

## CHAPTER TWO

### Questioning Woman: Leila Ahmed and Nawal El Saadawi's

#### Takes on Race and Religion



The frequent deployment of “women” as a category for analysis characterizes women as a singular group on the basis of a supposedly shared oppression; such a move, scholars have pointed out, is not merely biological essentialism but, also, universalizes certain secondary sociological and anthropological notions. Thus, there is an elision of a material subject and the discursive formation of the cluster “women” to constitute a universally exploited, powerless, and so on, group. In other words, “women” appear to exist outside history and without agency. This chapter explores some of the complications woven by black feminist scholarship into the category “woman” of early western feminist interventions. I also study a primary area of focus in the study of black autobiographies: the issue of who wrote, and for whom, and the critical role of imagined readers who may shape the ways in which narratives are constructed by autobiographers. I then read the autobiographies of two non-Indian Muslim women—Leila Ahmed’s *A Border Passage: from Cairo to America, A Woman’s Journey* (1999) and Nawal El Saadawi’s *A Daughter of Isis: The Autobiography of Nawal El Saadawi* (1999) to tease out the implications of “Muslim” in very different discursive formations of economic, social and power relations within a particular society. My purpose is to avoid a reductionist imposition of categories, “Muslim” and “women.” These two women from Egypt grew up during a period of intense nationalism in their country and I propose to set up, through my readings, instances that obfuscate the category “Muslim women” by way of arguments on race.

### **Afro-American Women and Autobiographical Writing**

The rich corpus of black women's autobiographical writings—from Toni Morrison, bell hooks (*Wounds of passion: a writing life*, 1997; *Bone Black: memories of girlhood*, 1996), Alice Walker (*In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, 1984), Angela Davis *An Autobiography* (1974), Maya Angelou (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 1970), Anne Moody *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968) and perhaps beyond Zora Neale Hurston (*Dust Tracks on the Road*, 1942)—studied in recent critical work in the area examines issues of genre, race and writing for black women.

A primary area of focus in the study of black autobiographies has been the issue of who wrote, and for whom. Despite the fact that most black people during slave-era America could not read or write, slave narratives are regarded as crucial to the identity and politics of 20th and 21<sup>st</sup> century Black Americans. Early slave narratives are seen as historical treatises that documented lives, the writer's as well as the lives around her. That is to say, writers read as rooted in such a framework often left out personal information, and wrote generally about the time and place, about professional accomplishments or travels.<sup>1</sup>

According to Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, early authors of slave narratives “wrote to be read by those who might influence the course of public events, might pay

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<sup>1</sup> See, for more, Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (New York: Arno Press, 1968; *New York Times*, 1850); Nancy G. Prince, *Black woman's odyssey through Russia and Jamaica: The narrative of Nancy Prince* (New York: M. Weiner Publishers, 1990; 1856); M. Seacole, *Wonderful adventures of Mrs. Seacole in many lands* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988; 1857).

money for their books, or might authenticate them as authors” (72).<sup>2</sup> This significant detail crucially draws attention of the critical role of imagined readers who may shape the ways in which narratives are constructed by autobiographers.

Furthermore, Fox-Genovese continues, white American women saw gender as constituting their selves in a seamless manner, which is a condition of stable societies. On the other hand, she points out, the experiences and writings of Afro-American women demonstrate an alienation from and ties to such a dominant model—slavery exposed the artificial nature of gender identification. For example, black slave women’s experiences queried the relation between their own experience of femaleness and the white, middle-class experience of being a woman:

However, in yet another strain, Meta Y. Harris talks of the conscious crafting of autobiography with an eye on its readers.<sup>3</sup> An acute awareness of possible readers and the impact of the reader on the text, particularly “hostile” readers, according to Harris, do inform authorial decisions. So, though a textual extract may be “okay” for a private reading, the same may have to be “reconsidered and revised.” But, while “privacy rights of others” may influence such decisions, she still writes, she claims, to “express” what life “has been like” for her and also to “release” the pain and anger she experiences as a black woman in her society. However, all black women may not wish to express the “mistreatment and

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, “My Statue, My Self: Autobiographical Writings of Afro-American Women” in Shari Benstock, ed., *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women’s Autobiographical Writings* (London: Routledge, 1988), 63-89.

