her victimhood to the 'barbaric' non-western forms of patriarchy, perpetuating orientalist and colonial ideas of the 'Third World' and justifying neocolonial involvement in those countries, under the guise of 'foreign aid', on the basis of 'women's emancipation'.[14] Certain essentialist practices, however, have been justified by some within the field for the political opportunities they may present. In a self-conscious practice she calls 'strategic essentialism', Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak recognises the strategic use of essentialism in a "specific and well-defined context for the work being undertaken … it is thus justified to posit a group identity with common features in order to advance its interests while continuing to debate and contest the hegemony of essential identity."[15] The latter part of the statement is of utmost importance, as essentialism as the discussion above has shown, will always be exclusionary.

How does one represent without essentializing? How important is the issue of representation when one considers the diversity of experiences of women all over the world? Polemics around representation arose within the fields of postcolonialism and feminism due to the absence of marginalised perspectives within various academic and non-academic fields. The 'Other', sometimes referred to as 'Subaltern', has historically been spoken for by those in positions of power, who have directly controlled the way the 'Other' has been presented and how sometimes they remain to be understood.

That is why during the modern and contemporary periods this issue of representation has been elaborated upon by historically oppressed groups. Deepika Bahri states how "a postcolonial feminist perspective requires that one learn to read literary representations of women with attention to the subject and to the medium of representation".[16] However, the term 'representation' itself evokes discussion within the

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[13] Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes', 65.

[14] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 5

[15] Deepika Bahri, 'Feminism in/and Postcolonialism', in *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*, ed. Neil Lazarus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 209.

[16] Deepika Bahri, 'Feminism in/and Postcolonialism', 200.

fields of postcolonialism and feminism. Spivak presents her understanding of representation by dividing the term into two main categories which she identifies as *Vertreten* (to politically represent) and *Darstellen* (to re-present, "placing there"), which she summarises as representation by either "proxy" or "portrait" respectively.[17] She believes that the interplay between these two forms of representation is unavoidable, as "in the act of representing politically [*vertretung*], you actually represent yourself and your constituency in the portrait sense [*darstellung*], as well."[18] Here, the subject as a "sovereign deliberate consciousness" engaged in the task of representing themselves and their constituency, does so by adopting essentialized identity groups such as 'feminist', 'working-class', or 'third-world'.[19] By representing, or making oneself a representative of a position, one must generalise, therefore, the 'subject position' is one which is constructed and adopted rather than being predetermined. Full representation is not what the critic should aspire to when one is tasked with discussing constructed identity groups. As Bahri explains with regard to Spivak's ideas presented above, "representation is always fictional or partial because it must imaginatively construct its constituency … and because it can inadvertently usurp the space of those who are incapable of representing themselves".[20]

The discussion above is necessary when engaging in the examination and literary representation of bodies which exist outside heteronormative western societies, as Arab women and men do. Where Butler's work matters, in this context, is through their illumination of the systems which work to produce both sex and gender, with the 'Arab woman' as the chosen feminist subject of analysis. Postcolonial theorists also warn against essentialist practices on the 'Third World Woman' and the role it can play in perpetuating the hierarchy between women of the 'West' and 'East', emphasising the reality of diverse historical and cultural contexts that exist within and outside of the boundaries of a totalising term.

4.3 The Historical and Social Construction of the 'Modern Arab Woman'

Within the scope of this dissertation, the 'Arab Woman' is taken as the feminist subject of analysis. This section, scopes into the ways precolonial, colonial and early postcolonial

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[17] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym (New York: Routledge, 1990), 108.
[18] Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic,* 108.
[19] Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic,* 108.
[20] Deepika Bahri, 'Feminism in/and Postcolonialism', 207.

ideas have become intertwined, creating the regulatory norm of the 'modern Arab woman', focusing specifically on the Egyptian context. On this basis, the ways certain modern Arab women have negotiated this prescribed identity are examined, focusing on some non-fictions work they have produced. This section is not meant to prescribe a uniform identity to all women living in Egypt around the times when these events took place, but rather to analyse the historical and social forces that played a part in certain aspects of identity formation.

The previous chapter and the generic overview it gives on the literary systems which produced and perpetuated conceptions of gender differences in pre-colonial Arab society can be somewhat explained (but obviously not fully accounted for) in the terms previously outlined by Butler. Islam and the Islamic empires, as the dominant power systems, integrated sex and gender roles into religious doctrine, as well as the relations between those two sexed categories: an Arabo-Islamic heteronormativity. However, colonial rule exposed Arab society to new social systems and colonial material conditions, as well as new cultural discourses of sex and gender, affecting the lives of the women in those societies.

Lila Abu-Lughod states, "in the postcolonial world women have become potent symbols of identity and visions of society and nation."[21] This statement may also be applied to the colonial period also, with women at the forefront of nationalist movements—with women's rights movements being co-opted into the broader nationalist cause—as we shall see further on. However, it is not in large social causes such as the nationalist cause where identity and knowledge of the self is created. For Foucault and his critiques of institutions in modernity, the family, specifically the women in the family in modernity, "became a site for the intervention and production of discourse about the self and its sexuality".[22] Modernity and discourses of modernity in the Egyptian context which coincided with western colonial rule in the Arab states brought up debate regarding the 'woman question': the 'remaking' of women in both the private and public spheres, as mothers, wives, daughters as well as free agents.[23] These questions were highly influenced by western standards of women's liberation and mainly served the interests of the colonial powers looking to create a larger and more educated workforce, as they ironically used discourse

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[21] Lila Abu-Lughod, ed., *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*, Princeton Studies in Culture/Power/History (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), 3.
[22] Abu-Lughod, ed. *Remaking Women*, 7.
[23] Abu-Lughod, ed. *Remaking Women*, 8.

of emancipation in order to confine women to a newer form of subjugation to the colonial motherland as opposed to their previous confinement to the domestic sphere.[24] These debates, picking up traction in the nineteenth century, were initially restricted to the role of upper-class women with the role of middle-class women in the discussion growing later on with the expansion of the social class. Working-class women were held to a different set of societal values as their restriction to the private sphere was not viable due to the necessity of their labour, and their status was brought into the debate well into the twentieth century. Badran points to an array of social phenomena that contributed to the rise of modern gender consciousness, these being the eroding of "urban harem culture", "the rise of the modern state" and culture, the expansion of women's education programmes, the move towards a more secular nation as envisioned by Muhammad ʿAli, and the budding capabilities of nationalist movement in the face of the British imperial project.[25]

These conditions and events laid the fertile ground for the evolution of feminist discourse in both women's and men's circles. We see this in the emergence of treatises on the rights of women, and biographical work such as ʿAʾisha al-Taymuriyya's 1887 publication *Natāʾij al-aḥwāl fī al-aqwāl wa-l-afʿāl* (*The Results of Circumstances in Words and Deeds*) where she ponders on her experiences of her younger years in the seclusion of the harem and her burning desire to gain literacy. The founding of the woman's press gave rise to women's journals such as *al-Fataḥ* (the young girl) in 1892 and *al-Firdaws* (Paradise) in 1896.[26] A popular reference of contribution to discourse on women's emancipation is Qasim Amin's *Taḥrīr al-marʾa* (*The Liberation of Women*) published in 1899 where, using his background in Islamic jurisprudence, he argues that women's seclusion and lack of personal freedoms weren't based on Islamic law. However, many modern day academics, with the expansion of knowledge on women's earlier contributions have criticised the idea of his work as the 'pioneer', practically erasing the pioneering works of al-Taymuriyya and other Arab women. Whilst it is true that he did instigate much debate on women's liberation at the time it was ultimately due to his social capital in society as a male intellectual and a Muslim. Abu-Lughod reminds us that "he ultimately was most

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[24] Abu-Lughod, ed. *Remaking Women*, 12.

[25] More detail on each of these phenomena can be found in Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1995), 4–13.

[26] Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, 15-16.

interested in promoting … the modern bourgeois family with its ideal of conjugal love and scientific child rearing".[27]

Building on the foundations laid by these pioneers came the early 20th century, and the imperative work being done by a new era of feminist activism, most notably the upper-class Huda Shaʿrawi and her organisation *al-Ittiḥād al-nisāʾiyy al-maṣriyy* (the Egyptian feminist union), who gained popular legitimacy by allying themselves alongside Egyptian nationalist liberation movements. Badran gives a detailed account of Shaʿrawi's life growing up always placed second to her brother, and how it informed her nationalist feminist activism.[28] Sabry Hafez also explains the way in which Shaʿrawi and her fellow feminists had to disguise their concerns as issues that concerned the Egyptian collective, even if they seemed contradictory to women's liberation. He elaborates that this was a factor in the "failure of the nationalisic project" since there was "the desire to liberate the male from foreign domination but subject the female to the domination of the patriarchal system".[29] Nevertheless, Shaʿrawi's life and actions have and still continue to serve as inspiration for Arab and Muslim feminist activists who either built on her ideas or even use her ideas as a point of divergence.

It is important not to directly associate modernity with the undermining of patriarchal culture. Hisham Sharabi's work *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society* traces the structural and ideological formation of a new patriarchy in Arab society. Sharabi's work develops this idea, based on the observation that

> over the last one hundred years the patriarchal structures of Arab society, far from being displaced or truly modernized, have only been strengthened and maintained in deformed, "modernized" forms. That is to say, the Arab Awakening or renaissance (*nahda*) of the nineteenth century not only failed to break down the inner relations and forms of patriarchalism but, by initiating what it called the modern awakening, also provided the ground for producing a new, hybrid sort of society/culture— the neopatriarchal society/culture we see before us today. Material modernization, the first (surface) manifestation of social change, only served to remodel and reorganize patriarchal structures and relations and to reinforce them by giving them "modern" forms and appearances.[30]

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[27] Lila Abu-Lughod, 'The Marriage of Feminism and Islamism in Egypt: Selective Repudation as a Dynamic of Postcolonial Cultural Politics', in *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*, Princeton Studies in Culture/Power/History (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998.), 256.

[28] Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, 31-38.

[29] Sabry Hafez, 'Sexual Politics and Narrative Strategies in Modern Arabic Literature', *Alternation* 2, no. 2 (1995), 24

[30] Hisham Sharabi, *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 4.

This begs the question of what became of Islamic doctrine and culture during this process of modernisation and secularisation, and what did it mean for Egyptian Muslim women and their civil and religious statuses? This brings us to Badran's second point regarding Egypt's historical developments leading up to the expansion of women's consciousness in Egypt, which was the rise of two main discourses during the late 19th century which she names "Islamic modernism and secular nationalism".[31] On the topic of Islamic modernism Badran explains how it revitalised the Islamic practice of *61ihad61d*, which involves private inquiry into Islamic religious scripture by both men and women. This led to the discovery that culturally Islamic patriarchal practices, such as veiling of the face, ignoring women's consent in marriage, seclusion of women, etc., were in fact not religiously mandated.[32] Cooke shows how this practice of *61ihad61d* continues to be encouraged by Islamic feminist thinkers in the present day, displaying a level of continuity with these early modern intellectual developments and their effectiveness in raising women's awareness of their religious rights.[33] On the other hand, the discourse of secular nationalism was one that arose as a result of the lack of agency Egyptian men and women felt under British colonial rule. This discourse of belonging no longer revolved around a common religious identity but a territorial and historical one, which was in great opposition with the discourse of the British colonial governors who "referred to Egyptians as 'natives', or the 'native race', avoiding the term 'Egyptian'".[34] This all-encompassing nationalism called upon Egyptian women to take up the concerns of the nation, and this allowed feminists to disseminate their ideas under the guise of nationalist discourse, claiming that their liberation allows them to become active subjects in service to their country.

Throughout the 20th century Arab feminist thought continued to develop, with western feminist circles expressing a newfound interest in the situation for women in the Islamic societies. Certain traditional Arab and culturally Islamic practices prevailed in their depiction over others in an orientalist western discourse, in particular the Muslim practice of veiling, which continues into our present day. The image of the veiled Muslim woman became synonymous with the western impression of Arab and Muslim cultures as

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[31] Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, 4.

[32] Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, 11.

[33] Miriam Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism Through Literature* (London: Routledge, 2001), 62.

[34] Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, 12.

primitive, patriarchal and oppressive, in need of liberation. On the topic of the 62ihad62d62ation of imagery by outsiders, Cooke writes:

> Women are easily turned by outsiders into images that then become emblems of their culture, for within the culture itself women serve that same function ... These images are the context of a first encounter between two people who know little if anything about each other. They may not change if they are not directly confronted and deconstructed[35]

It is true that in some cases, the veil may represent a lack of choice on behalf of the woman in society, with Nawal El Saadawi, one of the authors being studied in this dissertation, believing it to be a symbol of women's commodification and method of control. In fact for El Saadawi "veiling and nakedness are two sides of the same coin."[36] Yet, to many Muslim women and Muslim feminists, the veil is a visible symbol of identity and commitment to their faith.[37] Hatem points out how "most empirical studies of the social attitudes of the women who wear *alhijab* have indicated that they shared the educational and work aspirations of their secular counterparts."[38] In some cases, the veil has been co-opted as an emblem of resistance against colonial oppression of Arab-Muslim identity as seen in the case of the Algerian nationalist resistance against French rule.[39]

In her groundbreaking study *Le Harem Politique* (translated as *The Veil and the Male Elite* in 1991), Fatima Mernissi argues for a feminist reading of early Muslim history (a type of feminist *62ihad62d*) during the time of the Prophet Muhammad, placing herself in direct opposition with colonial feminists who spoke from the basis of Islam as a religion that endangered the rights of women. Her work suggests a form of proto feminism that came about during the early stages of Islam and the Islamic community. She writes:

> Women fled aristocratic tribal Mecca by the thousands to enter Medina ... because Islam promised equality and dignity for all, for men and women, masters and servants. Every woman who came to Medina when the Prophet was the political leader of Muslims could gain access to full citizenship, the status of *sahabi*, Companion of the Prophet. Muslims can take pride that in their language they have

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[35] Cooke, *Women Claim Islam*, 126.

[36] Nawāl Al–Saʿdāwī, 'Women, Religion and Literature: Bridging the Cultural Gap', in *The Nawal El Saadawi Reader* (London: Zed Books, 1997), 140.

[37] Cooke, *Women Claim Islam*, 136.

[38] Mervat F. Hatem, 'What Do Women Want? A Critical Mapping of Future Directions for Arab Feminisms', in *Arab Feminisms: Gender and Equality in the Middle East*, ed. Jean Makdisi (London: I. B. Tauris & Company, 2014), 51.

[39] Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, 23.

the feminine of that word, *sahabiyat*, women who enjoyed the right to enter into the councils of the Muslim *umma*, to speak freely to its Prophet-leader, to dispute with the men, to fight for their happiness, and to be involved in the management of military and political affairs.[40]

This discourse was a destabilising force for the Meccan elite at the time, who felt greatly threatened by the new rights and freedoms this religion promised, especially for those (women and slaves) who were previously neglected in society. Linking back to her present, during the 20th century, Mernissi plainly states that "if women's rights are a problem for some modern Muslim men, it is neither because of the Koran nor the Prophet, nor the Islamic tradition, but simply because those rights conflict with the interests of the male elite".[41] In saying so she places a divide between the Islamic religion and those who wield, misinterpret, and manipulate teachings of the religion for the subjugation of others in Islamic society.

Thinkers like Mernissi were in the process of establishing a new culturally bound tradition of Islamic feminism, discovering ways of grounding discourse surrounding women's liberation in their religious beliefs. This gave rise to the many interpretations of Islamic feminism that we see in the present time. In *Women Claim Islam*, Cooke brings up the question of Islamic feminism and what it means to be an Islamic feminist. The way Cooke categorises an Islamic feminist is by the following criteria: a women's rights activist who offers "a critique of some aspect of Islamic history or hermeneutics ... on behalf of all Muslim women and their right to enjoy with men full participation in a just community ... an attitude and intention to seek justice and citizenship for Muslim women".[42] This feminism pays special attention to Qurʾanic scripture, and the practice of *63ihad63d* in order to reject non-scriptural ties placed on religious women.

In her taxonomy of this feminist school of thought, Cooke names two Egyptian activists Zaynab al-Ghazali and Nawal El Saadawi, two names normally placed in opposition with each other due to their seemingly antagonistic ideological concerns. Al-Ghazali's feminism takes a very strong Islamist stance, dedicated to *63ihad* with the end goal of establishing the Islamic state of Qurʾanic ideal. Her feminism advocates women's liberation in the full acceptance of her Muslim duties as the figureheads of education and

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[40] Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (Cambridge, Mass.: Perseus Books Publishing, 1991)., viii.

[41] Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elit*e, ix.

[42] Cooke, *Women Claim Islam*, 61.

the domestic realm in order to raise and educate strong and capable Muslim men and women.[43] Cooke summarises al-Ghazali's rhetoric by stating "Islam welcomes women into the public space, but only after they have been good wives and mothers in the private space … the logic of her argument strongly suggests that public action represents the culmination of private activities".[44]

Nawal El Saadawi's Islamic feminism weighs more on the critical side, especially picking into patriarchal realities of Egyptian Muslim society. Due to the intensity of her criticism, it appears much simpler to classify El Saadawi's work and activism to a more secular Arab feminism, but Miriam Cooke challenges us to view her work differently. She conducts her own literary analysis of al-Saadawi's *The Innocence of the Devil* (1994) where she claims that the novel acts as an exploration of misogynistic tropes against women found within Islamic culture whilst also detaching them from the Allah and the Qurʾan.[45] El Saadawi's feminist work moves beyond the critique of patriarchal interpretations of Islam. Most of her work, fiction and nonfiction, recognises the political and economic aspects to the oppression of women, especially with the newer pressures of neoliberalism in postcolonial contexts. To El Saadawi, "the relation between culture, religion, gender and class is very important."[46]

The idea of Islamic feminism and its diverse application is one met with insider and outsider hostility. Academic Haideh Moghissi believes that the conceptions of 'Islam' and 'Feminism' are mutually exclusive due to the gender hierarchies present within Islamic societies, yet Cooke expresses her disagreement saying that arguments of this nature usually conflate Islam with Islamic fundamentalism.[47] Cooke also makes the argument for Islamic feminism and certain conflicting ideas that exist within the two:

> Islamic feminism is not a coherent but rather a contingent, contextually determined strategic self-positioning ... [it] works in ways that may be emblematic of postcolonial women's jockeying for space and power through the construction and manipulation of apparently incompatible, contradictory identities and positions.[48]

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[43] Cooke, *Women Claim Islam*, 83–106.

[44] Cooke, *Women Claim Islam*, 91.

[45] Cooke, *Women Claim Islam*, 78-80.

[46] Al-Saʿdāwī, 'Women, Religion and Literature', 139.

[47] Cooke, *Women Claim Islam*, 57–8.

[48] Cooke, *Women Claim Islam*, 59.