<sup>3</sup> Meta Y. Harris, “Black Women Writing Autobiography: Autobiography in Multicultural Education” in JoAnn Phillion, Ming Fang He and F. Michael Connelly, eds., *Narrative and Experience in Multicultural Education* (London: Sage, 2005).

marginalization” they face. As Harris points out, “[u]nfortunately,” writers “fail” to discuss any emotions of anger in their lives due to marginalization, harassment and hostility associated with racial bigotry. Instead, she wryly points out, a writer will “usually” use themes of humility or forgiveness in a diplomatic strain.

However, scholars agree that the rationality of a black woman’s experiential reality has had to do less with an empirical sense and more with the interlock of gender, class and race. Thus, the integrity of this subgenre, argues Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, “. . . derives not from the general categories of race or sex, but from the historical experience of being black and female in a specific society at a specific moment and over succeeding generations” (65). It is in the tension between condition and discourse and the varying ways in which black women writers tried to represent their personal experiences through the available discourses, in interaction with imagined readers.

Fox-Genovese also points out that the genre of black autobiography contains an important strand: she names it as the general rubric of “report from the war zone” (70). Drawing on the title of Gwendolyn Brooks’ autobiography,<sup>4</sup> organized around the political changes of the 1960s, she argues that such writings depict the author’s self indirectly, through “reports of actions more than through discussions of states of minds” (70). Fox-Genovese then traces the tension at the heart of black women’s autobiographies as “the chasm between an autobiographer’s intuitive sense of herself and her attitude towards her probable readers” (74).

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<sup>4</sup> Gwendolyn Brooks, *Report From Part One* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1972).

### Leila Ahmed: “Women’s Islam” and Racism

Problems regarding the genre of autobiography brought to the forefront by the interface of race and gender assume a further twist with the question of religion, especially in the context of colonized or formerly colonized countries such as those of West Asia. In her article about western feminist scholarship on women in West Asia and North Africa, Marnia Lazreg points out<sup>5</sup>

A ritual is established whereby the writer appeals to religion as the cause of gender inequality just as it is made the source of underdevelopment in much of modernization theory in an uncanny way, feminist discourse on women from the Middle East and North Africa mirrors that of theologians’ own interpretation of women in Islam. The overall effect of this paradigm is to deprive women of self-presence, of being. Because women are subsumed under religion presented in fundamental terms, they are inevitably seen as evolving in nonhistorical time. They virtually have no history. Any analysis of change is therefore foreclosed. (87)

This leads to the next logical step that women are to be seen merely as victims, not as agents who experience history and act from, through, or in it. History is enacted from above, and women as a homogenous group undergo a similar experience that appears to have left them or their lives unchanged.

From a wealth of material, I chose here to briefly examine two autobiographies published in 1999—Leila Ahmed’s *A Border Passage*<sup>6</sup> and Nawal El Saadawi’s

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<sup>5</sup> Marnia Lazreg, “Feminism and Difference: The Perils of Writing as a Woman on Women in Algeria,” *Feminist Issues* 14.1 (Spring): 81-107.

<sup>6</sup> Leila Ahmed, *A Border Passage: from Cairo to America, A Woman’s Journey* (New York: Penguin, 1999).

*Daughter of Isis*<sup>7</sup> Both are Egyptian women born roughly around the same time, in the last days of the British Empire, between a westernized, “modern,” elite and the growth of a grassroots-based Muslim Brotherhood that gathered rapid strength in the 1930s, and with life-world trajectories that are rich studies of contrast and similarity. I examine these texts for the ways these two very analogous lives stage their selves, and the strategies they deploy to make for a successful text, as well as the nodes at which these strategies “fail.”

Leila Ahmed’s prose oscillates between lyrical descriptions of the social and cultural world of her younger self, and those of the generation before her, and musings on the political struggles that her country, and she in her own life, had to engage in. Born in 1940, she writes an autobiography steeped in an unmistakable aura of nostalgia: the narrative begins with the “era of [her] childhood” and life’s musical quality, at the remote unfashionable edge of country, desert and city where she grew up, amongst a “scattering of villas” that led to “tranquil country fields” on the one side and to the “profound, unsurpassable quiet” of the desert on the other side (3). She lovingly recreates the breath, the sound and the patterns of her childhood that haunt her with notes of “loss and of remembrance” (5).

But the narrative is unable to continue with that “music of being,” because as she “sit[s] here now” in the “house of memory,” she realizes that life began with the disruption and desolation of that earlier world; it was with that interruption that she began to move on the path that brought her “here—exactly here,” the moment of composing the autobiography (5). The text then faithfully sets out the trajectory

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<sup>7</sup> Nawal El Saadawi, *A Daughter of Isis: The Autobiography of Nawal El Saadawi*, trans. Sherif Hetata (London and New York: Zed, 1999).

it is going to follow: from a life far “behind” in time, space and in its “modern” orientation in a Third World country to a “here” and a “now” that is located in an urban, academic milieu of a First World country. And the narrative claims to locate the critical shifts in her sense of self around the axis of Western imperialism and Arab nationalism.

Leila Ahmed was the youngest daughter of Abdel Aziz and Ikbal and grew up during a time of major political change in Egypt.<sup>8</sup> A teenager when Egypt was undergoing a revolution, espousing new messages of socialism, anti-imperialism, and Arab nationalism to the Egyptian people, Leila notes that even as a child she straddled many cultures. During her childhood, she spent most of her time with a Yugoslavian Nanny who spoke German, French and Italian. Later, “Lily” attended an English school in Cairo, a “quite ordinary” happenstance among her parents’ crowd, with children from Syrian, Lebanese, and Palestinian as well as Christian,

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<sup>8</sup> To give a quick overview of Egypt’s relatively recent politics and history, Egypt was ruled by the Turks until the British Occupation of Egypt began in 1882. The negotiations of Egyptian officials with the British for national independence initiated a partial withdrawal of British forces after World War I and set the stage for a new, independent Egypt. The Great Depression of the 1930s, which shaped Europe and the United States in significant ways, was also felt in Egypt, where new classes of educated young men and women were increasingly frustrated by their lack of upward mobility under British rule. Nationalist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood grew during the 1930s, advocating independence from the West and its values. Young Egyptian army officers like Abdel Nasser and Anwar al-Sadat were shaped profoundly by their experience fighting against the Israeli army in the Six Day War, the conflict that presaged the foundation of the state of Israel in 1948. They eventually saw the defeat of the Arab cause in that conflict as the failing of a corrupt political establishment in Egypt, and located themselves at the forefront of change. Egypt’s revolution of 1952 was a bloodless one, and the deposed King Farouk was saluted as he sailed to exile in Italy.

Initially, the aims of the revolutionaries in Egypt—ending corruption, injustice, and poverty through progressive social reform—seemed to represent a positive change. However, these high ideals were muted by the dictatorial rule established by Abdel Nasser, who became prime minister of Egypt in 1954. In 1956, Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal in order to both finance the construction of the High Dam, a project designed to control flooding along the Nile River, and further assert Egypt’s national independence. The nationalization of the Canal rankled England and France, who had enjoyed its revenues for years. With Israel’s aid, British and French forces attacked Egypt, but they were quickly forced to withdraw as a result of loud international outcry and pressure from the United States. In 1958, Egypt joined Syria to form the United Arab Republic, a pact that only lasted a few years. In 1971, the country was renamed the United Republic of Egypt.

Egyptian, Jewish and Muslim backgrounds, and of course, there were also English children. It was a school where the children were “prohibited” from ever speaking in Arabic; they conversed only in English (23). Significantly, Leila never learnt to write in Arabic though she could speak the language fluently.

This childhood milieu, Leila recalls, “seemed to . . . [have] no contradiction”: her parents’ generation, “locked in struggle” with the British for Egypt’s political independence, simultaneously and profoundly “admired” the “great strides . . . in human advancement” of Europe, its “tremendous scientific breakthroughs” as well as its institutions, “particularly democracy” (6). It was a time when pipes were being laid for internal plumbing, when streetlights and tramways made an appearance on the streets, when democracy, women’s rights, “new personal freedoms,” discarding the veil were all “in the air” and “freely discussed” (39). At the same time, Leila notes that her parents’ heroes were as much Gandhi and Nehru of India as Saad Zaghloul of Egypt and the “wondrous” modern science of Europe. In her father’s study hung two portraits: one of Newton holding a prism through which white light passed and came out split in a rainbow, and the other of Mahatma Gandhi, lying on his funeral pyre covered with flowers.

It was a generation which was “far more” rooted in their “own heritages” and “different ways of seeing” than their postcolonial children (34). Musing over her father’s opposition to the high Aswan Dam when he was the Chairman of the Nile Water Control Board on scientific and ecological grounds, Leila concludes that this was on account of his “rootedness” in his own tradition and the Koran. It is a trait, she points out, widely attributed to western women who pioneered ideas on

ecology and conservation: their “originality” is said to spring from a “women’s ethos” of “connectedness,” “different” from the “competitiveness and individualism of the men of their culture” (35).