In this way, Islam acts as the 'symbolic capital' for these women; the religious identifier gives Muslim women a platform to voice their ideas, concerns and push backs against both religious and secular patriarchal norms and regulations whilst also remaining faithful to their religious beliefs.[49] This also is the place from which Islamic feminism draws its rhetorical power, with Muslim feminist women drawing upon the multiplicities of their identities to conduct what Cooke has named 'multiple critique', where there is great self-awareness of the mosaic of one's identity (in this case as a woman and a Muslim), all the while remaining conscious of others' identities. Cooke summarises this position writing that due to multiple critique "when Islamic feminists do not feel under siege as women, they can denounce local patriarchal assumptions; when they do not feel threatened as Muslims, they can challenge Islamic prescriptions unfavourable to women.[50]

The examples above reveal the prominent role writing had to play in the journey for women's emancipation in the Arab world. Many of these activists were also writers, as we saw from the beginning with al-Taymuriyya, with her poetry and memoirs. These writings began to provide new perspectives on established concepts as well as more intimate stories on the lives that different types of women are leading. Sabry Hafez attributes this levelling of the literary playing field to the growth of the narrative:

> The rubrics of narrative grant the writer a great freedom in this domain for it can easily subvert prior literary vision by placing it in a new hierarchical order. The organization of discourse in a narrative text reflects the awareness that within any given discursive field not all discourses will carry equal weight of power. There is a constant process of marginalisation of certain discourses in order to invigorate and enforce others, and narrative discourse is the literary text that records this delicate process in action.[51]

Malti-Douglas' *Woman's Body, Woman's Word* explores the hypothesis that the advent of Arab women's prose tradition is a response to the classical male prose and their discourse and images about women, which was facilitated by the rising feminist consciousness in the Arab world beginning in the 19th century as well as the arrival of the printing press, which allowed for the widespread dissemination of these ideas, and women's newfound access to the world of publishing in the narrative form.[52] The ability to reclaim discourse and subvert

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[49] Cooke, *Women Claim Islam*, xx.

[50] Cooke, *Women Claim Islam*, 136.

[51] Hafez, 'Sexual Politics and Narrative Strategies', 17.

[52] Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), 8.

it in such an accessible manner expanded horizons for Arab women authors whose increasing numbers are documented in a bibliography by Joseph Zeidan, first in 1986 then updated in 1999 to encompass 1,271 Arab women employing the narrative from the 1880s to the 1990s.[53]

Anthology has proved to be a fundamental tool in the propagation of these women's works to reach their intended audience. Cooke exemplifies this by naming a few anthologies, such as Yusuf al-Sharūnī's 1975 anthology *The Night After the 1001 Nights* where he puts forward the writings of 20 Egyptian women, not before recognising that "women's relationship with storytelling is ancient".[54] This relationship is brought out through the title of the anthology which inextricably links Arab women writers with the legend of Shahrazad and her narrative voice, an idea explored in the previous chapter.

Nowadays, Arab women writers have been propelled onto the international stage and their works are increasingly more visible with the translation of their work into various languages. Cooke highlights this new stage in the formation of Arab women's narration since they are now aware of the broadening view of their audience, who are no longer from similar social backgrounds.[55] Their works are now being viewed in terms of 'first world' preconceptions of Arab and Islamic culture, or by readers who are not aware of the nuances that exist. This poses a new challenge for them, deciding whether their narratives should adapt to these new conditions or if they should remain rooted in their original messages. In the article 'Framing Nawal El Saadawi: Arab Feminism in a Transnational World', Amal Amireh delves into this issue as faced by El Saadawi and her reception in the contemporary globalised context and the way it "ends up rewriting both the writer and her texts according to scripted first-world narratives about Arab women's oppression."[56] El Saadawi herself criticises the 'sensationalist' receptions of issues pertaining to Arab women. In an interview entitled 'The Bitter Lot of Women' she voices her issues with this mindset:

> Western feminists simply refused to listen to the problems of so-called Third World women, and paid little attention to our analyses. … I have had to insist more than I otherwise might have on what you may describe as a 'Marxist' analysis, but which is really putting the oppression of women in the broader context of history and global politics. … I know very well how much women have suffered. Yet, I would

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[53] Cooke, *Women Claim Islam*, 3.

[54] Cooke, *Women Claim Islam*, 4-5.

[55] Cooke, *Women Claim Islam,* 27-28.

[56] Amal Amireh, 'Framing Nawal El Saadawi: Arab Feminism in a Transnational World', *Signs* 26, no. 1 (Autumn 2000), 215.

insist that there is a danger that in the West an issue like FGM, barbaric as it is …
is going to be sensationalized. Sexual mutilation, battered women, all that.[57]

El Saadawi's message to those examining such issues in the first world is best summarised
by herself when she states: "Recognize the scope of the issue. Recognize its historical and
political causes. … Instead of making a sensational fashion out of something that some
Western feminists discovered yesterday and will forget tomorrow."[58] What is definitely
certain is that the amplification of Arab women's voices is granting these women a new
form of visibility that will no longer be easily suppressed. It is therefore imperative that
scholarship takes historic and socio-political context into account before making claims on
the meanings of these women's work.

4.4 The Multiplicities of 'Woman' in *Imraʾtani fi Imraʾa* and *al-Shahhadh*

The novels chosen for this analysis are highly character driven. Regardless of gender, the
protagonists, Bahiah Shaheen of *Imraʾtani fi imraʾa* and Omar al-Hamzawi of *Al-
Shahhadh*, are what define the novellas through their discursive explorations. However,
due to the scope of this dissertation and the purpose of this chapter, special focus is placed
upon exploring the construction of the female characters in the novels, and drawing
connections between this construction and the socio-historical context of the modern
Egyptian period, as well as the ideological backgrounds of the authors.

Valassopoulos describes El Saadawi's novel as favouring a "personal self-reflexive
action over detailed socio-historical description."[59] This ungendered description of El
Saadawi's work may easily extend to Mahfouz's work, considering the protagonist Omar
and his internal dialogue and reflections. However, El Saadawi's work is more interested
in transgression and subversion of female gender norms than Mahfouz's. As we shall come
to see, his women characters are more of a reflection of the views of the men in his novel
who don't fully recognise their individuality.

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[57] Nawāl Al-Saʿdāwī, 'The Bitter Lot of Women: An Interview', in *The Nawal El Saadawi Reader*
(London: Zed Books, 1997), 66.

[58] Al-Saʿdāwī, 'The Bitter Lot of Women', 68–9.

[59] Anastasia Valassopoulos, *Contemporary Arab Women Writers: Cultural Expression in Context* (London:
Routledge, 2014), 32.

4.4.1 Imraʾtani fi Imraʾa

El Saadawi's narrative is subject-oriented; the writing emanates from Bahiah Shaheen's point of view. Therefore, any views of herself and other characters are through Bahiah's lens; we are seeing the way she interacts with the people and the world around her. How does this newly 18-year-old woman make sense of the contradictory world around her? The point of view is surreal and almost psychedelic, her mind shifts in and out of different subject matters but mainly centres around experiences stemming from her status as a girl coming of age into womanhood.

Bahiah Shaheen comes from a middle-class family living in Cairo. Her father is a government official and her mother is a stay-at-home wife. We learn that she has other siblings but the narrator doesn't go into detail about their lives. What better way to symbolise and subvert the cultural attachment of women as symbols of the Egyptian nation than through the name of the novel's heroine? Mona Mikhail, when analysing a set of Egyptian folk songs mentions how "traditionally the name 'Bahiyya' [بهية] has always been allegorical for Egypt."[60] Bahiah constantly reminds the reader of the disconnection between herself and her given name and how she does not identify with her name until Saleem is the one to say it.[61] She starts out as a medical student, a path she did not choose but one that was chosen for her by her family to improve her marriage prospects and boost her father's image within the Ministry of Health. However, her passions lie within art and painting, which she repeatedly has to hide from her father who views it as a useless distraction from her studies.

Bahiah feels alienated from the sex that she is identified as—being female—associating it with shame, lies and repression. This alienation initially manifests as a dislike of herself, or at least that part of herself that conforms to the neopatriarchal expectations of women in family and society: "She did not like Bahiah Shaheen. She could see her defects all too clearly. She hated that polite obedient voice."[62] Yet, another Bahiah Shaheen lurks beneath the surface constantly threatening to reveal herself. This Bahiah yearns to break away from the patriarchal forces that manipulate her life and the construction of her perceived gendered identity, forces which mainly manifest through individuals including those of her parents, her extended family, and her anatomy lecturer Dr Alawi.

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[60] Mona Mikhail, *Seen and Heard: A Century of Arab Women in Literature and Culture* (Northampton, Mass: Olive Branch Press, 2004), 24.

[61] Nawāl Al-Saʿdāwī, *Imraʾtāni fī Imraʾa* (Windsor: Hindāwī, 2020), 36.

[62] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Two Women in One*, trans. Osman Nusairi (London: Saqi Books, 2020), 46.

El Saadawi's characterisation of Bahiah and her self-reflexive dualistic identity attempt to create a marriage of doctor and artist, one which El Saadawi herself is a testament to. Through the character of Saleem, a left-leaning student who becomes Bahiah's love interest, she is allowed to embrace her artistic side. Even with Saleem's arrest after a nationalist protest and subsequently being married off to her cousin Muhammad, she is set on her path to take hold of her freedom, running away from her marriage and throwing herself into dissident political action.

Bahiah's mother, as well as many of the other women in the novel, act as antithetical to the character of Bahiah. She doesn't understand the way the women around her continue to suppress themselves and their desires, to the point where she begins to antagonise them, almost as much as she antagonises the men who exert power over her, and she rejects association with them. The next chapter explores the regulatory ideals which govern the acts of the women in the novel, especially in the way El Saadawi portrays these women as self-regulating and denying their desires. This is a notion which is extremely frustrating for Bahiah, who has discovered the importance of individual expression and the desire to cast off such regulatory ideals for a more authentic way of living.[63] The only women Bahiah finds to forgo these societal norms and restrictions are the prostitutes which she meets in jail following her arrest during the nationalist protest. This scene features the voices of these women with their witty comments on the contradictions of being a prostitute within Arab society – they are socially shunned and looked down upon, however the lives of men depend on their services. They begin their dialogue, greeting another prostitute who has been recently detained. The dialogue speaks for itself: the women do not censor themselves, hence empowering Bahiah to live authentically.

'Welcome!'	– أهلاً وسهلاً يا أختي.
'Thank you.'	–أهلا بك.
'When will God have mercy on us?'	– متى يتوب علينا ربنا؟
'God is pleased with us all right.'	– ربنا راضي عنا كل الرضا.
'Really?'	– والنبي يا أختي.
'Sure, we're the best of women.'	– طبعًا, نحن زين النساء.
'I feel better now.'	– رددت الروح في جسدي يا أختي.
'Without us honorable husbands would have died and respectable households might have collapsed'	– لولانا لمات الأزواج الشرفاء، وانهارت البيوت المحترمة.
'But they hate our smell …'	– ولكنهم يتأففون من رائحتنا.
'Because it's their real smell.'	

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[63] Bahiah's gender transgressions and subversions are explored in detail in chapter 6.

'And they put us in prison.'	– لأنها رائحتهم الحقيقية.
'Because we know what their genitals look like.'	– ويضعوننا في السجن.
'They're scared to death of us.'	– لأننا نعرف شكل عوراتهم.
'And they die of desire for us.'[64]	– ويخافون منا إلى حد الموت.
	– ويرغبوننا إلى حد الموت[65].

Al Sharekh views El Saadawi's heroines through the lens of a generalised "contempt for the male sex", almost as if El Saadawi is engaged in sexual warfare.[66] In Bahiah's case, expressions of contempt and distrust towards the men around her do exist, however this was usually directed towards their repressive attitudes towards themselves and the women around them.[67] She is an 18 year old who is unable to fathom the role that gender has to play in her life, and the way that her male counterparts exert power over her solely on the basis that they are men. In fact, this contempt translates towards the women in her life who refuse to take action or even recognise patriarchal social forces, such as her mother and her female colleagues in medical school. According to Valassopoulos "El Saadawi does not necessarily construct characters that conform to social types (the prostitute, the peasant woman, etc.). Rather she creates characters that speak to humanity about certain fundamental components of women's bodies and lives; how they are sexualised, gendered, policed and privileged. It is this voice that has perhaps troubled readers and led to critics protesting her lack of creative talent, her creation of 'one dimensional characters', etc."[68] In fact, Valassopoulos identifies "El Saadawi's innovation" in the fact that her character's inner and outer world are difficult to define, constantly feeding off each other: "The actions and words of El Saadawi's heroine (or heroines) *contain* and produce 'sedimented histor[ies]' of their surroundings that require dismantling by the reader."[69]

A valid criticism of El Saadawi's heroines, perhaps reflecting her personal worldview, would be their overarching sense of pessimism. However, it is not difficult to see how this would arise from given that El Saadawi was born, raised and died within a

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[64] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Two Women in One,* 108–9.

[65] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Imraʾtāni fī Imraʾa*, 67–70.

[66] Al Anoud Al Sharekh, 'Angry Words Softly Spoken' (PhD, London, SOAS, University of London, 2003), 208.

[67] For example, at one point Bahiah condemns the whole male medical student body in Al-Saʿdāwī, *Imraʾtāni fī Imraʾa*, 26.

[68] Anastasia Valassopoulos, *Contemporary Arab Women Writers: Cultural Expression in Context* (London: Routledge, 2014), 35.

[69] Valassopoulos, *Contemporary Arab Women Writers*, 35.

highly patriarchal culture, taking also into consideration the experiences of women's mental and physical abuse she had been witness to as part of her career as a psychiatrist. Many critics and authors have also expressed their scepticism towards El Saadawi due to her success amongst western readership – the phrase 'pandering to the western reader' shows up recurrently.[70] This is mainly due to the brutal and explicit scenes and images surrounding her heroines, found in her work that represent the Arab world and Arab masculinities in a negative light, playing into western prejudices. It is important to remember the diversity of experiences and themes that all Arab women writers go through, which may affect the content of their work. Amal Amireh explains how "serious debates about fiction will remind readers that they are reading not documentaries, but 'literature'".[71] It is impossible, and even unfair, to group Arab women writers into a monolith, there is no definition but a group marker that is employed for the purpose of collective empowerment of a social group that has been historically dismissed. Postcolonial feminist criticism pushes for the celebration of diversity that exists amongst women living in colonial and post-colonial conditions in order to enrich its theoretical basis, as well as to continue to bring the issues they face to light.

4.4.2 Al-Shahhadh

Various research projects have looked into the ways in which Mahfouz constructs the women in an array of his literary works. Previously, this research has worked by categorising the female stereotypical roles that exist within his novels and the symbolic role in which they play once they fit into this role. This role is then explained and 'contextualised' within the broader socio-political backdrop of Egypt and the rest of the Arab world. However, more recent works such as Mariam Cooke's, "Men Constructed in the Image of Prostitution" as well as Michelle Hartman's "Re-Reading Women in/to Naguib Mahfouz's *al-Liss wa'l kilab* (*The Thief and the Dogs*)" show the way in which the women in his novels exercise their autonomy, defy existing social norms, and even subvert certain commonly held stereotypes such as the 'prostitute' stereotype or the 'virtuous/virgin' woman stereotype. As Hartman explains,

> Mahfouz's motivation may not be a feminist project of rewriting women's roles in society to empower them, but what he does in thwarting such accepted notions is to

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[70] Some of these accusations have come from critics such as Sabry Hafez, Leila Ahmed and authors such as Alia Mamdouh and Adhaf Souief

[71] Amal Amireh in Valassopoulos, *Contemporary Arab Women Writers*, 25.

write women as individual and autonomous characters who exist and act not only under the control and power of men.[72]

Al-Shahhadh has written into it a variety of women and girls. The character Omar's immediate family is dominated by a female presence (before we learn that Omar's wife is pregnant with a boy). We have Zeinab, described as a paragon of virtue, who is Omar's wife, alongside his two daughters, Buthayna, who is a young teenager, and Jamila, a young girl child. Traditionally and in modernity too, the family is the core unit of Arab society. This accounts for the reason that, as Badran explains, "patriarchal domination remained most entrenched in the family, with modes of control over women varying according to class and circumstance."[73]

Zeinab al-Hamzawi, née Kamelia Fouad, is introduced to the reader as the devoted wife of Omar. In spite of her devotion, throughout the novel, Omar becomes increasingly estranged from her.

I married a woman of great vitality and charm, a model student of the nuns, refined to the letter. She seemed to be a born businesswoman, with an unflagging zeal for work and a shrewd eye for investment, In her era, you rose from nothing to great eminence and wealth, and in the warmth of her love, you found consolation for wasted effort for failure, and for poetry.[74]	تزوجت قلبا نابضا لا حدود لحيويته، وشخصية فاتنة حقا، تلميذة مثالية للراهبات، مهذبة بكل معنى الكلمة، مدبرة حكيمة كأنما خلقت للتدبير والحكمة، وقوة دافعة للعمل لا تعرف التوان، ونظرة ثاقبة في استثمار المال، ارتفعت في عهدها من غمار العدم إلى التفوق الفريد والثروة الطائلة، وجدت في حرارة حبها عزاء عن الفشل والشعر والجهاد الضائع، رمز الجنس والمال والشبع والنجاح، فماذا جرى؟[75]

From sex symbol to a symbol of his malady – this has been the journey of Zeinab's meaning for Omar. The narrator asks, "Does Zeinab have a role only after work?".[76]Omar's illness has now come for Zeinab just as it did for his work as a lawyer. Omar can only think of her in terms of what she can do for him, what role she plays in his life, and that role is now as

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[72] Michelle Hartman, 'Re-Reading Women in/to Naguib Mahfouz's *al-Liss Wa'l Kilab (The Thief and the Dogs)*', *Research in African Literatures* 28, no. 3 (Fall 1997): 7.

[73] Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1995), 124.

[74] Najīb Maḥfūẓ, *The Beggar*, trans. Kristin Walker Henry and Nariman al-Warraki (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 45.

[75] Najīb Maḥfūẓ, *Al-Shaḥḥadh* (Egypt: Dār al-Shurūq, 2016), 46, author's emphases.

[76] Maḥfūẓ, *The Beggar*, 45.

"*rumuz ... al-māl wa-l-najāḥ wa-l-tharāʾ wa-ahīran al-marḍ*" (a symbol of money, success, wealth, and now malady).[77] We see these tragic images of Zeinab recurrently constructed in the eyes of her dispossessed husband.

In the fading glow of the sun, she looked sedate, even elegant. In spite of her extraordinary rotundity, the exasperating evidence of indulgence, she retained a winsome beauty. Her serious green eyes still had their charm, but they were now the eyes of a stranger. She was the wife of another man, the man of yesterday who hadn't known listlessness or fatigue, who had forgotten himself.[78]	في ضوء الشمس الغاربة تبدت أنيقة وقورا، رغم اكتناز جسمها الطويل، المفصح عن شبع مثير ورفاهية محنقة، ما كان أرق جمالها! وما زالت على قدر من الجمال بالرغم من ضخامتها غير العادية وانتفاخ وجنتيها. ونظرتها الخضراء الجادة لم تفقد كل سحرها، ولكنها غريبة، غرابة مستحدثة لم ترها عينك من قبل. امرأة رجل آخر. رجل الأمس الذي لم يعرف التعب أو الفتور. الذي نسي نفسه.[79]

She becomes the personification of Omar's alienation and his decadent bourgeois life. Zeinab herself, however, remains steadfast in her traditional role of mother and wife within the family unit.

We learn a bit about Zeinab's backstory when we read the flashback scene of her courtship and marriage to Omar, but even in this case, Mahfouz only defines her in relation to her husband.[80] Throughout the novel, Zeinab is very sensitive to Omar's changing temperament and she expresses her concern multiple times. Omar has a tendency to escape her questions. In chapter 5, she explains how she feels that he is no longer himself and that this fact causes her much anxiety and sadness. She acts as the caring wife and she clearly has her husband's best interests at heart: "I care only about you".[81] As Ghada Mourad explains, within Arab societies "women are socialized in such a way that the concerns of the male in their immediate surroundings prime over their own".[82] Ironically, her caring nature and steadfastness to her traditional role drives Omar further away. When Zeinab

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[77] Maḥfūẓ, *Al-Shaḥḥadh*, 47; author's translation.

[78] Maḥfūẓ, *The Beggar,* 40.

[79] Maḥfūẓ, *Al-Shaḥḥadh,* 40.

[80] Zeinab's marriage to Omar is discussed in more detail in the next chapter when discussing relations between the sexes in love and marriage.