Leila recalls that her upper-class family typically spoke Arabic, English and French at home; the children spoke English with their father and amongst themselves, a “language of subversion” since other adults did not follow it and therefore it was a way of communicating “around them” (23). The siblings conversed in French as well, though almost always in Arabic with their mother Ikbal, who, she remembers had a “lovely voice” and sang occasionally in Arabic. Nonetheless, Arabic was “implicitly” the language of the “*baladi*,” the “unsophisticated folk” of the region. Sometimes, Leila’s mother would get together with her sisters and other women relatives to hear the concerts of famous women singers of the time—“consuming coffee and lemonade, smoking, relishing this singing as if it were some rich and subtle feast”—and “make an evening of it” (24). The children, recalls Leila, regarded the singing as an “endless monotonous wailing” and suffered this “music of the streets” with much “sighing and rolling” of eyes as they narrated the sessions at home to friends at school (24).

Leila’s narrative recalls nostalgically her mother’s family home. Her mother, the first-born and the eldest daughter of an upper-class Turkish family grew up in Cairo and on her father’s estate, “Zatoun,” at Benisweif about hundred miles southwest of Cairo (93). Her maternal grandparents’ home, Leila reminisces, was a place “palpably apart,” with an “aura and aroma” of “another time . . . another order” (99). The “rustle and shuffle” of clothes and the “soft fall” of

footsteps in her grandmother's living room could be muted abruptly—the “momentary terror” from the “boom” of Leila's grandfather's voice would make sure that women “suppressed [their] laughter” as he “passed into the recesses of the inner hall”; the entire ambience was a that of a mysterious world that was “pleasurable . . . and perilous” (99).

The narrative clearly implies that though it was a gilded world, it was nonetheless a caged world. It was shot through with moments of contradictions: on feudal ideas of a distant motherhood as against “modern” modes of an involved motherhood, the warmth of female sharing and sisterhood in seclusion as against the “freedom” of friendship amongst women during her life abroad, and most interestingly, in the modes of being a Muslim in Egypt and in the West. The world of women, in Leila's memories, is a happy space where women can bond and mimic—the seemingly jocular mimicry of the patriarch of the family that simultaneously works an unmistakable menace— and in their sharing subvert patriarchal authority.

Nonetheless, it is clearly a space where only females of the same clan or from a similar class background could socialize. For instance, the narrative notes that only an old servant woman, who had grown up with Leila's grandmother, was allowed to sit in during these daily women's sessions; the rest of the maidservants would only enter with trays of tea or food and leave the room. Neither does the narrative dwell on the tensions of authority and rebellion, for instance, among women across generations, or across matrimonial locations. Instead, the narrative contrasts the isolated loneliness of Leila's life at college in Cambridge, England,

or her early life as an academic in U. S. A., with her childhood years rich in company and consolation. The friendship among the women—limited though it was by clan and class rules—offered a community of sharing and bonding, a history of growing together in a shared ethos, that, the narrative implies, was rarely matched in later years even with friends at colleges or among colleagues in England or the U. S. A.

However, at the same time, Leila's narrative recalls that "profoundly inscrutable" as the women's domain appeared to the child Leila, it seemed to be her mother's "true and native land," a world where Ikbal was "completely at home" (100). Her mother went to "Zatoun" daily, or "almost daily" where she spent a couple of hours with her mother and sisters, from about midmorning to lunchtime, by which time she was back at her home to receive her husband for lunch. The daily sessions—to seek advice on marital problems or about children's sicknesses, to give similar advice, to arrange for jobs or admissions or ponder over possible marital alliances among relatives—were routine for Leila's mother and Leila's four aunts; the meetings were no doubt an enormous emotional and psychological "support and pleasure" (104). Leila Ahmed's narrative demonstrates over and over again that the atmosphere in her grandmother receiving room was "rarely solemn"; it was a relaxed, intimate, affectionate gathering where problems of the women, the family and the servants, were discussed, analyzed and resolved. It was a room where no man, "not even Grandfather," ever set foot (107). Leila also recalls her grandfather's Alexandria house of Siouf, where Leila's mother, her sisters, all their children and the Grandmother summered together, swimming,

picnicking and walking along the Nile or in the desert, visiting amusement parks. The older women might go out in the evenings, to plays or visit friends.

In this women's world, Leila notes wryly, motherhood was "sacred" though it had little to do with actually tending to one's children; the narrative notes in a gentle tone of irony that this notion of the "sacred" nature of motherhood no doubt governed her own mother's lack of interest in the day-to-day lives of her children as well as the tear-drenched "scenes" at the quayside as one or the other child sailed off to England (111). The narrative cannot but be aware of the steel underneath the soft appearance of this women's world—while even her grandfather would not enter, the text seems to suggest that this was clearly to ensure that female seclusion is not compromised in any manner whatsoever. However, it could also be that an older man is kept out in order to contain all the chaos that any of the women may unleash if even accidentally allowed access to an "outsider"! Clearly, the ambiguities of each space and each encounter is being carefully considered.

Another order of issues that the narrative grapples with in her life is that of problems Leila confronted as a student and as an academic on a day-to-day basis—issues of gender, race and ethnicity. During her student years in 1970s Cambridge, for instance, as Leila met and made friends with people from diverse backgrounds, attended seminars and participated in discussions and debates, she discovered that it was the language of Marxist theory that was at the forefront "intellectually." It was a language that she ". . . hastened to master" (sic) (210). And yet, points out the narrative, this theory with a capital "T" with words like

revolution, socialism, liberation, class oppression that represented “great shining ideals” for her “cohorts” from white, middle class families and “stable, democratic societies where they were free to say what they like and go where they liked” (210) had a very different connotation for a third world, coloured woman such as Leila.

The narrative then lays out how the “popular” theories “espoused” by her classmates entailed a “much more complex and complicated negotiation” for someone like Leila Ahmed (211). Coming from a “lived” experience of government persecution of political enemies, abuse of power, greed, corruption, violence, and general thuggery “rife” in Cairo made “Theory” “more complicated” for Leila (204). Granting that the revolution probably brought “many good things” for “other people,” the narrative believes these “new, golden opportunities” were not on “offer” in her “neck of the woods” (205).

The narrative grants that Leila’s is not an “analytical,” intellectual, reaction; it is “merely” an “emotional, lived perception” (206). While people familiar to her parents, part of their “broad network of social and professional connections” lost control over their properties under government nationalization and all sources of income, there were stories of such-and-such family was now being supported by its old chauffeur who lived in his old room over the garage; he shared his salary from a job with a “newly rich” family with his “former masters” (202).

At another point the narrative invokes the Kenyan writer of Gikuyu origin, Ngugi wa Thiong’O, on language—his writings on mother tongue and culture and

written language—as Leila Ahmed passionately talks of “varieties of vernacular Arabic” that find no place in the “culture of literacy” pursued “zealously” by governments throughout the Arab world (281).

But the history of writers such as Ngugi, who—with a background of his family’s and his own involvement in the Mau Mau war, his own imprisonment and exile—addressed and analyzed the use of English language has a slightly different trajectory.<sup>9</sup> The most central and primary difference is that Ngugi has pointed to cultural implications of the English language, its collusion along with Christianity in colonial education and administrative systems to gain “acceptability and perpetuation . . . [t]o capture the soul and the mind . . .” of the colonized.<sup>10</sup> His works in English have portrayed the political corruption of post-Independence Kenya and the people’s struggle to define an identity despite years of harsh political and social transitions; his essays on language, literacy and culture however largely enmesh the issue of education as an institutional method of colonial control, and therefore in the experiences of the postcolonial subject. The point of this diversion is to bring out a specificity in Leila Ahmed’s life-world and experiences, which while open to generalization as experiences of Third World, black students, is not quite “typical” or even “the *defining* experience” (211; emphasis in the original) for all students of Third World countries in 1970s England. Very quickly, the narrative is also clear about the flip side of a

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<sup>9</sup> The close and continued involvement of a writer such as Ngugi wa Thiong’O (born 1938) needs to be understood along an axis of a more intimate involvement of theory/praxis: for instance, Ngugi went into self-imposed exile following his release from a Kenyan prison in 1977 and then returned to Kenya in August 2004. Barely three days after he landed, robbers broke into his apartment and stole money and a computer, brutalized Ngugi and raped his wife.

<sup>10</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong’O, *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture, and Politics* (London: Heinemann, 1972).

revolution, illustrated through the victimization of her family, their friends as well as she herself by the revolutionary government.