[81] Maḥfūẓ, *The Beggar,* 43.

[82] Ghada Mourad, 'Unruly Bodies: Dissensus, Modernity, and the Political Subject in the Postcolonial Arab World' (PhD, Irvine, University of California, 2017), 108.

becomes pregnant with a boy, Samir, she hopes this will bring joy back to Omar and the family.[83] However, by the time he is born, Omar has completely estranged himself. On this stage of Omar's quest for salvation Frode Saugestad writes:

> Omar gives his family a second chance when Zeinab gives birth to their son Samir, but to no avail. His disappointment with her still being faithful to her traditional values, turns in the end to indifference, and Zeinab must be understood as the personification of the regressive forces in society that obstruct him in his pursuit of meaning by creating the boundaries that he has to surpass.[84]

Within Buthayna, Omar's first-born daughter, Mahfouz makes clear to the reader his image of an adolescent girl slowly coming into her being. She is described as having a moderate temperament, caring for her family, a budding poet, and ultimately the voice of reason for her father when he begins to lose his focus – although this is not enough to prevent him from tipping over the edge. Mahfouz creatively explores the relationship between father and daughter through Buthayna's relationship with Omar. They share a special bond, understanding each other's body language, and it is towards Buthayna who Omar feels the most shame when he begins distancing himself from his wife and family. During the beginning of Omar's illness, Buthayna's adolescence becomes a point of obsession for him, causing him to lament on the beauty and passion that one experiences around that age. Jealousy overtakes him when he begins thinking about her future endeavours, especially when it comes to love.

One day Buthayna will be preoccupied by someone other than you, as will Jamila, who now builds pyramids in the sand. For God's sake, what do you want? … Why do you have the foreboding of fantastic perils?[85]	ويوما ستجد بثينة ما يشغلها عنك ومثلها جميلة التي تشد الأهرام من الرمال. خبرني بالله ما تريد؟ ... ولم يتنبأ شيء في صدرك بمخاوف هوائية؟[86]

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[83] Maḥfūẓ, *Al-Shaḥḥadh*, 45.

[84] Frode Saugestad, 'Individuation and the Shaping of Personal Identity: A Comparative Study of the Modern Novel', (Ph.D., England, University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies, 2006), 123–4.

[85] Maḥfūẓ, *The Beggar,* 29.

[86] Maḥfūẓ, *Al-Shaḥḥadh,* 29.

Poetic images of Buthayna's development coincide with Omar's rediscovery of his poetic instincts, a venture which ultimately fails. In Chapter 3 of the novel, we learn that just like her father had done in the past, Buthayna has also taken an interest in poetry. This is a fact that pleases Omar, but he reminds her that her interest in science should take precedence over poetry. After reading her poetry, Omar has deduced that his daughter is in love. Once again, he feels jealous but he questions this jealousy that parents feel over their children when they are only experiencing love like they had once felt.

It was evident that his little girl, the bud which had not yet flowered, was in love. … Why should we be upset when our children travel the path we once took?[87]	ولكن البنت عاشقة. وربي إنها لعاشيقة. البرعمة التي لم تتفتح بعد. … لماذا نضطرب إذا كرر الأبناء سيرتنا؟ [88]

However, Buthayna later explains that this love of hers is "*la 'lla .. huwa ghāya kull shay*'" (the final purpose of all things).[89] She shares this existentialist fascination with her father. Her questioning nature inquires as to why her father no longer partakes in her new hobby even begging him to pick it back up. In her, Omar sees his lost passion for poetry that he too experienced during his youth. This sends him further into his spiral of self-pity; "you're braver than your father, that's all".[90]

El-Enany views Buthayna's role as purely symbolic, as a character combining "the values both of poetry and science", which Mahfouz holds dear. He continues by saying that "to these Mahfouz adds a third value by marrying her off to Uthman, the indefatigable fighter for social justice. As he is rearrested, we learn that Buthayna is already bearing the fruit of the union. This is Mahfouz's hope for human society: a holy trinity of science, poetry and justice."[91] To a certain extent this could be said of her character, however, this greatly waters down her character, maybe due to the confines of el-Enany's work and its lack of room for elaboration.

Buthayna's character is constructed around a period of time in the Egyptian postcolonial context where girls and women were allowed and expected to be educated. Especially growing up in the upper-middle class, Buthayna is afforded more opportunities

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[87] Maḥfūẓ, *The Beggar,* 34.

[88] Maḥfūẓ, *Al-Shaḥḥadh*, 34.

[89] Maḥfūẓ, *Al-Shaḥḥadh,* 35; author's translation.

[90] Maḥfūẓ, *The Beggar,* 36.

[91] Rasheed El-Enany, *Naguib Mahfouz: The Pursuit of Meaning* (London: Routledge, 1993), 110.

for education. Her father seems to treat her like an equal. He encourages her interest in science as well as her more emotional side with poetry writing, as long as it does not affect her studies in science. However, this education and encouragement backfires against Omar. Since he himself brought up a headstrong and inquisitive young woman, once Omar begins to pull away from the family unit, she is not one to keep her head down and accept the matters of the situation. Buthayna directly confronts her father, expressing the concerns she has about her mother to him and expects him to answer her properly. She sees him as a trustworthy figure in her life, as at the end of the day, he brought her up to be the person she is. This makes Omar's betrayal that much more hurtful when she finds out that all his reassurances that there was no other woman turn out to be a lie. Nevertheless, she remains committed to her father and Mahfouz subtly weaves her self-sacrificial nature resulting in her downfall within the text.[92]

Omar's character becomes involved with a series of women working as entertainers and prostitutes. In the postcolonial Egyptian context of the 1960s even with new opportunities for working women, the old professions for women in entertainment (such as singing and dancing) retained their prominence. Many women found success in these careers however they were not deemed socially respectable and mainly drew in women from more modest backgrounds and low socioeconomic status.[93] Egyptian feminists staunchly fought back against the stigmatisation of women in entertainment, but on the other hand they launched a campaign against the exploitation of women working within prostitution. However, Mahfouz's novel shines a light on the interconnectedness of these two professions, with entertainers also expected to perform sexual favours for their patrons.

The presence of Margaret in the novel is an elusive one. Margaret is a European woman (her nationality is not specified, although Omar suspects her to be English) who is the current favourite singer ("al-najma") at the nightclub 'Barīs al-Jadīda' (the New Paris).[94] Omar encounters her for the first time at this nightclub, which Omar's equally decadent friend Mustapha is a regular attendant to. Al-Nowaihi points out the postcolonial trope of the relationship dynamic which may be found in the case of al-Shahhadh between Omar and Margaret: "The theme of Arab male/Western female has been an important one in Arabic literature almost from its inception, and is often employed in explorations of the

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[92] Buthayna's agency and self-sacrificial nature are further considered in Chapter 6.

[93] Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, 189–191.

[94] Maḥfūẓ, *Al-Shaḥḥadh*, 54.

difficulties of cross-cultural and colonial relationships."[95] Mustapha, in a spirit of confraternity, takes the chance to dehumanise Margaret when Omar asks him to clarify her name. Her name becomes no more important than the sum of money (20 pounds/guineas) it takes to spend the night with her[96]

The fine lines of her face, a certain look in her eyes, the lightness of her movement—perhaps it was the harmony of all these which evoked something of the long-sought ecstasy.[97]	ثمة خطوط رشيقة في صفحة الوجه ونظرة في العينين الملونتين وخفة في الحركة، لعل من تضامنها جميعا تنبثق النشوة المستعصية المنشودة.[98]

The first description we get of Margaret shows how Omar is looking for something in these women. He is not just attracted to her; he is attracted to something he wants out of them; looking for ecstasy in the sexual act. The first words she says, however, give us a glimpse into her witty nature and sceptic outlook on life, probably coming from past lived experience. Mustapha makes a joking remark regarding Omar's profession as a lawyer, telling her that he hopes that the relationship between them will never come to need his professional services. The way she replies is also reminiscent of the women in *adab* anecdotes of the classical period, with their witty and eloquent replies:

I always need someone to defend me. Isn't that the case with women in general?[99]	أني أحتاج دائما لمن يدافع عني, أليس ذلك تعريفا لا بأس به للمرأة؟[100]

She later gets into the car with him, and after a short back and forth asks Omar to take her back to her hotel, but instead he takes her to the pyramids. The entire time the reader can sense her discomfort, or maybe fear, replying to his absurd statements and demands in short sentences, a clear sign of anxiety "It's best we don't stop … Be sensible. Please take me

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[95] Magda M. Al-Nowaihi, 'The "Middle East"? Or . . . / Arabic Literature and the Postcolonial Predicament', in *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, ed. Henry Schwarz and Sangeeta Ray (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 300.

[96] Maḥfūẓ, *Al-Shaḥḥadh*, 55.

[97] Maḥfūẓ, *The Beggar*, 53.

[98] Maḥfūẓ, *Al-Shaḥḥadh*, 55.

[99] Maḥfūẓ, *The Beggar*, 54.

[100] Maḥfūẓ, *Al-Shaḥḥadh*, 56.

back. … Tell me about it tomorrow … Please don't be angry".[101] She retains a polite persona – seen through the repetitive usage of *min faḍlak* – a defensive attitude that many women resort to when they sense masculine instability or fear of sexual violence.

Following her many objections to his absurd requests, Omar takes her home. He is assured that they will be together again, yet the next time he is at The New Paris Margaret is not there. Mustapha tells Omar that she has left the country. The night she spent with Omar clearly left her feeling unsafe, it is therefore implied that she left because of his unrelenting attitude towards her. Her initial witty remark rings true. The man she expected to defend her turned out to be obsessive and predatory. He meets Margaret a second time, an unspecified amount of time following their short encounter, when he attends the The New Paris with Warda in tow. This reconnection, once again brief, involves a level of fear on Margaret's behalf, but for the sake of her work she complies with Omar's wishes.

Warda is the second prominent woman working in the entertainment industry as a dancer, who becomes a serious love interest for the novel's protagonist. Warda initially comes off as slightly insecure, asking for Omar's reassurance and reciprocity in love. However, she is not afraid to talk back to him when she feels he is in the wrong, as prostitute characterisations normally do in Mahfouz's novels. Her lack of self-worth comes out when she reasserts her position as the 'other woman' in Omar's life, however she is a character that gives the role of love importance in her life: "the experience of love is precious even if it brings suffering".[102] She goes back to working at the Capri club once her affair with Omar bitterly ends, moving on and even acting as if nothing happened.

Warda, similarly to Margaret, assumes the character role of 'the prostitute' in Mahfouz's story, a character trope he employs in a majority of his novels. In her non-fiction work *The Hidden Face of Eve,* El Saadawi comments on the irony of the archetypal prostitute character in Arabic literature as follows:

> The woman prostitute plays a much more important role in Arabic literature than that which is accorded to the pure and virtuous woman. … The prostitute seems to symbolize real woman, woman without a veil or a mask. She is real woman for she has lifted the mask of deceit from her face and no longer feels a need to pretend that she is in love, or to simulate virtue and devotion.[103]

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[101] Maḥfūẓ, *Al-Shaḥḥadh* 59–60; translation Maḥfūẓ, *The Beggar*, 57.

[102] Maḥfūẓ, *The Beggar*, 97.

[103] Nawal Al-Saʿdāwī, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*, trans. Sherif Hetata, 2nd ed. (London: Zed Books, 2015), 339.

El Saadawi continues by pointing out Mahfouz's fondness for the prostitute character and the roles they play in his overarching socialistic narratives, "however" she states, "his understanding of their situation has not moved from a superficial analysis of their social condition to a deep and sensitive realization of the tragedy women are made to live".[104] It is then also ironic that in the case of *Al-Shaḥḥadh*, the prostitute character Warda is one that falls in love with our main protagonist, willing to leave her work behind for him.

Mahfouz's female characters can easily be described as Caroline Seymour-Jorn does; "compelling and sympathetic".[105] However, El Saadawi's work is more interested in the nuances of women's lives and mainly in the case of Bahiah, her struggle to negotiate her position as a modern Egyptian woman—she is expected to study, but only in the way her parents approve of—living in a restrictive social context. Mahfouz's female characters are doomed to live in a man's world, Omar's will affecting and seeping into the lives of the women around him. Bahiah attempts to renegotiate that power imbalance, seeking agency in the way she deems most authentic to her desires. Even in the case of Buthayna, whilst she does pull away from her father, Mahfouz places her into the hands of Othman in order to create a symbolic union. Bahiah's relationship with Saleem is only the beginning in her journey of self-emancipation.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter is concerned with the focus of the 'Arab woman' as a subject of literary analysis, as well as the meaning behind undertaking such a study. This is done through the understanding of the term 'Woman' in poststructuralist thought and 'Third World Woman' in postcolonial thought and the way these terms have been problematised by those two schools of thought. Both terms are essentialist as they always end up excluding those that do not necessarily fall under the criteria of normalised womanhood. Gender identity in different social contexts will involve different regulatory ideals around them, constantly reasserted or even transgressed and subverted through gender performativity. These ideals also exclude certain bodies and expressions, making them illegitimate or marginalised.

This led to the exploration of the Arab woman in the modern historical context of Egypt. Historical developments are outlined, including the 'woman question' in Egypt

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[104] Al-Saʿdāwī, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, 339–40.

[105] Caroline Seymour-Jorn, 'View from the Margin: Writer Niʿmat Al-Bihiri on Gender Issues in Egypt', *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 13, no. 1 (2000), 82.

beginning during the colonial period, the rise of feminist movements, the rise of neopatriarchy in modernity, and the subsequent reconfiguration of women's roles in society. The theme of writing as feminist practice within Egypt is a recurrent feature. The number of women authors continues to grow and certain writings, like ones by El Saadawi, have received global attention leading to the question of the reception of their work outside the social context of Egypt. This has resulted in over-sensationalising of certain issues over others, which normally portray the Arab woman as a passive victim to the wills of brutal Arab men. This emphasises the importance of situating a text within the proper context before making judgements before understanding the intentions and local reception of texts.

Finally, this chapter presents detailed portraits of the women and girl characters in *Imraʾtani fi imraʾa* and *al-Shahhadh.* Although Mahfouz's novel has a larger and more diverse variety of women, their characters are developed such that they are defined in relation to Omar. On the other hand, Bahiah in El Saadawi's novel is allowed more room for individual development and agency. However, the rest of the women in El Saadawi's novel, such as Bahiah's mother and female colleagues in medical school are painted with broad brush strokes, repressing their true selves and desire, denying them their own individuality. The following chapter will take a closer look at the multiple forces acting behind the creation of the aforementioned characters, the fictional worlds they inhabit, and the historical and social conditions they reflect.

5. The Discipline and Desire of the Female Body

5.1 Introduction

This chapter explores how the sexed female body has been constructed, objectified, and regulated in the two novels chosen for analysis. This will involve an in depth analysis of selected excerpts of the novels regarding the body as an object and the sexualisation of the body— meaning 'sex' as the constructed biological category, and 'sex' as the intimate physical act—involving the objectification of the body in medicine, the socially expected acts of bodies in marital relations, and the way these discourses contribute to the suppression of bodies.

These images and ideas are explored by drawing upon the historical tradition and tropes in Arabic literature as well as the modern and contemporary philosophical, historical and literary theories relating to corporeality and desire, specifically the body of the postcolonial Arab woman. This chapter is also deeply indebted to the work of Judith Butler, specifically *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*, with the active connection of the literary constructions of the sexed female body in the novels to the social constructions of 'gender' and 'sex'. Butler contends that the body is not a passive vessel that is shaped by external forces, but rather an active site of cultural and social regulation. They assert that the boundaries of the body are not fixed, but rather are constantly being negotiated and redefined through various social and cultural practices, and due to this certain bodies are privileged and valued over others. The body hierarchy is maintained through various forms of power and discourse, in this case, the power structures existing in modern Egyptian society.

5.2 The Sexed Female Body

Based on the theoretical framework highlighted in the previous chapter formulated by postcolonial feminists, as well as Butler's approach to sex, gender and desire, this section draws upon the contents of the two chosen novels as a basis for the discussion of the production of the sexed female body in modern Egyptian society. In the case of El Saadawi's *Imraʾtani fī imraʾa*, references to the body, and the ideas which surround it, are extremely prevalent throughout the text as duly noted by Malti-Douglas:

> Male bodies, female bodies, young bodies, old bodies, diseased bodies, healthy bodies—all have a role to play in the Saadawian literary corpus. Narrators exploit

body imagery. The body is the terrain on which games of power are played, whether of class, gender, medicine, or what have you. Nawal El Saadawi's training as a physician has a hand here: medical imagery reinforces the power of the corporal imagery in the feminist's literary corpus. Questions of femininity, masculinity, and the precise boundary of the body become part of the complex Saadawian world of gender.[1]

Throughout the novel, Bahiah questions her identity as a girl and the expectations that come along with it. The following excerpt shows El Saadawi's heroine, Bahiah, discovering that her body presents as a biologically female one, and the impact that the traumatic incident has on her:

Once, with a child's innocence, she told her mother that she had discovered she was a girl, not a boy – and undressed to prove it. But her mother slapped her hand, and told her, 'Promise me never to do that again.' When Bahia didn't answer, her mother slapped her face.[2]	قالت لها ببراءة الأطفال إنها اكتشفت أنها فتاة وليست ذكراً، وكشفت عن ملابسها لتثبت لها الحقيقة، لكنها ضربتها على يدها وصاحت: تحرمي! ولم ترد، فضربتها مرة أخرى وهي تقول: قولي حرمت! ولم ترد، فرفعت يدها في الهواء وصفعتها على وجهها [3]

Shame and disgust were instilled in the lessons that were taught to her regarding her body, especially by her mother. Her body is something to be covered, for nobody except her to see. Bahiah's child-like inquisition into the nature of her body remains ingrained in her mind as a source of shame. This moment teaches her that people would rather disconnect from their nature and cloud themselves with ideas that make the female body a taboo than question these constructed ideas that regulate bodies and desire.[4]

Images and discourse on female bodies in Mahfouz's *al-Shaḥḥādh* can be easily described as purely objectified. Since the novel is based on Omar's point-of-view, the reader has insight into the way he views the women in his life and the language he uses to construct their physicality. In fact, the first image of a woman is a description of Omar's wife, Zeinab, and the way he is scanning her face, starting from her neck ...

He focused on his wife's thick	تبدى عنق زوجك من طاقة فستانها الأبيض

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[1] Fedwa Malti-Douglas, "Towards an Arab Feminist Poetics", in *Men, Women, and God(s): Nawal El Saadawi and Arab Feminist Poetics* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1995

[2] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Two Women in One*, 19, a few parts are omitted in the English translation.

[3] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Imraʾtāni fī Imraʾa*, 18-19.

[4] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Imraʾtāni fī Imraʾa,* 19.

neck above her white collar and on her fleshy cheeks. She stood as the pillar of faith and virtue. Her green eyes were pouched in fat but her smile was innocent and affectionate.[5]

غليظا متين اللأساس. واكتظت وجنتاها بالدهن، وقفت كتمثال ضخم مليء بالثقة والمبادئ، وضاعت عيناها الخضراوان تحت ضغط اللحم المطوق لهما. أما ابتسامتها فما زالت تحتفظ ببراءة رائقة ومحبة صافية [6]

In the Arabic original—a feature that is sometimes omitted or changed in the English translation—the narration shifts into the second person, and this feature is present in the narration of Zeinab's description (*zawjiki* …). The narrator seems to be directly speaking to Omar, unveiling his innermost thoughts, making use of undesirable adjectives to emphasise her large size (*ghalīẓan; bi-l-duhn; ḍaghṭ al-laḥm*). Whilst he appreciates her principled nature as well as her smile, this description is devoid of any form of attraction due to her size. This description foreshadows the loss of affection that Omar experiences towards his wife, yet its discursive importance lies in the fact that it can also be contrasted with the overly romanticised description of his daughter, Buthayna and the way Omar objectifies her body.