Thus, I would propose that the narrative is emphatically pointing out that “popular” theories “espoused” by Leila Ahmed’s classmates did entail a “much more complex and complicated negotiation” for someone like her (211). The narrative strives to term Leila’s experiences—of having arrived from “political upheavals that traumatically affected *our* lives” (emphasis added) to learn academic theories grounded in “moral, political, and intellectual dilemmas” of white male students—as probably “typical” if not “the *defining* experience” for students of Third World countries (211). Disturbed by “midnight thoughts” on the disconnect between Life and Theory (213) and “. . . the silent costs of the lives that we were living” (223), the narrative muses that nonetheless this period of passive learning was probably the fuel for the “intellectual revolution” ahead—questions raised from the margins by blacks, women, people of other cultures who worked at making their own perspectives and histories, their “identities,” “academically visible” (212). My point here is that Leila’s life and experience of academics and “Life” is grounded in her very specific trajectory; one very precise axis that includes being female, Egyptian and Muslim.

At one level, Leila’s narrative is working with the generic conventions of autobiographies—a story of the growth and evolution of a “self,” with an account of the influences and obstacles it faced and overcame. The only difference, of course, would be that this life is grounded in her very specific trajectory that includes being female, Egyptian and Muslim. This difference—gender, class, race,

religion—is what hinders, I suggest, an easy collapse of this autobiographical “self” into a universal individual “self” that the narrative, on a surface level, so invitingly presents to a reader. In fact, this difference is what enables the text to raise the questions it does raise—about being female, a non-White, a non-Christian, about academic theorization from a very particular context and so on. In other words, Leila Ahmed’s “autobiography” constantly pushes at the defining norms of the genre, and pinches at the identities being imposed on her. For instance, the issue of “race” that marks her experiences cannot be read under a broad rubric of “Race” as it is understood under “Western” categories of thinking, given inflections of religion and class. This is obvious, for instance, when the problems of her friend Veena who installs an idol of Ganesha are very different from those faced by an upper class Muslim such as Leila in the secular-Christian ethos of Girton College, Cambridge.

Juxtaposing the “secularism” of the West with a liberal “female” Islam and the repressive nature of official, “male,” Islam from her remembrances of Egypt, Leila’s narrative also ponders over seemingly enviable notions of freedom of speech and action in her new world. The narrative recollection of the earlier women’s spaces in Egypt, women’s times and women’s cultures, iterates it as being permeated with an “understanding” of Islam that was different from the official, dogmatic Islam of men. That women’s Islam was “gentle, pacifist, inclusive, somewhat mystical”; religion was about “inner things,” and “outward signs” such as prayer or fasting in this feudal-upper class atmosphere were “certainly” not important factors in being a Muslim. What was more central, the narrative avers, was how one conducted oneself and one’s attitude towards others:

it was a “way of holding oneself in the world—in relation to God, to existence, to other human beings” (121). Once again, the probable specific class parameters of such a “women’s Islam” is hinted at by the text itself: a memory about “someone” raising the issue of female genital mutilation with her mother. A “grimace” passed on her mother’s face during this discussion, as, with a “polite, restrained withdrawal,” she responded, “That is not something that we do” (97). The “ethnic traditions” that differed in their customs regarding women surely also define this notion of “women’s Islam,” and the autobiographical narrative, clearly, is vitally aware of this.

Nonetheless, though the women of her mother’s world could not read, did not traditionally go to mosques but they were women who held “seriously” the belief that there is no priesthood in Islam: held it as a “declaration” of their right to their “own understanding of Islam” (125). Leila’s narrative is struck by a realization, after a lifetime of traveling and meeting Muslims from all over the world, that this is the Islam not only of women but also of “ordinary folk” as opposed to the Islam of “sheikhs, ayatollahs, mullahs or clerics” (125). The Islam of classical texts is an “arcane, mostly medieval written heritage” erected by a minority of men who “made the laws and wielded . . . enormous power”; it is “abstruse and obscure,” this heritage that dates from medieval times, that has been written over an aural and oral Islam (126).

Yet, the narrative is aware that this “universally” humane and gentle Islam of women could not take into account the power relations of society: for instance women did not, conventionally, have a right to divorce even when they suffered

where as “official” Islam gave women a right to divorce their husbands. The laws were centrally tied to a woman’s economic independence, and Leila has evidence of this from within her own family. Nonetheless, the narratives locates the “inexorable erasure” of the “oral and ethical” traditions of Islam as an irony of literacy: we “automatically assume” that those who write and put down their knowledge in texts have something more valuable than those who “simply live their knowledge and use it to inform their lives” (128). And the Western academic world is contributing to the greater visibility and legitimacy of textual Islam and the “gradual silencing and erasure of alternative oral forms of lived Islam” (129). Throughout history, claims Leila, “official Islam” has been “our enemy” and “our oppressor” (129). Drawing on an impressive genealogy, the narrative points out that throughout “Muslim history,” philosophers, visionaries, mystics and the greatest luminaries who held alternate views were “hounded, persecuted, executed” by official, patriarchal regimes (130).

The richness of the text comes because, I will argue, the narrative also struggles with a realization that the “secularism” she and her south Indian friend Veena encountered at Cambridge was “pronounced,” indeed “almost aggressive” and that the underlying notion was decidedly that people who were religious not “quite on a par intellectually” as those who were “unambiguously and forthrightly secular” (225-26). While Leila did not feel she was a “believing” Muslim, claims the narrative, she nonetheless “knew” that any outward sign of being a believer of an “other” religion would mean she would not be taken “an equal” by her peers or considered “seriously,” academically. What the narrative is grappling with is the hegemonic understanding of spaces of academic and non-academic worlds in a

western country as “secular,” though they were already marked as religious spaces and the presence of outward signs of “other” religions (such as her friend Veena’s installation of a Ganesh idol) immediately marked them as “lesser”; it was a society that “insidiously and pervasively undermined our own experience and denied . . . our own histories and cultures and the foundational beliefs of our own societies” (226).<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, the narrative complicates the complex problems raised by religion for Leila as an academic in the U. S. A. through the category of race. For instance, the narrative observes sharply that participants in women’s studies conferences in 1980s U. S. A. “did not even seem to know” of a possible connection between the patriarchal vision of Islam and that of Judaism and Christianity (292). For example, Leila had to write an article “within months” of her arrival contesting the “ridiculous” notions held by her white colleagues.<sup>12</sup> Leila recalls how appalled she was that women who were radically “rejecting, contesting and rethinking their own traditions and heritage,” white middle-class academics mainly, turned on Muslim academics such as her a “gaze completely structured and hidebound by that heritage” (292). On the one hand, it was a “living” social movement that Leila entered into, with a “rich, vibrant, diverse, and internally contentious debates . . . generated by an intellectually vital social movement” (294). The pulsating life of strife and furious debates, its invigorating “groping” for a way “forward” through

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<sup>11</sup> For more on the discussion of the institution of “religion,” see, for instance, Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993; S. N. Balagangadhara, *“The Heathen in His Blindness . . .”: Asia, The West and the Dynamic of Religion* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994); Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> Orchestrating her memories of those early years of embattlement and heady discoveries of possible new alliances, Ahmed mentions the names of Audre Lorde, June Jordan, bell hooks who spoke out against “this strand” of white feminism.

“uncharted . . . uninvented territory,” all meant that Leila was constantly thinking on her feet, challenged and challenging. On the other hand, “besieged” by hostility and ignorance of white American women in conferences on campuses across U. S. A., Leila found their attitudes and beliefs, the kind of arguments they raised against the “indefensibility” of Islam, as “plainly” revealing “prejudiced, hostile” notions that their heritage had constructed about Islam and its women, about religion and gender.

The “shocked and furious tones” and the “racist gaze” of that early white feminist movement was on the other hand offset, maintains the narrative, by the space that Europe and America offered for dissenting voices. Leila’s narrative is passionate that the tens of thousands of Muslim migrants to Europe and America of today take “for granted” their right to think and believe “whatever they wish”; most particularly, they take for granted their right to “speak and write openly of their thoughts, beliefs, and unbeliefs” (131). It is, “quite simply,” according to the narrative, an unprecedented state of affairs as far as Muslim historical experiences are concerned (131). Thus, the narrative consistently nudges at existing, accepted definitions—at one time gender, at another religion, yet again race. I suggest that this ambiguity that the text raises frames the genre of autobiography, self and identity in a continuously contingent fashion.

Leila struggles to delineate her self as constructed along racial lines, not necessarily religious ones. Constantly conscious of her otherness, the narrative claims that Leila learnt to see the constructed nature of her Arab identity, formed and reformed to suit the political interests of the day. Leila recalls an incident at

school that brought this home to her: a Palestinian teacher slapped her for identifying herself as Egyptian rather than Arab. This was also the time when Jews and Christians were being defined as “other” by emerging “Arab” nationalism. In terms of her career, Leila’s marks out the years of her return to Egypt from college at Cambridge, England, in the early 1960s as the “crucible” years—the circumstances and politics of those years shaped her life and work to come.