[Buthayna] had the fine figure of her mother when she was fourteen, but it seemed unlikely that she would grow obese with the years, that she would allow fat to mar her beauty.[7]

و [بثينة] تكرر صور أمها عندما كانت في الرابعة عشرة، بقامتها الرشيقة، ولكن يبدو أنها لن تتعملق مع الأيام ولن تسمح للدهن بأن يغطي على صفائها [8]

Omar's idealisation places emphasis on Buthayna's physical appearance, which reminds him of the way his wife used to look. However, he does this by derogating his wife's appearance based on her weight, implying that a fat woman is no longer a beautiful woman. Omar's idealisation of his daughter, which can also be identified as an idealisation of youth and beauty, is also visible in the scene where he is watching his daughter on the beach:

How sweet you are, Buthayna. Your budding breasts are proof of the world's good taste … It's

ما ألطفك يا بثينة! براعم صدرك تشهد للدنيا بحسن الذوق … من المخزن أنك لم تعرفي من الدنيا شيئا، وأنني صنعتك كالكنار فلم

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[5] Najīb Maḥfūẓ, *The Beggar*, trans. Kristin Walker Henry and Nariman al-Warraki (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 17.

[6] Najīb Maḥfūẓ, *Al-Shaḥḥadh*, 14.

[7] Maḥfūẓ, *The Beggar,* 17.

[8] Najīb Maḥfūẓ, *Al-Shaḥḥadh*, 15.

regrettable that you know nothing about life, that I've kept you enclosed like a little canary in your school bus … Are you affected by the scent of these bare bodies, by the flirtations exchanged among the waves?[9]

تتجاوزي سيارة المدرسة ... وكيف تؤثر فيك رائحة الأبدان العارية؟ والغزل المتطاير بين الأمواج.[10]

Buthayna's body is changing, materially and culturally, from one of a girl child to a more adult one through the process of puberty (*al-murāhaqa*). It is through an intersubjective cultural lens that Omar views his daughter's physicality. Her body is changing into an object of desire, and it appears that this change is happening unbeknownst to her as revealed by her father's thoughts. Omar connects her growing breasts to the cultural desirability that comes with this process. In short, he is actively gendering and sexualising his daughter's body. The reader gains more insight to the idealised statement when learning that Omar was a poet in his past and therefore he is viewing this youthful scene through a poetic and nostalgic lens. This may be interpreted as Omar re-living the passion of his youth through his daughter's body, using her image to reconnect with his emotions in his despair. However, the fact remains that he is reasserting patriarchal power that exists in the process of reasserting feminine cultural ideals over his young daughter's body.

The reality of the process of feminine gendering is more obvious in El Saadawi's novel, where we get Bahiah's point of view of the experience of female puberty. Bahiah views her puberty with suspicion. At the age of eighteen she is aware that her body is no longer hers, but an object of her family's ownership and a source of shame.

She had never felt that she was a girl or that she was eighteen. This used to be called the age of puberty. A suspicious word. At the mere sound of it fathers and mothers tremble with suppressed sexual desire, baring their teeth and shaking a warning finger at their sons and daughters.[11]

كم تكن تحس أنها فتاة، أو أنها في ثمانية عشرة. هذه السن في ذلك الوقت كانت تسمى سن المراهقة، المراهقة كلمة مشبوهة مريبة، ما إن ترن في الجو حتى يرتعد الآباء والأمهات برغبة جنسية مكبوتة، يرفقونها بتكشيرة حادة، ويلوحون لأبنائهم وبناتهم بأصابع مهددة [12]

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[9] Maḥfūẓ, *The Beggar*, 28.

[10] Maḥfūẓ, *Al-Shaḥḥadh*, 15.

[11] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Two Women in One*, 111.

[12] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Imraʾtāni fī Imraʾa,* 71.

Puberty inevitably brings about the awakening to sexual desire, yet it also causes fear to arise within the family system. Young bodies, growing into their self-awareness and knowledge of desires are brought to feel shame in this process, creating skewed ideas of their bodies and their nature. Bahiah realises this, stating "Since she did not know what was normal, she imagined that sexual desire was abnormal".[13] Being brought up with skewed conceptions of normality, she came to view her sexual desires and her sexed body as abnormal. This sentiment was brought up every time she looked at herself naked in the mirror, or even as we see, when she experienced her first menstruation.

<div style="display:flex">
<div>

The first spot of red blood she had ever seen was on her small, white knickers. … The young girl's eyes were large and frightened. … With her small swollen fingers, she buried her knickers in a hole behind the wall. She walked out in the street without knickers. The cold wind passed between her legs billowing her dress, but she pulled it down firmly with both hands, defying the wind. …

As she neared the wooden shelter, a deep red drop of blood trickled down between her legs and onto the asphalt. It lay on the ground in a red circle that widened to grow as big as the sun. The policeman with his handlebar moustache stared at her. He poked his nose out of the shelter, sniffing the blood. She threw her bag to the ground and ran home.[14]

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<div dir="rtl">

أول بقعة دم حمراء رأتها في حياتها كانت فوق سروالها الصغير الأبيض ... وعينا الطفلة الصغيرة دائرتان واسعتان مذعورتان ... وتدفن سروالها بأصابعها المتورمة الصغيرة في حفرة وراء الجدار، وتسير في الشارع بغير سروال، تنفذ الريح الباردة بين ساقيها تحاول أن ترفع فستانها عن فخذيها، لكنها تشد الفستان بيديها الاثنين وتقاوم الريح ...

وحين تقترب من الكشف الخشبي تسقط من بين ساقيها فوق الأسفلت نقطة حمراء قانية، تفترش الأرض على شكل دائرة حمراء، تتسع وتكبر وتصبح في حجم قرص الشمس، يحملق فيها الشرطي بشاربه الطويل الأسود، ويمد أنفه من وراء الكشف متشممًا رائحة الدم، وتلقي حقيبتها على الأرض وتجري لاهثة إلى البيت.[15]

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Her first instinct at seeing the blood on her underwear was to hide all evidence of what had occurred. The paranoia grew, fearful that she would be caught, with this paranoia materialising in the figure of the policeman, sensing her shame and 'sniffing'

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[13] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Two Women in One*, 113.

[14] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Two Women in One,* 36-7.

[15] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Imraʾtāni fī Imraʾa,* 28-9.

(*mutashammaman*) the blood that had fallen down on the ground as if searching for evidence of a crime.

5.3 The Miseducation of the Female Body

The previous section points to literary examples that reflect the elements of the heteronormative regime that creates the concept of the sexed female body in Egyptian-Arab society. This section shifts the focus onto the specific forms of regulations of these bodies that are exemplified in the two novels, specifically tied to sexuality and sexual desire. These concepts have been tied into a tight bond within the Arab cultural intersubjectivity. However, how can a woman have a healthy relationship with her sexed body and sexuality if it is considered a societal taboo to talk about women's experiences as sexual beings as well as their own pleasure?

Much of discourse around Arab women's sexuality has been connected to the effects it has on men, an idea closely related to the Islamic concept of *fitna*; women's sexual power causing chaos to the natural God-given order. It is important to reiterate that Islam does not condemn the sexual act and the pleasure of it as sinful, but strictly relegates it to the marriage contract. Sexual acts, here, are inadvertently tied to marriage. This connection is further explored within the next section of this chapter. This section is focused on the way sex and experiences of sexuality are written by the given authors, with specific attention given to women's sexual experiences. Nawal El Saadawi writes in her autobiography, *A Daughter of Isis,* the internal difficulty she faced when it came to writing and discussing 'sex':

> The most difficult thing to write about is what people call sex. It is hidden behind a cloud of smoke, behind an inability to break the code hidden in the subconscious depths ... When I deal with sex I lose my mastery over language. This is the case especially with Arabic. Arabic is the language of the holy Qur'an and cannot be used easily to talk about what is considered sacrilegious. In English I can write down the word penis as simple as that, but in Arabic it is called the masculine rod, which sounds obscene. It is even worse when I write about the female sexual organs.[16]

Even in El Saadawi's case, whose work has pushed to destigmatize women's bodies and sexual experiences, she finds it difficult to overcome this deeply rooted cultural sentiment.

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[16] Nawāl Saʿdāwī, *A Daughter of Isis: The Autobiography of Nawal El Saadawi* (London ; New York: Zed Books, 1999), 11.

El Saadawi never makes use of the Arabic terms directly referring to female sexual anatomy throughout *Imraʾtani fi imraʾa*. This could be understood in terms of what Foucault explores in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. He speaks about the 'discursive field' which refers to the set of statements, texts, and other forms of communication that are relevant to a particular subject or theme. He argues that the boundaries of a discursive field are defined by the power relationships that exist within it, and that these power relationships shape the way in which knowledge is produced and disseminated. In summary, he treats "discourses as groups of signs (signifying elements referring to contents or representations) … that systematically form the objects of which they speak."[17]

Foucault's concept has been elaborated on by poststructuralist feminists, such as Butler in their revelation of the relationship between patriarchal power structures, language and knowledge formation, and is here applied to the power relations that exist in the codification of tradition and language and how it relates to discourse on the female body.[18] The Arabic language is a liturgical one, and therefore its usage is required to remain in line with the religious and cultural framework which it embodies. Sabry Hafez points out how in the Qurʾan—considered by Muslims as the gold standard of Arabic usage—reference to God and divinity are in the masculine, and religious investigations of the language have been dominated by men who in turn control linguistic developments[19]. The evident 'phallogocentric' nature of the Arabic language alongside the patriarchal social structure it is employed in have restricted and limited women's discourse historically, including jargon relating to female sexuality. If making use of the proper vocabulary referring to female anatomy is considered taboo, then this further restricts the allowance of discourse surrounding women in general. The restrictions placed on her by virtue of being a woman constantly affirm "*al-maʾsā fawqa jasadihā*".[20] Bahiah's female corporeal state (*jasadihā),* an object of sensuality that may be corrupted, is a reminder of the tragedy of being a walking taboo in a patriarchal society.[21]

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[17] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. Alan Sheridan, (London: Routledge, 2002), 54.

[18] The deeper exploration of the dialogue between Foucault's work on power, discourse, and knowledge formation with the development of feminist ideas can be read in Maureen McNeil, 'Dancing with Foucault: Feminism and Power-Knowledge', in *Up Against Foucault : Explorations of Some Tensions Between Foucault and Feminism*, ed. Caroline Ramazanoglu (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 1993).

[19] Sabry Hafez, 'Sexual Politics and Narrative Strategies in Modern Arabic Literature', *Alternation* 2, no. 2 (1995): 17–18.

[20] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Imraʾtāni fī Imraʾa*, 17.

[21] An exploration of the word *jasad* and its specific link to corporeality and desire can be found in Lisa J. White, *Rooted in the Body: Arabic Metaphor and Morphology* (Cairo New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2021). 18.

One way El Saadawi overcomes this difficulty is by presenting discourse on women's sex and sexuality through the medicalised lens, and the way medical discourse reflects, and even regulates, misogynistic discourses. El Saadawi's work in, and familiarisation with, the medical field in Egypt as well as in the West, gives the reader an insight into the ideological constructs around women's bodies and sexuality. Bahiah poses the question of what it means to be a woman to her colleagues in medical school. Upon hearing this question, Dr Alawi, the anatomy lecturer, gives a very biologically reductionist answer:

<table>
<tr>
<td>

'What does it mean to be a girl?' she asked her parents and her fellow students in the dissecting room. When Dr Alawi heard the question, he dipped his metal forceps into the open stomach of the dead woman whose body lay before him and took out her womb … His blue gaze fixed her black eyes. He smiled, but she did not smile back.

</td>
<td dir="rtl">

فما معنى فتاة؟ سألت السؤال لأبيها وأمها وزميلاتها في المشرحة، وحينما سمع الدكتور علوي السؤال دب ملقطه المعدني في بطن المرأة المفتوح وأمسك الرحم … ثبّت عينيه الزرقاوين في عينيها السوداوين وابتسم لكنها لم تبتسم.[22]

</td>
</tr>
</table>

This scene holds significance as El Saadawi gives the reader a glimpse into the institutionalisation of this essentialist view of women solely for their reproductive function. She draws a link between the female body, the medical perspective and the subsequent disempowerment of women. The word for girl, *fatā*, has been made synonymous to the womb, *riḥm*. A woman is made only the sum of her biologically female reproductive parts. Dr Alawi, through his actions, has affirmed the power of medical discourse over women's sexed bodies. This scene echoes an idea that Judith Butler will later come to articulate in their work *Bodies That Matter*. El Saadawi's text, in fact, shows us the way the normative 'ideal construct' of 'sex' materialises within the medical field and the position of power from which it propagates biologically reductionist discourse. Every time this construct is reiterated; it solidifies its power. The regulatory norm of 'sex', Butler explains, works in "a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and more specifically, to materialize the body's sex, to materialize sexual difference in the service of consolidation of the heterosexual imperative."[23]

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[22] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Imraʾtāni fī Imraʾa*, 22.

[23] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*, Routledge Classics (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2011), xii.

The irony of such a regulatory ideal is made clear when one considers that within the norms of Arab society young unmarried women, existing under neo-patriarchal social structures, are expected to live as if they bear no semblance of sexual organs or sexuality; what is considered to be the basis of the material sex binary. As Hisham Sharabi describes it, "Neopatriarchy, inwardly preoccupied with sex and outwardly behaving as though sex did not exist, here suffers merciless exposure and ridicule."[24]

A cultural way in which female sexed bodies and their sexuality has been controlled is through Egypt's deeply rooted practice of female excision. El Saadawi has written extensively on the topic in her fiction and non-fiction, and this arises within *Imraʾtānī fī imrāʾa*. On the day of her wedding, Bahiah's mind flashes with memories surrounding her body and sexuality and the feelings which surround them. One of the memories is of her sister Fawziah's excision. The scene is as follows:

<table>
<tr>
<td>The cries of her sister Fawziah still rang in her ears: there was a red pool of blood under her. Every day she waited for her turn. The door would open and Umm Muhammad would enter with the sharp razor in her hand, ready to cut that small thing between her thighs. But Umm Muhammad died and her father was transferred to Cairo and that small thing between her thighs remained intact.[25]</td>
<td dir="rtl">لا زال صراخ فوزية في أذنَيها، وبركة الدم من تحتها حمراء قانية، وفي كل يوم تنتظر دورها، والباب يفتح وتدخل أم محمد بالموسى الحادة لتقطع ذلك الشيء الصغير بين فخذَيها. لكن أم محمد ماتت وانتقل أبوها إلى القاهرة وظل الشيء الصغير في جسدها.[26]</td>
</tr>
</table>

Once again, attention is drawn to the euphemistic language El Saadawi makes use of to refer to the clitoris; *al-shayʾ al-saghīr* (the small thing). Bahiah remembers the way her sister limped and moaned (*taʿaruja wa tataʾawwaha*) for the days to follow.[27] Even when healed, her sister's movements changed: "*lam taʿudd tajrī kamā kānat, wa khuṭuwātuhā ʾaṣbaḥat baṭīʾa*" (she could not run as she used to, and her steps slowed down).[28] Female

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[24] Hisham Sharabi, *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 33.

[25] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Two Women in One*, 112–3.

[26] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Imraʾtāni fī Imraʾa*, 72.

[27] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Imraʾtāni fī Imraʾa*, 72.

[28] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Imraʾtāni fī Imraʾa*, 72; author's translation.

excision remains common practice within Egyptian society. In her non-fiction work *The Hidden Face of Eve*, El Saadawi describes the procedure as follows:

> Circumcision is most often performed on female children at the age of seven or eight (before the girl begins to get menstrual periods). On the scene appears the *daya* or local midwife. Two women members of the family grasp the child's thighs on either side and pull them apart to expose the external genital organs and to prevent her from struggling – like trussing a chicken before it is slain. A sharp razor in the hand of the *daya* cuts off the clitoris. …
>
> The ignorant *daya* believed that effective circumcision necessitated a deep cut with the razor to ensure radical amputation of the clitoris, so that no part of the sexually sensitive organ would remain. Severe haemorrhage was therefore a common occurrence and sometimes led to loss of life. The *dayas* had not the slightest notion of asepsis, and inflammatory conditions as a result of the operation were common. Above all, the lifelong psychological shock of this cruel procedure left its imprint on the personality of the child and accompanied her into adolescence, youth and maturity. Sexual frigidity is one of the after-effects which is accentuated by other social and psychological factors that influence the personality and mental make-up of females in Arab societies.[29]

Fortunately, this practice has significantly reduced in recent years, yet the fact remains that many young girls and women continue to live with the effects of this procedure. Bahiah experiences a level of guilt for not having had the procedure done on her, even fantasising about a day where the *daya* Umm Muhammad would come back from the dead to get rid of the evil organs (*al-aʿḍāʾ al-sayyiʾa*) that God left on her body.[30]

El Saadawi's research on the practice of excision shows how even educated women who had undergone FGM did not understand the full consequences that this procedure has on their mental and physical health, even thinking that the procedure was necessary to maintain purity.[31] This mentality is reflected in Bahiah's ideation of her sister's experience as referenced above. Whilst El Saadawi pushes back against this retrograde practice in her fiction and non-fiction work, she opposes over-sensationalised portrayals of Arab women, by western feminist groups, as passive victims to these practices. She actively opposes those who seek to highlight this issue "in isolation, or to sever their links with the general economic and social pressures to which women everywhere are exposed".[32]

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[29] Nawal Al-Saʿdāwī, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*, trans. Sherif Hetata, 2nd ed. (London: Zed Books, 2015), 67–8.

[30] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Imraʾtāni fī Imraʾa*, 72.

[31] Al-Saʿdāwī, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, 69–72.

[32] Al-Saʿdāwī, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, xlvi.

In fact, in *Imraʾtani fī imraʾa*, Bahiah's character exposes the ways in which Egyptian women self-regulate their bodies and 'real selves'. Throughout the novel, there is a repetition of the phrase *al-unthawiyya al-makbūta* (the suppressed feminine …).[33] Whether the narrator makes reference to laughs or gasps, the women involved in these acts are actively suppressing an aspect of their femininity, a suppression which materialises through these actions. Bahiah's growing awareness of these acts of self-suppression creates a steadily growing resentment and alienation from her female peers.

When she saw the other female students, walking with that strange mechanical gait, their legs held tightly together, she realised that they belonged to one species and she to another.[34]	وحين ترى زميلاتها يسرن بسيقانهن الملتصقة بتلك الحركة الدورية الغريبة تدرك أنهن من فصيلة وهي من فصيلة.[35]

These women perform their expected gender roles to the point where Bahiah views them as unrelatable to herself, almost as if they were a different species altogether. Valassopoulos points out how these acts of self-regulation alienate Bahiah from the women in her life as she feels alone in her recognition of their performance of sameness and conformity.[36]

Mahfouz's novel also brings out the patriarchal miseducation of women in Warda's character, who puts Omar's honour before her own. In Chapter 11 of the novel, Omar declares that he has moved out of his family home to live in the apartment he shares with Warda. Her reaction to this event is strange at face value, but it exposes the reality of female bodies bearing the brunt of a man's honour. She tells him, "I told you, I don't want to cause you any trouble".[37] However much he tries to dismiss her feelings on the matter just makes her angrier. Her lighthearted nature changes to defend an honour that is not hers, and brings down her own self-worth:"you stain your honour with a prostitute".[38] Warda does not question the idea that she is placing his honour above his, especially due to the role

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[33] Some examples of the usage of this phrase may be see in Al-Saʿdāwī, *Imraʾtāni fī Imraʾa*, 19, 22, 26, and 31.

[34] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Two Women in One*, 41.

[35] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Imraʾtāni fī Imraʾa*, 31.

[36] Anastasia Valassopoulos, '"Words Written by a Pen Sharp as a Scalpel": Gender and Medical Practice in the Early Fiction of Nawal El Saadawi and Fatmata Conteth', *Research in African Literatures* 35, no. 1 (2004): 99–100.

[37] Maḥfūẓ, *The Beggar*, 79.

[38] Maḥfūẓ, *The Beggar*, 80.

prostitutes occupy within the Egyptian social hierarchy. She even worries about the way this act of dishonour will affect his family, mainly Buthayna's marriage prospects. She has internalised the belief that these worries are more important than her own since she will be the one to blame for Omar's dishonour.

El Saadawi's narrative also makes it a point to shed light on the familial and parental role in the regulation of bodies and the process of self-actualisation. Feminist theorists globally have emphasised the role of "gender inequality in the family" as a large part of the "unequal incorporation" of women in economically and politically liberal societies such as the Egyptian one at the time of El Saadawi's writing, regardless of the secular or Islamic nature of the family.[39] The manifestations of inequality do differ according to different intersections of identity such as class, location and so on, but as we see in the case of Bahiah, she becomes increasingly aware of the way her parents have restricted her from her true self, specifically her father.

Her father stood like a vast, high barrier between her and her real self, blocking her way, guarding the entrance to the house with the bulk of his body, his loud coarse voice, huge palms and wide eyes. When his voice rang out, calling her name, she felt he was calling somebody else but she would answer anyway: 'Yes, father.' 'Have you done your homework?' he would ask, and she would reply politely and obediently, 'Yes father.' When she heard the word 'yes' she realised that the voice was definitely not her own.[40]	كالحاجز الطويل الضخم كان أبوها يقف بينها وبين نفسها الحقيقة، يحول بينهما بضخامة جسمه، وصوته القوي الخشن، كفه الكبيرة وعينيه الكبيرتين القابعتين في مدخل البيت. حين يرن صوته: بهية! تدرك أنه ينادي واحدة غيرها، لكنها ترد وتقول: نهم، ويسألها: عملت الواجب؟ وترد بصوت مطيع مؤدب: نعم. ويتصل صوتها إلى أذنها بكلمة نعم، فتعلم عن يقين أنه ليس صوتها.[41]

Bahiah feels that her true self lies beyond the socially expected standards of what it means to be a woman in her society. Her father is a regulatory body, likened to a massive physical obstruction (*kal-ḥājiz al-ṭawīl al-ḍakhm*) placed between the two facets of identity that exist within her. She gives features to this obstruction that resemble a human—her father–

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[39] Mervat F. Hatem, 'Egyptian Discourses on Gender and Political Liberalization: Do Secularist and Islamist Views Really Differ?', Middle East Journal 48, no. 4 (1994): 663.

[40] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Two Women in One*, 35.

[41] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Imraʾtāni fī Imraʾa*, 28.

–but endowed with negative traits that remind her of her physical weakness compared to him, so she complies to his wishes. His oppressive manhood translates to feelings of resentment within Bahiah, especially with her increasing awareness of the lack of power and choice she has had in her life.

In Warda's case in *al-Shahhadh*, when she speaks about her childhood with Omar, she expresses that her mother was conservative and restrictive[42] On the other hand, her father was a well-loved English teacher who died before her decision to go to acting school. She believed her father would have respected her decision, but his lack of presence resulted in her family cutting ties from her. Even when her aspirations failed, she felt as if she could no longer return to her family.

Omar's discourse as a parent about Buthayna objectifies and regulates her body. The previous section shows the way in which he portrays her in a sexualised manner at a young age in her life. Mahfouz's draws upon the neo-patriarchal framework through which one views and constructs women and their desirability, and ascribes it to Omar, leanness as beauty, fatness as ugliness. His wife's body no longer inspires this passion in him, rather he feels somewhat oppressed by her image. When Buthayna expresses excitement towards spending the time at the beach with her family she states, "*ḥattā l-barāmīl!*"[43] (Away to the life buoys!), to which Omar internally laments,

Here is your mother resembling a life buoy. How oppressive the horizon is. Freedom is hidden somewhere beyond it and no hope remains except a troubled conscience.[44]	ها هي أمك تحاكي البراميل. والأفق يحاكي السجن. والحرية استكنت وراء الأفق. ولم يبق من أمل إلا الضمير المعذب[45]

How does Omar manage to connect the resemblance of Zeinab to a lifebuoy to the resemblance of the horizon to a prison? He says that freedom is hidden behind this horizon, but what does Zeinab's body have to do with it? It may be that he feels stifled in his relationship which is slowly stagnating but he finds a scapegoat in Zeinab's body in order to help him express this feeling. Zeinab's female body, no longer fitting his ideal image, acts as a scapegoat for Omar's undealt with emotions. We will see later the ways in which

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[42] Maḥfūẓ, *Al-Shaḥḥadh*, 89.

[43] Maḥfūẓ, *Al-Shaḥḥadh*, 16.

[44] Maḥfūẓ, *The Beggar*, 19.

[45] Maḥfūẓ, *Al-Shaḥḥadh*, 16.

Omar uses female beauty and bodies for his own personal needs, disregarding the fact that they are fully fledged human beings with thoughts and emotions.

5.4 Love and/or Marriage

This section elaborates on the novels' depictions of regulatory structures restricting sexed female bodies by scoping in on the institution of marriage and its relation to love. Marriage, as prescribed by Islam, is the regulatory body that restricts sexual relations between male and female bodies. Love, on the other hand, is a complex emotion; an enigma that has confounded artists, thinkers and humans throughout history regardless of cultural background. The connection between love and marriage is a relatively new idea, but one that has increased in importance. Love is what drives various people, regardless of gender, towards marriage, but marriage can easily exist loveless.

El Saadawi explains the separation existing between love and marriage in Arab culture in terms of the mediaeval poetic and cultural theme of *al-ḥubb al-ʾudhrī* (Udhri love) where romantic unrequited and unconsummated love is glorified over marriage and sex.[46] Even in the novels, love and marriage are placed and viewed as mutually exclusive within the two novels, however, they are not diametrically opposed. Bahiah's sexual relationship and love affair with Saleem actually subverts the concept of *al-ḥubb al-ʾudhrī*. Whilst she does find love outside of the confines of marriage, one which is forced upon her by the men in her family, there is also sexual satisfaction to be found in this relationship.

In *al-Shahhadh*, through Omar's flashbacks, we learn of the passionate love affair that predicated Zeinab and Omar's marriage. In Omar's own words, her eyes electrified him[47]; he was unable to contain his love for her (or maybe her physical appearance). It's implied that Zeinab was also madly in love with Omar, since she gave up the relationship with her family to be with Omar as we learn in the flashback of a speech Mustapha gives to Omar on their wedding day.

"Congratulations to both of you. The past is buried, but she's sacrificed much more than you. Beliefs are apt to tyrannize even those who've deserted them. To your health, Zeinab. To yours,	ـ مبارك عليكما، أصبح الماضي في خبر كان، ولكن تضحيتك لا تقاس بتضحيتها، وللعقائد طغيان حتى على الذين نبذوها، صحتك يا زينب، صحتك يا عمر .. وانتحى بك جانبا وراح يقول وهو

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[46] Nawal Al-Saʿdāwī, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, 335.

[47] Najīb Maḥfūẓ, *Al-Shaḥḥadh*, 26.

Omar."

He took you aside and, completely drunk, began to expostulate. "Don't forget the bad times ahead, but never forget love. Remember that she has no other family in the world now. She's been cut from the tree, and has no one but you."[48]

سكران تماما:
ـ لا تنس الأيام الأليمة، لا تنس الحب أبدا، تذكر أنه لم يعد لها أهل في هذه الدنيا، مقطوعة من شجرة، ولا أحد لها سواك.[49]

Zeinab had to give up her old life to be with Omar. She converted from Christianity to Islam, changing her name to one of the daughters of the Prophet Muhammad in the process, which resulted in the subsequent estrangement of her family. As a Christian woman, she was not obliged, Qurʾanically, to convert to Islam as seen in Surat al-Māʾida: 5,

ٱلْيَوْمَ أُحِلَّ لَكُمُ ٱلطَّيِّبَٰتُ ۖ وَطَعَامُ ٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُوا۟ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ حِلٌّ لَّكُمْ وَطَعَامُكُمْ حِلٌّ لَّهُمْ ۖ وَٱلْمُحْصَنَٰتُ مِنَ ٱلْمُؤْمِنَٰتِ وَٱلْمُحْصَنَٰتُ مِنَ ٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُوا۟ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ مِن قَبْلِكُمْ إِذَآ ءَاتَيْتُمُوهُنَّ أُجُورَهُنَّ مُحْصِنِينَ غَيْرَ مُسَٰفِحِينَ وَلَا مُتَّخِذِىٓ أَخْدَانٍ ۗ وَمَن يَكْفُرْ بِٱلْإِيمَٰنِ فَقَدْ حَبِطَ عَمَلُهُ وَهُوَ فِى ٱلْءَاخِرَةِ مِنَ ٱلْخَٰسِرِينَ ٥

Today all good, pure foods have been made lawful for you. Similarly, the food of the People of the Book is permissible for you and yours is permissible for them. And [permissible for you in marriage] are chaste believing women as well as chaste women of those given the Scripture before you—as long as you pay them their dowries in wedlock, neither fornicating nor taking them as mistresses. And whoever rejects the faith, all their good deeds will be void [in this life] and in the Hereafter they will be among the losers.

(Qur'an.com, 5:5)

In this case, Mahfouz decides to push Zeinab's character in the direction of conversion. It seems that he wanted to emphasise the lengths Zeinab went to to be with Omar. Their love was so strong that she was willing to do anything to be with him, even if it meant actively rejecting her upbringing and religious beliefs. This also reveals the way women's choice in marriage is expected to be sanctioned by the family, regardless of religious beliefs. It is a reflection of cultural expectations rather than religious verdict. As a married homemaker and mother, she is also relegated to the sphere of the family. Modern liberal and Islamic Egyptian society promoted "domesticity as a middle-class ideal and an indirect means of

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[48] Maḥfūẓ, *The Beggar*, 44–5.

[49] Maḥfūẓ, *Al-Shaḥḥadh*, 46.

political participation."[50] Mustapha makes it a point to remind Omar of the sacrifices she has made during their wedding day. In a sad irony, the memory crops up in Omar's head just as he admits to himself that he no longer feels love for Zeinab: "*lam tabqa dharra ḥubb wāhida.*"[51] As a reader, this intensifies the pathos one would feel for Zeinab, after all she has been through for the man who ultimately just fell out of love with her. He laments in a letter to Mustapha about his desire to find love once again:

<div dir="rtl">

كم أتمنى أن أتسلل إلى قلب عاشق. وأنا كما تعلم لم أحب في حياتي سوى زينب ولكن كان ذلك منذ عشرين عاما. وما أذكره من ذلك التاريخ حركات ومواقف لا مشاعر وانفعالات. وأذكر أنني قلت يوما «عيناها تصعقانني» وأذكر أنك لم تتخل عني أبدا. وأن حالتي كانت جنونية. ولكن ذكرى الجنون غير الجنون نفسه. كنت محموم الفكر بركاني القلب ساهر الليل. ورفعني العذاب إلى الشعر وسحت من عيني دموع وتوثقت أسبابي بالسماء ولكن كل أولئك ذكريات محنطة. وها أنا اليوم أكافح للتملص من المواد الدهنية ولا أرى في زينب العزيزة إلا تمثالا لوحدة الأسرة والبناء والعمل. وثق من أنه لا يهمني شيء.[53]

</div>

How I'd like to sneak into the heart of a lover. As you know, Zeinab has been my only love; but that was more than twenty years ago, and what I remember of that affair are events and situations rather than the feelings and agitations. I remember I told you one day, "Her eyes slay me," but you never forsook me in my insanity. However, the memory of insanity is not like insanity itself – the feverish thoughts, volcanic heart, and sleepless nights. Agony only lifted me to poetic ecstasies. Tears streamed from my eyes and I approached heaven. But these are no more than mummified memories. Here I am struggling to lose weight and I see in dear Zeinab only a statue of family unity and constructive work. Honestly, I have lost interest in everything.[52]

This sentiment of pity towards Zeinab doesn't last for much longer, especially once Omar begins looking for love outside of marriage, discarding any concerns for Zeinab's feelings. He also begins to dismiss Buthayna's concerns towards her mother, showing that a breakdown has occurred between Buthayna and her father where there once was a

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[50] Mervat F. Hatem, 'Egyptian Discourses on Gender and Political Liberalization: Do Secularist and Islamist Views Really Differ?', *Middle East Journal* 48, no. 4 (1994): 664.

[51] Maḥfūẓ, *Al-Shaḥḥadh*, 45.

[52] Maḥfūẓ, *The Beggar*, 27.

[53] Maḥfūẓ, *Al-Shaḥḥadh*, 26-27.

relationship of mutual respect. What is interesting is the way Buthayna doesn't accept silence from her father as an acceptable answer, she wants a proper answer.[54]

Love, specifically his love for beauty, is what Omar believes to be the medicine for his illness. He believes to have found it in a one night stand with the European singer Margaret, then later with the Capri club dancer and prostitute, Warda. These temporary love affairs, whilst initially bringing him a level of happiness, do not prove to be enough to bring Omar out of the hole his nihilistic mind has dug. Like Zeinab, Warda is expected to quit her job at the club once her relationship with Omar becomes more serious.[55] This further causes her dependency on Omar since she, as we learnt before, has no family to return to – her work at the club was what supported her in life "[Omar] felt that she'd become a part of his personality and that she clung to him as her last hope."[56] When Margaret, the European singer, returns from abroad the cycle that played out on his relationship with Zeinab begins once again with Warda. In Omar's own words she is uprooted from his soul[57] once he is reacquainted with Margaret. He subconsciously views the women in his life as replaceable, when someone/something more exciting walks into his life.

Buthayna's marriage to Othman comes at a surprise to Omar in the final chapter of Mahfouz's novel. Othman Khalil is introduced towards the end of the novel, with Omar reluctantly back at his family home after the birth of his third child, Samir. Long prior to the events of the novel, Othman was a revolutionary alongside Omar. However, Othman was caught by the authorities and the rest of the group fighting alongside him was spared. When Othman leaves the prison, his revolutionary ideals remain strong within him. By the time he leaves, he is in his mid-fifties The novel gives hints of a mutual attraction developing between Buthayna and Othman, especially when Othman has dinner with the al-Hamzawi family and Mustapha shortly after being released from prison. We see Buthayna showing interest in his story, and a flowing conversation between the two shortly after. Buthayna even joins them after dinner in the parlour for coffee, a rarity for women at the time. Later when the men move to the balcony, at the cause of Buthayna's lack of presence Othman appears "a bit apathetic and sullen".[58] He is disillusioned by his old

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[54] Maḥfūẓ, *The Beggar*, 80.

[55] Maḥfūẓ, *Al-Shaḥḥadh*, 85.

[56] Maḥfūẓ, *The Beggar*, 86.

[57] Maḥfūẓ, *Al-Shaḥḥadh*, 99.

[58] Maḥfūẓ, *The Beggar*, 116.

companions, with Buthayna's young inquisitive nature being the main cause for hope. It seems that Mahfouz's intention was to show Othman's principled nature, this is also the same side of Omar's coin, where Othman has begun clinging to Buthayna (a symbol of the blend of art and science), right after meeting her for the first time, as a source of hope.

Their marriage is clearly a symbol of Mahfouz's beliefs in the importance of science and art. When Othman announces the marriage to Omar, it snaps him out of his episodic delusions and awakens anger within him. Despite their age-difference, they have wed each other and we learn that Buthayna is now pregnant with a son. Yet, as soon as we learn of this, we also learn that Othman is on the run and will have to abandon his new family. Once again, a woman, in this case Buthayna, has been restricted to the domestic sphere whilst Othman returns as an active political subject, even if he is about to be arrested. This marriage and pregnancy acts as a necessary symbolic step in Mahfouz's narrative but reaffirms to the reader the role that women must play in socio-political development, still restricted to be wives and mothers.

Whereas the nature of Buthayna's marriage to Othman is to a certain extent, consensual, there is no doubt of the lack of consent on Bahia's part to her cousin in El Saadawi's narrative. Bahia's parents, as well as the male members of the extended family, believe that this marriage is the only way to control Bahia's 'deviancy':"marriage is the strongest protection for girls' morals").[59] This act of being married off, rightly causes Bahiah to feel dehumanised, feeling as if she is an object owned by her father to be bought and sold;"Fate was her father, who owned her just as he owned his underwear").[60] No matter how valuable or invaluable the object is, her father had ownership as well as the last say on matters to do with her own autonomy, and the price for her hand was a mere three hundred pounds.

Valassopoulos points out the pervasiveness of images of death in the scene of Bahiah's wedding day; Bahiah "likens signing her marriage certificate to signing her death warrant".[61] Her life has metaphorically ended – she is no longer Bahiah but the wife of her cousin. Her silk dress reminds her of what people are wrapped in when in a coffin restricting her movement.[62] She is then expected to consummate her marriage. On this expectation, in the context of El Saadawi's narrative, Dalya Abudi writes:

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[59] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Two Women in One*, 110.

[60] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Two Women in One*, 111.

[61] Valassopoulos, *Contemporary Arab Women Writers*, 47.

[62] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Imraʾtāni fī Imraʾa*, 73.

The consummation of marriage on the wedding night in traditional families, especially from the lower classes, puts the young bride in an awkward, frightening, and painful situation. Her first sexual encounter is a semi-public event in which she has to prove her virginity to a husband whom she hardly knows and who is frequently much older than she. With little preparation for what is awaiting her, the bride is expected to fulfill her sexual duties and satisfy her husband's desire.[63]

When Bahiah arrives at the apartment, she is greeted with the 'tools' she will need to carry out her duties, "*adawāt jinsiyya*".[64] These tools, she remarks, are all sexual. After all those years of women being expected to rid themselves of any form of sexuality, on the night of their marriage all of it is expected to be revived.[65] When Bahiah rejects her new husband's sexual advances he is quick to anger, justifying his dominion over her for the reason that she is contractually bound to him by marriage. She scandalises her husband, running away and leaving him alone on their wedding night but as she does so she is reminded of what awaits.

<table>
<tr>
<td>Scandal awaited the whole family: her father would come looking for blood, her mother would inspect the sheets and nightdresses, and members of the family would be all over the newlyweds' house searching in vain for the family's non-existent honour.[66]</td>
<td dir="rtl">الفضيحة تنتظر أسرتها، وأن أباها سيقبل، يتشمم رائحة الدم، وتفتش أمها ملاءة السرير وقميص النوم، وينتشر أفراد الأسرة في بيت العرس يبحثون بلا جدوى عن شرفهم غير الموجود.[67]</td>
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The use of olfactory imagery of her father sniffing around for blood that would prove her virginity (*yatashammamu rāʾiḥa al-damm*) harks back to the image of the policeman from when Bahiah experienced her first menstrual period. The parents are 'policing' the marital bed to see if the marriage was consummated, and if there is evidence of virginity. In *The Hidden Face of Eve*, El Saadawi mentions the way in which ideas of Arab women's bodies, such as the false notion of an intact hymen, end up in these same bodies becoming the site

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[63] Dalya Abudi, *Mothers and Daughters in Arab Women's Literature : The Family Frontier* (Boston: Brill, 2010), 71.

[64] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Imraʾtāni fī Imraʾa*, 74.

[65] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Imraʾtāni fī Imraʾa*, 74.

[66] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Two Women in One*, 118–9.

[67] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Imraʾtāni fī Imraʾa*, 75.

of a family's honour.[68] The guilt stemming from this inevitably arises in Bahiah's mind when she decides to escape this unwanted marriage.

5.5 Desiring the Body

In *Body Work*, Peter Brooks presents the argument that "in modern narrative literature, a protagonist often desires a body … and that body comes to represent for the protagonist an apparent ultimate good, since it appears to hold within itself—as itself—the key to satisfaction, power, and meaning."[69] However, what is missing in that argument is how patriarchal regulations on the sexed female are reflected in the way they are desired. Within normative ideas of Arab society, women's sexuality is chaos inducing, yet they are expected to be passive and accepting of the advances of men. Patriarchal regulations affect the way men express their desires and sexuality. In the cases of the novels chosen we see the way Arabo-Islamic constructions of women's desirability manifest in the way men express their desire for women.

In *Imraʾtani fi imraʾa*, Bahiah is conscious of the suppressed desire of the men around her, especially the male medical students she goes to college with. Whispering obscene jokes to each other, sneaking an elbow into a female student's breast on the way out of the lecture hall and the tension that would follow …

Muscles contracted, features froze and eyes became taut as a rope stretched to its breaking-point … The eye muscles twisted towards anything that had the softness of flesh, whether breast, bottom, or leather satchel. Each male student would unconsciously take a bite of his satchel and chew it … In the tram he could not stand it anymore. He would find himself inadvertently pressed against some woman's breast. At midnight he would close his anatomy books and go to bed, but the body would refuse to sleep, for the stimulant would have congealed like the tip of	وتتقلص العضلات وتصبح الأعناق مشدودة, والملامح مشدودة، وتبدة العيون من شدة التوتر كنقطة الوسط في حبل مشدود من طرفيه … وتلتوي عضلات العين ناحية كل شيء فيه طراوة اللحم، لا تفرِّق بين الأثداء أو الأرداف أو الحقائب الجلدية، ويضغط الواحد منهم، بإسنانه، من غير وعي, على حقيبة كتبه الجلدية يقطع منها قطعة يمضغها … وفي الترام يصبح كل شيء فوق طاقته، ويجد نفسه مدسوسًا، عن غير قصد، بين ثديي امرأة. وفي منتصف الليل يغلق كتب التشريح وينام على السرير، لكن جسده يأبي النوم فقد تجمع الترياق في بؤرة محددة، وتكون برأس مدبب كرأس

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[68] Nawal Al-Saʿdāwī, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, 39–40.

[69] Peter Brooks, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993), 8.

a boil needing only the slightest touch to burst.[70]	الدمل، وما هي إلا ضغطة واحدة باليد حتى ينفقئ[71]

The imagery El Saadawi makes use of in this section communicates the immense tension that exists within these young men. The contracted muscles, the image of a taut rope , the congealed boil ready to burst . There are no healthy outlets available for the expressions of these desires, leaving the tensions to rise and resulting in deviant and physically intrusive behaviours, such as these young men 'accidentally' leaning against the breasts of women on the tram.

Egyptian heteronormative constructs of women in Mahfouz's novel manifest in an interesting way, and they emerge subtly throughout the story, and we see their development, or degeneration, when Omar begins his series of affairs with various women. From early on in the novel, we see Omar affirm to himself that the medicine for his illness––a type of nihilistic alienation and lack of hope—can be found in women's beauty and sexual passion. In his quest for this lost passion, Omar attends nightclubs alongside his friend Mustapha—who is a frequent attendee despite his marital status—looking for a woman who will reanimate him from his metaphorical death. The setting is already one where women's image and sexuality will be divorced from her personhood. What better place then, for Omar to test his hypothesis? As Mustapha clearly states to Margaret, the singer at *The New Paris:* "[Omar] regards beauty as a treatment which will cure him of the strange illness he's been suffering from recently".[72] Margaret herself is taken aback by this statement which is a clear reduction of her personhood: "That means I'm some sort of medicine?".[73] Omar has no real interest in knowing Margaret, he is just enamoured by her appearance. When she leaves Egypt the day after,he still considers their encounter as something real, his heart skipped a beat.[74] He has no consideration for how his overbearing nature made her feel, only about what her physical beauty made him feel.

In the way Omar's feelings towards women are described, there is the connotation that their beauty is something that stirs uncontrollable feelings inside men, very much aligning to the concept of *fitna*. A scene that best exemplifies this is when Omar encounters

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[70] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Two Women in One*, 31.

[71] Nawāl Al-Saʿdāwī, *Imraʾtāni fī Imraʾa*, 25–6.

[72] Maḥfūẓ, *The Beggar*, 55.

[73] Maḥfūẓ, *The Beggar*, 55.

[74] Maḥfūẓ, *Al-Shaḥḥadh*, 63

Margaret once again at The New Paris, describing the way she looked on stage, with red-lights illuminating her, the colour of a "bewitching she-devil".[75] Omar and the men he has surrounded himself with subject the various women to their strict scopic field as objects of desire; they are "delightful temptations" for men to enjoy.[76] Their desire and sexuality is active, whilst hers is passive. Men's sexuality, in comparison to women's, is not directly tied to honour. It is even considered the responsibility of women to prevent men's sexuality from running rampant.[77]

Omar's metaphysical desire for women takes a dark turn, mingling with the twisted desire in him to kill them. One night, with a prostitute named Muna the following thought occurs to him: "As he pressed her to him, he trembled with an unaccountable urge to kill her".[78] This is a reminder of how women are safe only at the benevolence of the men they are with. Omar's shift in attitude from one of desire to one of deathly violence, brings out the danger that women may be subjected to at the whim of certain men, and this is truer for prostitutes, as Muna is in this case. There is no telling when a man, like Omar, might decide to give in to that violence, and how intertwined it is with desire. This connection between Omar's love and hate towards women quickly rises to the surface.

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<td>

Mustapha laughed and said, "Hail to the greatest Don Juan on the African continent." …

…"It's no secret anymore. Several of my colleagues have spoken about you. The news has also reached your cronies at the club. They wonder what's the story behind your rejuvenation."

He said with distaste, "Honestly I hate women."[79]

</td>
<td>

قال له مصطفى وهو يضحك:
– أهلا بأكبر زير نساء في القارة الإفريقية!
… سرك يذيع يوما بعد يوم، حدثني عنك أكثر من زميل من زملائي، وترات أخبارك إلى بعض زملائك بالنادي، وهم يتساءلون ماذا قلبه وكيف جدد شبابه؟
قال بنفور:
– الحق إني أكره النساء.[80]

</td>
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This is also a reflection of the way desire of women without respect for women is pure misogyny, a clear message by Mahfouz to the reader. Seeing Warda working at the Capri club again, Omar recognises the pattern reappearing in his relationships with women;

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[75] Maḥfūẓ, *The Beggar*, 90.

[76] Maḥfūẓ, *The Beggar*, 61.

[77] Al-Saʿdāwī, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, 276–9.

[78] Maḥfūẓ, *The Beggar*, 95.

[79] Maḥfūẓ, *The Beggar*, 96.

[80] Maḥfūẓ, *Al-Shaḥḥadh*, 106.

"ecstasy, love, then aversion".[81] His despair worsens and he tries to find closure with her. We see the speech of a desperate man in the following scene:

He felt the glances of the other women who'd gone with him, night after night. As Warda smiled, he muttered, "I didn't desire them." … "I knew them all, without exception, but there was never any desire." "Then why?" "Hoping the divine moment would unlock the answer." She said resentfully, "How cruel you were. You men don't believe in love unless we disbelieve in it."[82]	وتلاقت عندهما نظرات النساء اللتي مضى نهن ليلة بعد أخرى فابتسمت وردة تمتم هو: – بلا رغبة! … – عرفتهن بلا استثناء ولكن بلا رغبة! – ولماذا إذن – لأن اللحظة الإلهية لا تجود بنفسها أكثر من ثانية واحدة! فقالت بامتعاض: – ما كان أقساك! أنكم لا تؤمنون بالحب إلا إذا كفرنا به. [83]

He justifies his lack of respect for other women and their emotions in his quest for a moment with the divine. Of course, Mahfouz is also showing how Omar's lack of respect extends to himself. Threading the line of sanity, he brings down the women involved with him as they are the objects of his so-called connection with the divine. Yet, according to him there was no desire. It is my belief that this is due the connection his desire has with the violent tendencies that began to grow with him. The more he viewed women as objects in his personal quest for meaning and salvation, the more he justified those violent feelings within him since he no longer fully considered their autonomy and emotions as worthy of respect.

A distinction is created between active and passive desire: "One question that emerges in relation to this distinction is whether active and passive forms of desire are correlated with masculine and feminine."[84] This section views women constructed in the eye of masculine desire, as objects of this desire. The correlation between femininity and passivity has led to the reproduction of a passive sexual role for women, and therefore their desire is seen as passive and irrational due to their lack of subjectivity. The next chapter

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[81] Maḥfūẓ, *The Beggar*, 97.

[82] Maḥfūẓ, *The Beggar*, 97–8.

[83] Maḥfūẓ, *Al-Shaḥḥadh*, 107–8.

[84] Judith Butler, 'Desire', in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, 2nd ed. (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 377.

takes interest in breaking down the correlation between sexual roles and subjects of desire, revealing the origins and limitations of this dichotomy and hierarchical paradigm of desire.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter explored various discourses surrounding the female body in the novels, namely to do with the regulatory norms that exist around it within Egyptian society and the expressions of desire towards the female body. The main point to discuss is the shame that arises in women due to regulation and stigma of the female body. El Saadawi's heroine Bahiah explores this idea in depth, looking at the way the shame began in childhood and translated into her early adulthood. These regulatory norms are perpetuated mostly through the family, namely the father and mother figures. The parental figures in both novels make several remarks with regards to the bodies of their girl children which contribute to the reinforcement of these norms, which are namely shame or blatant sexualisation from a young age. El Saadawi's narrative goes into more detail regarding the processes of the body that young girls experience such as menstruation and female genital mutilation, specifically in the Egyptian context. Mahfouz's narrative has the more specific scope on the way patriarchally socialised men, embodied through Omar, view the women in their life through an objectified lens, subjecting them to dehumanising standards. The regulation of bodies and desire through marriage is discussed by both authors, each exploring certain effects it has on the personhood of women, such as the relegation to the domestic sphere as well as the expectations of sexual favours towards the husband. Finally, the manifestations of male desire towards women is explored also as an effect of regulatory norms of Arab neopatriarchy. Since sexual desire is strictly restricted in Islam, its suppression manifests as a view of women through an objectified lens as we saw in the specific case of Mahfouz's protagonist Omar as well as the male students in El Saadawi's narrative. The next chapter will move beyond these regulatory measures in society to view how in the novels chosen, women have subverted these social norms and expectations in the process of self-actualization.

6. Transgressions, Subversions, and Expressions of Agency

6.1 Introduction

Moving beyond the analysis of strict gender prescriptions present in the novels, this chapter is concerned with acts of active subject formation. Feminist critical study, keeping with the tradition of feminist political activism, is absorbed into the discussion of agency and whether agency is possible for women given the social construction of womanhood and the confines of patriarchal society. In keeping with a focus on Butlerian theory, this chapter picks up acts of gender transgressions, subversions and resignifications as expressions of agency. Since gender is viewed through a culturally constructed lens, acts of subversion must also be situated within their cultural context, in this case the Egyptian neopatriarchal culture. A specific site of subversion in El Saadawi's narrative is one of eyes and the gaze, therefore a portion of analysis is dedicated to this major trope. Desire and subject formation is revisited, this time with Bahiah's character taken as a subject of desire, rather than the representations of women as objects of desire. Mahfouz's work is discussed in the final section of this chapter which deals with the limitations in women's agency. This section takes the case of Buthayna, the daughter of the novel's protagonist Omar, who finds herself limited in her choices for expression due to the all-encompassing actions of her father.

6.2 Subversive Bodies

The previous chapter was interested in the way regulatory ideals and norms within Egyptian society curtailed sexed female bodies, their behaviour, and their development, yet these norms are not necessarily adhered to by all women. Butler's redescription of gender identities has been established as a set of 'performative acts'. However, Butlerian politics of the performative involves a prescriptive element of the understanding of gender, which in turn informs the practice of a subversive gender politics:

> The prescription is invariably more difficult, if only because we need to think a world in which acts, gestures, the visual body, the clothed body, the various physical attributes usually associated with gender, *express nothing*. … an imperative to acknowledge the existing complexity of gender which our vocabulary invariably

disguises and to bring that complexity into a dramatic cultural interplay without punitive consequences.[1]

Bulterian subversion is culturally situated—it operates within the confines and sign systems of a culture. In El Saadawi's narrative, Bahiah's character could be said to embody this Butlerian subversive gender politics. Bahiah's character, situated within a modern neopatriarchal Egyptian society, is both constructed by her culture and finds agency within subversion through the process of iterative resignification. The beginning of the novel describes the posture undertaken by Bahiah.

| She stood with her right foot on the edge of the marble table and her left foot on the floor, a posture unbecoming for a woman.[2] | كنت تضع قدمها اليمنى على حافة المنضدة الرخامية، وقدمها اليسرى فوق الأرض. وقفة لا تليق على الإطلاق مع كونها امرأة [3] |

Bahiah's body is performing against the expected gendered script of 'Woman'; she never fully internalised the prescribed performativity of womanhood. Bahiah, without having spoken verbally, subverting the Egyptian understanding of gender through her body. This opening description is made more powerful when compared to the way girl's clothes at the time subjected them to restricted forms of movement and postures—"legs and knees remained clamped"—because of their long, tight skirts. Yet, Bahia is freeing herself from such a restriction:[4]

| She wore trousers, had long legs with straight bones and strong muscles, and could walk firmly, swinging her legs freely and striding confidently.[5] | كانت ترتدي البنطلون، وساقاها كانتا طويلتين، عظامهما مستقيما، وعضلاتهما قوية، تستطيع أن تدب على الأرض وهي تمشي، وتحرك ساقيها بحرية، وتفصل بينهما بثقة [6] |

[1] Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (December 1988), 530.

[2] Nawal Al-Saʿdāwī, *Two Women in One*, trans. Osman Nusairi (London: Saqi Books, 2020), 13.

[3] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Imraʾtāni fī Imraʾa*, 15.

[4] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Two Women in One*, 13.

[5] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Two Women in One*, 13.

[6] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Imraʾtāni fī Imraʾa*, 15.

At the beginning of the novel, the only way Bahia can be her authentic self is through the way she holds herself and her body. This idea of women's speech through her body is reminiscent of French feminist Hélèn Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine*, where Bahiah's character is expressing her unconscious desires physically using its own non-verbal language. However, due to patriarchal expectations for women at the time, there is a sense of alienation between the authentic, steadfast part of herself and the Bahiah she is expected to be by her family and her peers. The way her body 'speaks' is truer to her nature than the way she describes herself, Bahiah Shaheen, hard-working, well-behaved medical student".[7]

As soon as Bahiah begins to break away from the obedient Bahiah that she used to perform, this change is immediately remarked by the anatomy lecturer Dr Alawi. He confronts her directly: "*lasti Bahīa al-latiyy ʿarafnāhā*" (This is not the Bahiah that we know).[8] Tension now exists between Bahiah and the people who thought they knew her. Dr Alawi attempts to intimidate her, policing her new attitude, by isolating her from her peers to talk to her in his office. His words left her feeling physically exposed—"*wa-shaddat ḥawl ʿunuqihā yāqat al-blawza*" (she pulled the collar of the blouse to her neck)– – and angry.[9]

For Bahiah, Saleem is an authentic expression of choice, something that she has lacked in most of her life. She chooses to go to his apartment in Al-Muqattam and she chooses to sexually express herself with him also. Feelings of guilt and shame arise in the moment as a result of patriarchal education, however she stands by her choice. These acts of choice and assertion of desires are discussed further on in this chapter.

'Who told you that I'm a girl?' They were used to hearing this question from her. It did not annoy them; on the contrary, her father was rather pleased by it, as if secretly delighted that his daughter was not really a girl, or as if he wished, deep down, that she was not. She knew that her father's approval was genuine, for he had wanted her to be a boy. But her	«من قال لك إنني بنت.» كانوا قد تعودوا أن يسمعوا منها هذا السؤال، لم يكن يغضبهم، بل بالعكس كان أبوها يغتبط بعض الشيء، كأنما يفخر بشعور خفي أن ابنته ليست بنتًا، أو يتمنى في قرار نفسه ألا تكون بنتًا. كانت تعرف أن أباها صادق في غبطته, وأنه كان يريدها ذكرًا، لكن أمها أرادت شيئًا آخر وولدتها أنثى، أو لعلها لم تكن أمها، وإنما هي الصدفة

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[7] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Imraʾtāni fī Imraʾa*, 24; translation Al-Saʿdāwī, *Two Women in One*, 29.

[8] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Imraʾtāni fī Imraʾa*, 45; author's translation.

[9] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Imraʾtāni fī Imraʾa*, 45; author's translation.

mother had willed something different and given birth to a girl – or perhaps it was not her mother at all, but mere chance that had made her female.[10]

المحضة التي جعلته أنثى.[11]

Her father's approving reaction to Bahiah's verbal rejection of girlhood is interesting. He is pleased to hear that she does not identify with her gendering, yet he continuously subjugates her to the prescriptions of Egyptian girlhood and womanhood when he decides to marry her to her cousin. He punishes her for her transgressions and rejection of traditionally feminine roles. This contradiction is a feature in neopatriarchal society as related by Sharabi.

> Neopatriarchal society, as "modernized", is essentially schizophrenic, for beneath the immediately encountered modern appearance there exists another latent reality. Between these two there is opposition, tension, contradiction. …
> From this perspective we can immediately grasp the curious aspect shared by all types of neopatriarchy, the absence equally of genuine traditionalism and of authentic modernity. In "modernized" patriarchy it is just as hard to find a truly modern individual or institution as it is to locate genuinely traditional ones.[12]

Bahiah's transgression and subversion of prescriptive gender roles can be contrasted with Zeinab and Buthayna's close reference to it in Mahfouz's novel. Zeinab and Buthayna, as well as Warda to a certain extent, are characterised as self-sacrificing: a quality that conforms to the ideal of Egyptian womanhood. In the contexts that Mahfouz has written these three women, not much room is left for subversion, in speech nor acts, rather it is their very commitment to the scripts of their social roles which leaves Omar frustrated.

6.3 Being Gazed Upon and Gazing Back

Mahfouz's novel virtually constructs women through Omar's gaze. It is through his eyes which we interpret the world and people around him. The previous chapter dealt with the objectification of the women in Omar's life and the way we learn about them through his gaze. The novel contains no instances of women's optical perspective. On the other hand,

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[10] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Two Women in One*, 86.

[11] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Imraʾtāni fī Imraʾa*, 57.

[12] Hisham Sharabi, *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 23.

many critics of El Saadawi's work have observed the importance her writing gives to images of the eye and the act of watching. For instance, Al Sharekh explains: "The image of eyes, watching, following, observing, is a recurrent one in the fiction of Nawāl al-Saʿdāwī. It seems that the Arab female cannot shake off the feeling that she is constantly being watched, being judged, even if her only judge and jury are the voices in her head."[13] In her examination of the poetics of El Saadawi's writing, Malti-Douglas writes, "El Saadawi has a fascination with eyes that borders on obsession. Like the bodies of which they are a part, eyes are everywhere: male eyes, female eyes, diseased eyes, healthy eyes."[14]

Imraʾtani fi imraʾa is written in the third person, however the narration explores Bahiah's senses in detail, with a specific focus on sight and perception. Descriptions of gazes—both Bahiah's as well as the gaze of those around her—permeate throughout the novel. In Islamic culture, the gaze is tied to the idea of modesty: one's gaze, mainly the male gaze on the female body, correlates with the possibility of fitna. Men are taught to divert their gaze away from women, a teaching derived directly from scripture (Surat al-Nur: 30):

قُل لِّلْمُؤْمِنِينَ يَغُضُّوا۟ مِنْ أَبْصَٰرِهِمْ وَيَحْفَظُوا۟ فُرُوجَهُمْ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ أَزْكَىٰ لَهُمْ ۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ خَبِيرٌۢ بِمَا يَصْنَعُونَ ٣٠

> Tell the believing men to lower their gaze (from looking at forbidden things), and protect their private parts (from illegal sexual acts). That is purer for them. Verily, Allah is All-Aware of what they do.[15]

Writing on this specific Qurʾanic verse, Fatima Mernissi explains Ghazali's interpretation of the verse's implications, meaning that "the eye is undoubtedly an erogenous zone in the Muslim structure of reality, just as able to give pleasure as the penis. A man can do as much damage to a woman's honour with his eyes as if he were to seize hold of her with his hands."[16]

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[13] Al Anoud Al Sharekh, 'Angry Words Softly Spoken' (PhD, London, SOAS, University of London, 2003), 212.

[14] Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Men, Women, and God(s): Nawal El Saadawi and Arab Feminist Poetics* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1995).

[15] Muhammad Taqī-ud-Dīn Al-Hilālī and Muhammad Muhsin Khān, trans., *The Noble Qurʾan: English Translation of the Meanings and Commentary* (Madina, K.S.A.: King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Holy Qur'an, n.d.), 470.

[16] Fatima Mernissi, "The Meaning of Spatial Boundaries", in *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Muslim Society* (London: Saqi Books, 2011).

When Bahiah decides to go to Saleem's flat in al-Muqattam, one of the first things that comes to her mind the moment she arrives is of her father finding out about his daughter's dishonour in the newspaper. The image of watching eyes is repeated obsessively, reminded of what's at stake when choosing to be with Saleem.

Her brain started churning at dream speed, hurling up image after image. She imagined her father in his bamboo chair in the sitting room, sipping his morning coffee. He opens his newspaper, and finds that the naked body of his daughter Bahiah has been found in a bachelor's flat in al-Muqattam. …

Her mind baulked at imagining her father's shock on seeing his polite, obedient daughter's body naked not in her own bedroom but in a young man's flat. Not only would he see her, but so would thousands of others who read the morning paper, including the members of her vast family scattered across the country from Aswan to Alexandria … . not to mention all the employees at the Ministry of Health: her father's superiors and subordinates, who had been convinced over thirty years that he was an efficient superintendent with close family ties and an honourable reputation.[17]

وبدأ عقلها يعمل بسرعة الحركة في الأحلام، مصورًا لها أشياء كثيرة. تصورت أباها قابعًا في كرسيه الأسيوطي في الصالة يحتسي قهوة الصباح، يفتح الجريدة فوق الصفحة الأولى فيرى جسد ابنته بهية عاريًا ومقتولًا في شقة شاب أعزب بمدينة المقطم.
…

خيالها عجز عن تصور الصدمة، حين يرى أبوها جسد ابنته المطيعة المؤدبة عاريًا ليس في حجرة نومها الخاصة مثلًا، وإنما في شقة شاب وليست عيناه هما اللتان تريانها وإنما آلاف العيون التي تقرأ جريدة الصباح، ومنها عيون أفراد الأسرة العريقة الكبيرة المنتشرة في القطر من أسوان إلى الإسكندرية،... وعيون موظفي وزارة الصحة جميعًا، رؤسائه ومرءوسيه الذين أقنعهم على مدى ثلاثين عامًا أنه المدير الكفء ذو الأصل العريق والسمعة الشريفة[18]

All types of anxieties rush into her brain, thinking of the worst case scenario for the situation she has found herself in; her family, including her extended family, hearing about her dishonourable death, her father's reputation at work being smeared by her disobedience. A feature of Arab neopatriarchy that is present within some families is the personification of honour within the female bodies that reside in it. This moment brings Bahiah into her social context; she would be ready to sacrifice her life and her honour in order to keep her father innocent of this moment. "She loved her father in spite of

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[17] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Two Women in One*, 74–5.

[18] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Imraʾtāni fī Imraʾa*, 50–1.

everything."[19] She is aware that ultimately, the oppressive gaze would come for her father's honour and livelihood.

El Saadawi's novel features various instances of 'battles for dominance' that occur between Bahiah and her anatomy lecturer Dr Alawi, not verbally but through the gaze. A strong image of their two conflicting gazes is first presented in the following scene; Bahiah's black-eyed gaze battling Dr Alawi's blue-eyed one.

When he fixed his blue eyes on her, she would stare back at him with her own black eyes. She knew full well that black is stronger than blue, particularly where eyes are concerned. Black is the origin, the root that reaches back into the depths of the earth.	وحينما يصوب إليها عينيه الزرقاوين تصوب إليه عينيها السوداوين. كانت تدرك أن اللون الأسود أشد قوة من اللون الأزرق وبالذات في العينين. الأسود هو الأصل، هو الجذر العميق الممدود في بطن الأرض.[20]

The male gaze is confronted by the female gaze. El Saadawi also makes it a point to contrast their gazes through eye-colour; Bahiah's eyes being black and Dr Alawi's being blue, with black representing a deep-rooted strength reaching into the earth's belly. Bahiah subverts the usual oppressive male gaze, asserting her own gaze over others, these others mainly being the men who surround her. The dynamic existing between Dr Alawi and Bahia relates to the concept of 'micropolitics' coined by Nancy Henely (1977), discussed in the context of nonverbal communications by DeFrancisco and Palczewski:

> In her studies of discrete behaviors called *nonverbal cues,* she finds that the absence of reciprocity in the behaviors transforms seemingly innocent intimacy cues into acts of dominance and submission. She compares nonparallel interactions between women and men to other unequal power relations, such as parent–child, customer–food service employee, and White–Black race relations. In each case, many nonverbal behaviors could be seen as expressions of intimacy, but it is unlikely that both parties equally use the same nonverbal cues. Nonreciprocal nonverbal forms and rejection of reciprocated behaviors indicate an unequal relationship. Henley calls this the *"micropolitics"* of nonverbal communication (p. 3), the subtle nonverbal ways in which unequal power relations are performed, negotiated, and expressed.[21]

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[19] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Two Women in One*, 76.

[20] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Imraʾtāni fī Imraʾa,* 16.

[21] Victoria L. DeFrancisco and Catherine H. Palczewski, 'Gendered/Sexed Bodies', in *Communicating Gender Diversity: A Critical Approach* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2007), 83.

The prolonged eye-contact between these two characters represents the grounds for an engendered micropolitical unspoken dialogue where the unequal power relationship—in social status and sexual identity—existing between them is being negotiated. Dr Alawi is attempting to intimidate Bahiah and assert non-verbal dominance over her, but she refuses to let him win. This dialogue occurs various times within the text, with Bahiah remaining unrelenting in her resistance to his intimidation; she stares right back at him, subverting the power dynamic with the strength of her black eyes.

An interesting assertion of the female gaze is done through Bahiah's close watching of the men in her medical student cohort.[22] The way they are described through her perspective is through a tone of annoyance, judgement, and even disgust.[23] At that moment, she finds agency in the assertion of her gaze; a reversal of gender roles and gendered power. Sabry Hafez refers to this as a 'feminist inversion of codes', applying the concept directly to the literature of El Saadawi. This blanket statement applied to El Saadawi's work is limited and reductive: "Although the feminist's ultimate aim is the dismantling of the patriarchal system, Saʿdāwi's thinking, in its hierarchical and binary structure, is identical to that of patriarchy."[24] This judgement—whilst not specifically referring to *Imraʾtani fi imraʾa*—is one Hafez applies to El Saadawi's work in totality, ignoring the manner in which patriarchal power is renegotiated in characters like Bahiah's.

The first time Bahiah meets Saleem, we get another intense scene of two eyes meeting each other, reminiscent of her nonverbal power struggle with Dr Alawi. Bahiah is unable to break her gaze, however, this time she feels that she has nothing to prove: "[he was] not just anyone. He was the sort of person you have to look at".[25] She can't help but look at Saleem, and when he looks back she feels properly seen for the first time:

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[22] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Imraʾtāni fī Imraʾa*, 25.

[23] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Imraʾtāni fī Imraʾa,* 26; author's translation.

[24] Sabry Hafez, 'Sexual Politics and Narrative Strategies in Modern Arabic Literature', *Alternation* 2, no. 2 (1995), 32.

[25] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Two Women in One,* 43.

The secret behind that extraordinary face lay in the way his eyes moved. It was strange, different from the other male students. They just opened like mirrors in which things were reflected. The eyes of male students did not really see, or rather, they did not see things as they really were.

When his eyes moved in front of hers, she felt as if he was seeing her. It was the first time she had ever been seen by any eyes other than her own.[26]

سر غرابة الوجه هو في حركة العينين حين تنظران، فهي حركة غريبة، تختلف عن حركة عيون الطلبة حين ينظرون. عيونهم تبدو وكأنها لا تنظر، وكأنها لا تفعل شيئًا، وإنما هي مفتوحة فحسب، كمرآة تنعكس على صفحتها الأشياء. وبمعنى آخر عيون الطلبة لا تمارس النظر الحقيقي، وبالتالي فهي لا ترى الأشياء، أو لا تراها على حقيقتها.

حينما تحركت عيناه أمام عينَيها أحست انه يراها، وانها لأول مرة تصبح مرئية بعينَين أخريين غير عينَيها.[27]

The power is balanced between Bahiah and Saleem as his gaze is non-threatening. Through Saleem and his reflecting gaze, Bahiah's subjectivity and individuality is acknowledged and asserted.

6.4 Unravelling Desires

Assessing the role of desire in subject formation and character construction shifts the analysis of this chapter onto a more metaphysical basis. It has been, and continues to be, the main topic of discussion and study in various scholarly works and philosophical traditions. Desire, commonly *raghba fī* in Arabic, may be defined as an immaterial concept acting as a pushing factor—an appetite yet unsatisfied—which manifests and persists in speech, acts, and writing, as it is mainly expressed as such. In an essay on desire, Butler emphasises the connection between language and desire: "Desire will be that which guarantees a certain opacity in language, an opacity that language can enact and display, but without which it cannot operate."[28] Butler asks challenging questions based on this established relationship: "How is it that desire becomes an object of speech, of writing, or of discourse in general? What is desire such that it becomes that of which we speak but also, perhaps of equal importance, that which impels us to speech, which establishes our

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[26] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Two Women in One,* 44.

[27] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Imraʾtāni fī Imraʾa*, 32–3.

[28] Judith Butler, 'Desire', in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, 2nd ed. (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 369.

rhetorical bearing in the world?"[29]

A distinct message ever present in the novels of El Saadawi is how in a socially restrictive environment, expression of desire is an act of resistance and agency. Amongst certain conservative and religious social groups in Egypt, desire is highly regulated. On norms of desire in Egypt, Mourad explains,

> These norms form alliances with religion but are not based in it. In fact, the history of the Egyptian discourses on gender in twentieth-century Egypt prove that Islamists and secularists relate differently on gender issues, but converge in their lack of commitment to the liberalization of women and to the liberal process in general.[30]

The topic of religion and religiosity doesn't explicitly appear within *Imraʾtani fi imraʾa*, but certain experiences pertaining to Bahiah's life can easily be ascribed to cultural Islam—as opposed to actual Islamic teachings—such as being expected to remain a virgin until marriage as well as being married off to her cousin when her 'morals' are seen by her family as having been corrupted. Bahiah resists authority in her sexual desire; "Resistance of the body as sexuality", Mourad writes, "takes place when the norms regulating the bodily desire become constricting, and this body redirects the desires through which it is recognized."[31]

El Saadawi writes Bahiah's relationship with Saleem in a very progressive way. Bahiah feels like Saleem's equal from the beginning, when she describes their physicality in a similar manner; "His palm was the same size as her own, so were his long thin fingers".[32] The narrator dissolves their sexual differences, emphasising their similarities instead. Initially, this level of comfort Bahiah experiences with Saleem frightens her, causing her to run away from him. She feels his gaze looking straight into her, "a strange penetrating gaze that tore the mask from her face, stripped away the layers, making her visible."[33]

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[29] Butler, 'Desire', 369.

[30] Ghada Mourad, 'Unruly Bodies: Dissensus, Modernity, and the Political Subject in the Postcolonial Arab World' (PhD, Irvina, University of California, 2017), 90.

[31] Mourad, 'Unruly Bodies', 30.

[32] Nawal Al-Saʿdāwī, *Two Women in One*, 47.

[33] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Two Women in One*, 53.

When Saleem later asks Bahiah to visit him at his apartment, this choice of whether or not to accept the invitation signifies a point of no return for Bahiah. The other Bahiah in herself—the true Bahiah—can no longer be suppressed.

The senses are so hopeless in understanding feelings. What she felt for him went beyond the ability of her ears to hear, of her eyes to see, her nose to smell, and her fingers to touch. She realised that people have other senses, as yet undiscovered, that they lie latent in the inner self. … They are the real, natural senses, but they have never been developed by our upbringing, or by education, regulations, laws, traditions or indeed by anything at all.[34]	وما أعجز حواس الإنسان عن إدراك ما يحسه الإنسان! إن ما تحسه هي نوحه هو شيء أكثر من مقدرة أذنَيها على السماع، وعينَيها على الرؤية، وأنفها على الشم، وأصابعها على اللمس. وأيقنت في تلك اللحظة أن للإنسان حواس أخرى مجهولة، لم تُكَتَشف بعد، وأنها كامنة، منكمشة في أغوار النفس، ... فهي الحواس الحقيقية الطبيعية، لم تفسدها التربية في البيوت، ولا التعليم في المدارس، ولا النظم ولا القوانين ولا التقاليد ولا أي شيء.[35]

This train of thought evokes Butler's statement on the opacity of desire in language, and the inability of full expression; "language is always less than 'clarifying' when it comes to desire."[36] El Saadawi also invokes sensory imagery, also marking its lack of clarity in generating understanding of feelings and desires. Feelings are beyond materiality and the logic of sensory experience.

With Bahiah choosing to run away from her forced marriage to her cousin, the reality of her desire—similarly to Bahiah's mother when she was three years old—slaps her in the face. Her bodily desires—for sex and food—are displaced and replaced by the desire for self-affirmation and preservation.

Since the time her mother had smacked her when she was three, she felt disgusted by the sight of sexual organs in the bathroom and would quickly avert her eyes. She was not even aware of being female. She did not consider Saleem male. She saw her real self in his eyes. Going to him was an assertion of her freedom and	منذ ذلك اليوم الذي ضربتها أمها على يدها (كانت في الثالثة من العمر) وهي تشعر بالغثيان إذا ما رأت أعضاء ولد أو بنت، وحين تلمح أعضاءها في الحمام صدفة تبعد عينَيها بسرعة, بمعنى آخر لم تكن تدرك أنها أنثى، وسليم في نظرها لم يكن ذكرًا. كانت ترى في عينيه صورة نفسها الحقيقية، وحركتها إليه تؤكد حريتها وإرادتها, وحين

[34] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Two Women in One*, 77.

[35] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Imraʾtāni fī Imraʾa*, 52.

[36] Butler, 'Desire', 369.

choice. When she was with him, she lost all desire for food as well as her sexual appetite. She would become a human being without instincts and without those familiar desires. She would be in the grip of a new, wild, nameless desire: the desire to be her real self and to trample all other wills down with hers, to tear her birth certificate to pieces, to change her name, to change her father and mother, to gouge out the eyes of those who had cheated and deceived her, including herself, so that no one would be able to take her own eyes and replace them with eyes that were not hers.[37]

تكون معه تضيع رغبتها في الطعام، وتضيع شهوتها الجنسية، وتصبح إنسانًا جديدًا بغير غرائر وبغير تلك الشهوات المعروفة، وإنما هي شهوة جديدة عارمة بغير اسم. شهوة إلى أن يكون الإنسان نفسه الحقيقية، أن يدوس بإرادته على الإرادات الأخرى، ويزق شهادة ميلاده، ويغيّر أبها وأمه، ويضع أصبعه في عيون كل الذين خدعوه وكذبوه عليه، ولا يستثني من ذلك عينَيه فيخرقهما ويصنع لنفسه عينَين جديدتَين.[38]

"Going to him was an assertion of her freedom and choice." This expression of choice would cause her to lose all forms of bodily desire. This is because the desire to be her authentic self overrides all others, even at the expense of her past life and her family ties. Interestingly, Saleem's sex does not matter to Bahiah; in fact Bahiah does not even consider him to be male (*dhakar*) and she doesn't consider herself female (*unthā*) either. When speaking about Bahiah's true self ("*al-insān nafsihi al-haqīqiyya*"), El Saadawi shifts away from the feminine Arabic gender markers in her writing, where she could be said to be writing from a gender neutral point of view. Bahiah experiences the euphoria of self-assertion outside the binary. Once again, there is a dissolution of sexual differences between the two. Even though they present in a heterosexual manner, their relationship exists outside the heteronomative sex/gender/desire constraints outlined by Butler; where expressions of gender and desire outside this framework—in this case, one of Egyptian neopatriarchy—are viewed as deviant at best and completely illegitimate at worst.

Desire, however, does not always necessarily refer to sexual desire, it ranges from bodily desires to more spiritual and conceptual ones, amalgamating within the subject. Bahiah's desire to assert her autonomy and take control of her life overtakes her. =[39] This desire arises following her sexual encounter with Saleem, furthering the narrative of Bahiah's journey of self-assertion. In a seemingly contradictory manner, Bahiah's desires

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[37] Nawal Al-Saʿdāwī, *Two Women in One*, trans. Osman Nusairi (London: Saqi Books, 2020), 112.

[38] Nawāl Al-Saʿdāwī, *Imraʾtāni fī Imraʾa* (Windsor: Hindāwī, 2020), 71–2.

[39] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Imraʾtāni fī Imraʾa*, 40 .

are tangled up in a way that is reminiscent of Plato's conception of the "desire to return to the impossible origin".[40]

She burned with desire to return to where she had come from, to escape the field of gravity and free herself from that body whose own weight, surface and boundaries divided it from its surroundings: a consuming desire to dissolve like particles of air in the universe, to a final, total vanishing-point.[41]	رغبة جامحة في العودة من حيث أتت في الخروج من مجال الجاذبية الأرضية، في أن تصبح بغير جسد له ثقل، وله سطح، وله حدود خارجية تفصله عما حوله، رغبة جامحة في الذوبان كذرات الهواء في الكون, والتلاشي الكامل النهائي.[42]

Accounts and manifestations of this form of desire are prevalent in El Saadawi's text, ranging from Bahiah's desire to merge with her mother's body (specifically to curl up in her mother's womb), to lose herself within Saleem, to return to a singular vanishing point, and to experience the effervescence of collective political action, but still Bahiah desires to assert her individuality and be understood as one. Al-Nowaihi singles out this emergent motif in postcolonial Arabic literature, in comparison with the literature produced in the early 20th century:

> If for the generation of Lashin a favored motif was that of the individual, often an elite modern intellectual, facing the uncomprehending, intractable masses, and for Qasim and Diyab's generation it was that of a young man torn between the desire to melt into the collective on the one hand and to live out the modern paradigm of individual autonomy.[43]

This paradoxical desire is particularly prevalent when Bahiah participates in the student strike and nationalist protest. She connects the pleasure of community and political participation with the unitary pleasure of the sexual act, and in doing so she is illuminated on the fact that the love that this unity brings is also a recognition of the individuality of the person or thing—in this case it is love for one's country—one understands with love.[44]

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[40] Butler, 'Desire', 370.

[41] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Two Women in One*, 17.

[42] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Imraʾtāni fī Imraʾa*, 18.

[43] Magda M. Al-Nowaihi, 'The "Middle East"? Or . . . / Arabic Literature and the Postcolonial Predicament', in *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, ed. Henry Schwarz and Sangeeta Ray (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 289.

[44] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Imraʾtāni fī Imraʾa*, 74.

6.5 Buthayna: The Limits of Agency

The interest of this section (and chapter) lies in the exploration of women's agency in the novels, taking a closer comparative inspection into the characters of Bahiah and Buthayna in El Saadawi and Mahfouz's novels respectively. How much space do these authors allow for agency in their female character's subject formation? How possible is it for these characters to express agency? Both characters are coming of age and exploring their roles as individuals, and as members of family and society, with the prescription of a feminine gender identity factoring into this process.

This chapter is highly involved in inspecting Bahiah's agency in the way she transgresses and subverts Egyptian gender norms, since it is most explicit in her character. The women in Mahfouz's novel are more subject to the views of Omar which makes the analysis of their agency that much more complicated to carry out. This does not mean that it does not exist, but that it is more subtle; it does not align with preconceived notions of women's expressions of agency since it is not transgressive. The best character from Mahfouz's work to look at in light of this discussion is Buthayna. Mahfouz truly paints her as the creation of both her father and her mother, internalising aspects of both their personalities and world-views. Buthayna's similarities to her father are highlighted by Seigneurie as follows:

> Like the young ʿUmar, Buthayna is independent minded, curious, tolerant, eager to develop her talents, and concerned about justice. And she, like the young ʿUmar, is passionate about spiritual poetry. If anybody can get through to him, it should be Buthayna. Indeed, ʿUmar declares his love for his daughter and recognizes her many gifts, but it never crosses his mind that his quest is also hers. Buthayna is initially eager to talk with her father about her poetry, but because ʿUmar cares only whether she is writing about a boyfriend, the discussion veers into an interrogation[45]

Omar cannot conceive that her poetry is interested in the very thing he is searching for, which is "the final purpose of all things".[46] In fact, he actively must hide his sarcastic tone in order to affirm her statement. The narrator interjects at this moment with a thought

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[45] Ken Seigneurie, 'Modern Nihilism and Naguib Mahfouz's Faith in Liberalism', *Middle Eastern Literatures* 24, no. 3 (2 September 2021): 179.

[46] Najīb Maḥfūẓ, *The Beggar*, trans. Kristin Walker Henry and Nariman al-Warraki (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 34.

provoking statement: "We're fools to think of ourselves as stranger than others".[47] With regards to Buthayna's dynamic with her father Seigneurie continues by saying

> In the case of Buthayna, she is more than a foil; she isʿUmar's double across numerous axes. He recognizes his similarity to her, and she "understands him beyond words." On the other hand, he is fickle; she is steadfast. He fears science; she excels at it. He lacks the courage to pursue poetry; she boldly insists on it. He is lethargic and diffident, she enthusiastic and enterprising. He despairs, she hopes. And whereas ʿUmar keeps faith only with himself … she devotes herself to the family—the source of her vulnerability. She empathizes with her mother and keeps faith with her father despite his lying and neglect. [48]

What does this say about Buthayna's proximity to agency? It seems as if Mahfouz actually endows her with more agency than her father who is hopeless towards the questions of existence: she is active and optimistic, he is passive and pessimistic. The subtext of this father-daughter dynamic is an active subversion on the part of Mahfouz's writing, endowing the daughter, the figure of the next generation, with more hope. Omar has ironically instilled her with strong values, causing him to cower in her image, reminiscent of his estranged wife.

She sat facing him on the balcony that Friday, their holiday, and he reflected uneasily that he'd hardly seen her the past week. … It was strange that he couldn't remember her as a child, whether she was a devil like Jamila. Now she's a beautiful girl, intelligent, studious, refined, poetic. Her resemblance to her mother as a girl he preferred to forget.[49]	جلست قبالته في الشركة، جلسة يوم العطلة, فقال لنفسه بعد ارتياح: حقا لم أرها منذ أسبوع كامل. ... ومن عجب أنه لم يعد يذكر كثيرا عن طفولتها، وهل كانت عفريتة كجميلة، ولكنها اليوم فتاة جميلة، ذكية مجتهدة وشاعرة، ومثال للأناقة .وأما فكرة أنها تكرر صورة قديمة لأمها فلتطردها عن ذهنك.[50]

Omar is uncomfortable in her presence, clearly intimidated. He no longer sees his daughter as a child, unable to even remember her in childhood. He tries to make small talk with her, commenting on her serious stature and if she's been eating enough, but Buthayna replies

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[47] Maḥfūẓ, *The Beggar*, 35.

[48] Ken Seigneurie, 'Modern Nihilism and Naguib Mahfouz's Faith in Liberalism', *Middle Eastern Literatures* 24, no. 3 (2 September 2021): 181

[49] Maḥfūẓ, *The Beggar*,73.

[50] Najīb Maḥfūẓ, *Al-Shaḥḥadh* (Egypt: Dār al-Shurūq, 2016), 77.

with a serious statement: "*māmā marīḍa!*" (mama is unwell). Omar tries once again to change the subject dismissing Zeinab's condition stating, "*māmā bi-khayr*" (mama is fine), but Buthayna doesn't budge, reiterating that her mother is not well.[51]

When Buthayna learns of her father's affair with Warda, she makes the decision to stop seeing him. She rejects Mustapha's offers to go see her father, an act that Omar takes offence to. Ironically, in this assertion of agency—the refusal to visit the father that has abandoned them—Omar accuses Buthayna of passivity and negativity (*al-salbiyya*) once they are finally reunited at the hospital on the occasion of Zeinab's giving birth to Samir:

<table>
<tr>
<td>

"Your alienation from me is unbearable. I've invited you to visit me repeatedly. Why have you never come?"

"I couldn't"

"Did anyone prevent you?"

"No, but I was so sad"

"Was your sadness greater than our love?"

She said bitterly, "You never once came to see us."

"That wasn't possible. But you should have come when I repeated the invitation so often. Your refusal only made matters worse."

She tried to steel herself against the tears that were threatening. "Grief prevented me."

"That's too bad. Passivity is a trait I don't like, and I needed you after I'd left."[52]

</td>
<td dir="rtl">

... —ومقاطعتك لي غير مقبولة, وقد دعوتك مرارا لزيارتي فلماذا لم تحضري؟

– لم أستطع ..

– هل منعك أحد؟

– كلا, ولكنني كنت حزينة جدا ..

– أكان حزنك أكبر من حبنا؟!

فقالت بمرارة:

– لم تزرنا مرة واحدة

– لم يكن ذلك بالممكن. ولكني دعوتك مرارا فكان عليك أن تأتي، وقد نغص امتناعك راحتي ولم تكن في حاجة إلى مزيد ..

فقطبت لتكتسب صلابة تطرد بها حنان الدمع وقالت:

– منعني حزني ..

– يا للأسف لا أحب لك السلبية، وكنت في حاجة إليك في غربتي![53]

</td>
</tr>
</table>

Omar here takes his daughter on a guilt trip, bringing her to the verge of tears. He describes his choice to leave his family as a form of exile (*ghurbatī*), completely absolving himself of any form of blame. Omar shifts the conversation away from the matter of his absence and piques Buthayna's interest and support by tapping into their shared love: poetry. She is steadfast in her devotion to her father, however, this hope and commitment to the family ultimately turns Buthayna into a Christ-like figure of the sacrificial lamb. The last time she

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[51] Maḥfūẓ, *Al-Shaḥḥadh*, 78; author's translations.

[52] Maḥfūẓ, *The Beggar*, 102–3.

[53] Maḥfūẓ, *Al-Shaḥḥadh*, 114.

visits her father—who is living alone, far from family and community, and in a delusional stupor—he rejects her: "My girl, haven't you realized yet that I'm deaf".[54]

Towards the end of the novel, the reader—at the same time as Omar—learns that Omar's friend Othman has married Buthayna and that she is pregnant, yet Othman cannot be with his family as he is once again on the verge of arrest. She is doomed to raise their child alone. Before her life can even begin—one must remember that she is still a teenager––it has been taken away from her. Her agency on the matter is stripped away, abandoned by both her father and her new husband.

6.6 Conclusion

This chapter set out to present an analysis of women's subject formation in the novels *Imraʾtani fi imraʾa* by Nawal El Saadawi and *al-Shahhadh* by Naguib Mahfouz. Most of the analysis was focused specifically on El Saadawi's heroine Bahiah, which indirectly speaks to an aspect of her novel which is not present in Mahfouz's: the ability for agency for women characters. Whilst Bahiah's character finds herself in a socially restrictive social situation, El Saadawi presents her with the tools for affirmations of agency regardless of her disempowered position within the neopatriarchal power structure. These are through the subversion of gendered embodiments which Bahiah tears through in the way she moves through society, the renegotiation of power asserted through the gaze, and the expression of sexual and metaphysical desires. For Mahfouz's characters, this access to agency is limited, with the character Buthayna seeking more minor modes for this expression done mainly through the writing of spiritual poetry and the refusal to see her father considering his unfaithfulness. Mahfouz presents parallel lines of development within the characters of Omar and Buthayna, and whilst both lines run into the culmination of their demise, Mahfouz presents the possibility for salvation in Buthayna that is nevertheless ignored by her father.

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[54] Maḥfūẓ, *The Beggar*, 130.

7. Conclusion

"Creative writing in itself is an act of rebellion, not only in the aesthetic or imaginative sense, but in the social sense as well. Therefore, pondering the question as to whether women's literary creativity offers a new image of women different from the stereotypical one will not lead us to a definitive answer, if the analysis of some of the images produced by this literary creativity is anything to go by."

- Fawzia Abdullah Abu-Khaled: 'The Creative Arab Woman'[1]

This dissertation has presented a commentary and critique of the constructions of womanhood and prescriptions of femininity in the novels *Imraʾtani fi imraʾa* and *al-Shahhadh*, written by the iconic Egyptian novelists Nawal El Saadawi and Naguib Mahfouz respectively. The questions asked in this dissertation's introduction loom over the various arguments presented. To conclude this study, these questions are revisited and renegotiated. This dissertation argued that the analysis and observations stemming from the chosen narratives should neither be a locus of feminist merit or lack thereof, but rather analysed as literary depictions of certain gendered constitutions expressed as a result of the various factors that make up the identity of the character.

The way in which women—or gender identities in general—are represented within creative work has social and historical ramifications. In her study on the Egyptian novel, Hoda Elsadda prefaces her work with the following statement: "representations of ideal gendered roles and characteristics not only define and shape the contours of national identity and national futures, but they are also cultural interventions in ideological contestations over the image of the nation."[2] This gives the study of the representations of women an added importance in the understanding of the ideal femininity within the Egyptian national imaginary. Mahfouz's novels, especially his Cairo trilogy, have been a site for critical gender studies and feminist engagement, due to his presentation of the neopatriarchal household and the subservient roles women are relegated to. However, the

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[1] Fawzia Abdullah Abu-Khaled, 'The Creative Arab Woman: Opposing the Stereotypical Image and Dismantling the Prevalent Discourse', in *Arab Feminisms: Gender and Equality in the Middle East*, eds. Jean Makdisi, Noha Bayoumi, and Rafif Rida Sidawi (London: I. B. Tauris & Company, 2014), 143.

[2] Hoda Elsadda, *Gender, Nation, and the Arabic Novel: Egypt, 1892-2008*, Edinburgh Studies in Modern Arabic Literature (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), xiii.

writing in *al-Shahhadh* practises a new sensibility towards women and their representation. Whilst this novel focuses on its protagonist Omar, this indirectly allows Mahfouz an opportunity for the exploration of the effects of the neopatriarchal mindset on the male psyche and the ways in which these effects then materialise in the relations Omar has with other men, women, and even himself. He abandons his wife Zeinab, mentally accusing her of being too traditional and a symbol of his malady (*rumūz al-marḍ*), he engages in sexual affairs with an array of women and prostitutes in his personal search for meaning without considering their feelings, and he dismisses his daughter Buthayna when she reaches out to him for comfort and guidance. He expects his daughter to excel at her studies in science, but he also submits his romantic partners to economic dependence, seen initially in Zeinab as a homemaker, and later Warda when she leaves her work at the Capri club to take care of the apartment Omar has built for them. It could be argued that these representations show the shortcomings of the patriarchal nuclear family that is prevalent in modern Egyptian urban societies. Zeinab's adherence to the ideal image and role of wife and mother within this dynamic left her abandoned when her husband fell 'ill' due to his ontological crisis. Yet, Mahfouz's novel never makes women's issues explicit in his writing, rather, it is up to the reader to tease out these subtextual qualities; a feature of this novel which is worth noting.

El Saadawi's novel, whilst limited in diversity of women characters, dedicates more attention to an individual young woman's experience in navigating a limiting world, negotiating with those limits, or deciding to completely transgress them. Within Bahiah, there live two Bahiahs, or at least this is how Bahiah manages to make sense of the contradictions that exist within her. Bahiah witnesses the self-regulating practices of the women around her, and in a similar way to Mahfouz's protagonist Omar, she becomes disillusioned with them, however, Bahiah is more sympathetic towards their plight since she herself must deal with the consequences of not performing her gender as expected. She initially struggles with self-hatred based on her sex and the pressure she felt to conform. Within Bahiah, El Saadawi traces one young woman's journey for self-emancipation within a society that is not yet emancipated itself. There is definitely a level of parallel that El Saadawi is drawing between Bahiah and herself, however that is not to say that the novel is autobiographical. As a literary product of its time and El Saadawi's experiences, this early work within her literary repertoire was and remains eye-opening to the complexity of women's subject formation within a strict neopatriarchal society.

A point of convergence between El Saadawi and Mahfouz's narratives is the way in which they explore the meanings inscribed onto the female body, a reflection of the long-standing regulations stemming from a blend of Islamic doctrine, culture, and tradition. The manifestation of these traditional regulations in the context of Egyptian modernity is best understood through the concept of 'neopatriarchy' as defined by Sharabi, which has been a focal point for this study. On the role of the family, Sharabi writes: "The patriarchal family's significance for understanding neopatriarchal structures lies in its basic internal relations, above all in the relations of *authority*, *domination*, and *dependency*, which both reflect and are reflected in the structure of social relations."[3] The two novels take the structure of the family and the way it reflects the Egyptian middle-class social condition as a point of reference in the way female bodies are regulated and surveilled. Any forms of deviation from certain regulations, such as lack of physical modesty or even a woman existing outside of the realm of attractiveness, results in penalisation which is internalised in sexed female bodies as shame. Bahiah's character experiences shame which she attributes to the moment she first became aware of her 'femaleness' and her mother smacks her across the face. In Mahfouz's novel the prostitute Warda is far more concerned with protecting Omar's honour than with affirming her own self-worth due to her line of work, as in conservative families, women are socialised with the belief that the status of men's honour lies with them.

El Saadawi's narrative moves beyond the limiting beliefs and regulations and the depiction of Arab women's perpetual victimisation. Bahiah's character explores subjectivity and agency through acts of gender role subversion and transgression. Sexual desire is a specific locus for transgression for El Saadawi. In Mahfouz's narrative, sexual desire is written as a masculine act where Omar is the one who desires. The desires—and consequently, the requests for agency—of the women around him are not taken into account, even when they are in his interest. Yet, desire for Bahiah is not only sexual, but there is also a seemingly contradictory desire for independence alongside the desire for belonging. Bahiah learns to embrace the contradiction, running away from her family and finding belonging in artistic and political dissident groups. The road to Bahiah's transgressions was paved through intra-cultural subversion, an idea highlighted in the

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[3] Hisham Sharabi, *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 41, original emphases.

theoretical work of Judith Butler. In El Saadawi's novel, this subversion mainly takes place in the role-reversal of the gaze where Bahiah imposes her gaze upon others; she is gazed upon and she gazes back.

Considering the challenges and limitations of this research, this study would have benefitted from a deeper analysis into men present in the novels in order to have a more refined presentation of gender dynamics, however, this would have widened the scope of this dissertation and is beyond its remit. Involving more literary productions and more Egyptian authors would have also provided a broader spectrum of literary arguments and personal interpretations of gender, giving this research more nuance.

In the context of the two novels chosen, it is clear that the personal lives and ideologies of the authors play a significant role in the construction of their women characters. However, they both pay close attention to the dominant social forces in their Egyptian society at the time, honing in on the situation in middle class and upper class Cairo to be more exact. As a humanist, Mahfouz is more concerned with the broader struggles of Arab life, mainly the fight against economic and political injustice. His depiction of Arab women's plight falls in line with his overall message, especially with his frequent depiction of the prostitute character in his novels as the most visual victim of economic injustice and social discrimination as depicted in *al-Shahhadh*. El Saadawi's work and political activism regarding women's issues makes her literary construction of women more sensitive to the specific social conditions that surround their struggles. In the case of *Imraʾtani fi imraʾa,* she represents the situation of a middle class daughter of a government employee, benefitting from modern, secular developments such as the increased educational opportunities for girls, however remaining bound by traditional prescriptions of girlhood and womanhood.

Gender Comparativism in a Time of Deconstruction
To conclude this dissertation the following question is reconsidered: How does one define 'men's literature' and 'women's literature'? Maybe it is easier to define via the sexual markers male and female, yet even those terms are contentious. There is no overarching theory one can draw upon to define male literature or female literature. The arbitrary nature of the gender markers 'man' and 'woman' has been discussed, yet historically, socially,

and materially they still hold value. Gender consciousness in Arab culture throughout time has permeated its literary production. Arab poetic and narrative personas will be informed by their existence within the gendered frameworks of Arab society, leaving markers of 'femininity' and 'masculinity' throughout their compositions. Gendered experiences are always accompanied by other experiences stemming from different aspects that pertain to one's identity such as class, sexual orientation, race and so on. An Arab woman writing will not look like a European woman writing. An Arab lesbian woman writing will not necessarily look like an Arab heterosexual woman writing. The binary of men's writing in opposition to women's writing will end up ignoring the intersectionalities that exist outside of that strict binary – this is a clear site for deconstruction.

The question posed can only really be answered in the case of El Saadawi and Mahfouz respectively. Considering the arguments presented throughout this dissertation, how productive would it be to do away with the idea of men's writing versus women's writing? Some Arab women, like El Saadawi, find strength in this gender marker. It gives them the platform on which to project their ideas and experiences. It is a productive site for opposition towards dominant narratives perpetuated by 'men', reminiscent of Spivak's notion of 'strategic essentialism'. El Saadawi's life and work was very much involved with women's rights issues in the Arab world, it is therefore expected that her work will involve a deeper dive and discussion into the issues pertaining to women. This expectation was met, even going beyond due to specific content within her novel relating to sexist rhetoric within the medical field. Her medical training and career—specifically working in psychiatry and with women in rural areas—predicate this increased interest. This is not to say that all Arab women writers are this involved in speaking out on women's issues in their work, and also this does not exclude Arab men writers from writing about—and involving themselves in—women's issues. In Mahfouz's novel *al-Shahhadh*, there is an array of women coming from different backgrounds and experiencing the multifaceted pressures of patriarchy. However, their struggles are marginalised in the eyes of the protagonist Omar. The women and girls struggle and will continue struggling, they are relegated to perpetual victimhood. This division, however, should not be taken as a definite and unchanging binary, as that will perpetuate the hierarchy of men's writings over women's writings. More contemporary Arabic works complicate and confuse this binary, yet in this modern period, visibility for Arab women authors was a priority and therefore the importance given to the gender distinction is a product of the political necessities of the time.

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