What Leila seems to be struggling against here is the conflation of country, race and religion—Egypt, Arab and Muslim into the single category of “Arab.” However, in her emphasis of the Egyptian composition of “Arab,” I argue that the narrative is actually wrestling with a global homogenous category of “Muslim.” Leila’s autobiography, composed in 1990s North America, is consciously welding together problems raised from all quarters which will not allow her to be a universal self; the narrative is, I assert, working hard to resist the identities imposed on its “self” while at the same time working with its limitations.

Titled *A Border Passage*, I contend that the autobiography acknowledges the fault lines and the containments that the term “border” would entail. Professing a passage, a way or an opening, the text is layered with a deep awareness of the conflicts, differences and the fears it is negotiating even as it plots the routes of a life that has negotiated, quite successfully it is put forward, the lines of demarcation and division. At the same time, the concomitant plurality and narrowness of “borders” would appear to hint that the text and its author are proposing an emancipatory potential.

As it happens, Leila's autobiography about a border passage does bear the subtitle, "From Cairo to America—A Woman's Journey," and ends with her arrival in U. S. A. The life and experiences that followed, she notes in conclusion, from about 1980 to maybe the late 1990s (the book was published in 1999) are part of "other stories": partly the story of feminism, of women, of coloured people, of Muslims in America, of America itself and of American lives in "a world of dissolving boundaries and vanishing borders" (296). It is now "another time" claims the narrative, in tones of measured nostalgia, celebration and prophetic visions of the life ahead.

Rather tellingly, Leila declared in an interview that ". . . there was never a point when I thought that what I wanted to write was an 'objective' reconstruction of facts, events, and so on. Always what I wanted to write, what I felt a kind of driving, passionate yearning and even need to do, was to set down and to be true to the living of this particular life. 'Facts' and history and politics are of course—and far more than I understood to begin with—part of that story, but it's really how we saw and experienced these, their trace and residue in our consciousness and the workings of memory, that make up the stories that we tell and that are the stuff of memoirs."<sup>13</sup>

Leila Ahmed's narrative is a beautifully crafted, carefully calibrated exploration of her life, her history, and her journey. The text's use of language, its skilful deployment of rhetoric and an understated prose style are employed to explore

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<sup>13</sup> "An Interview with the Author," in *A Penguin Readers Guide to "A Border Passage,"* appended in Leila Ahmed, *A Border Passage: from Cairo to America, A Woman's Journey* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 5-9.

questions of identity in a world where cultural identifications are complex and politically loaded. For instance, a liberal education in English-speaking schools in Cairo and at Girton College, Cambridge is contrasted sharply with the racism and stereotypes she suffered by her British teachers and peers. The narrative sets up the story of Leila's life through women's communities of intimacy and support—from the emotional sustenance in her grandmother's house at Zatoun to the world of ideas in the Cambridge community that nurtured an intellectual life, benignly presided over by women such as Muriel Bradbrook and Kathleen Raine.

So, the author would seem to invite us to view her crossing—a crossing through, with and over borders—as at once both exclusionary and enabling. I have tried to demonstrate, through my analyses of specific themes and instances in Leila Ahmed's autobiography, the textual strategies deployed to bring into being the contingent factors of a successful life story. In a very interesting move, the text takes on stereotypes of her pre-American life as being understood in a “pre-modern” framework, where women had very little or no effective agency, as far as politics or history in the sense of a “public sphere” go. That is to say, the narrative brings to center-stage the erasure of a “folk” or “women's” Islam by a text-centric, patriarchal Islam, circumscribed though as it is, and how “fact[s]” of history and politics were seen and “experienced.” The women's world at Zatoun was as rich in its communitarian possibilities of a sisterhood as that of Girton College, Cambridge, even if material or ideological specificities cannot be collapsed under the same rubric.

Interestingly, in an Epilogue titled “Cairo Moments” Leila recounts a brief visit she paid to her childhood city as a renowned academic, courtesy the American University of Cairo. Though a hectic schedule, the narrative regrets, did not allow time for nostalgic indulgences, Leila draws a quick sketch of the city and the people she saw. Young women, probably “educated professional women, working women, upwardly mobile women” wore the “modern Islamic dress” of a veil which though no longer signified seclusion or invisibility but rather, affirmed a “right to work” in the public world, “pursuing professional and working lives” (300). While there was a palpably “growing presence of fundamentalism and fundamentalism’s deadly intent to curtail freedom of thought,” a sense of “intellectual vitality and cultural richness,” an almost “palpable vibrancy and ferment” seemed to be electrifying the atmosphere (300).

Leila’s autobiography raises what for me is a central challenge: the idea that “fundamentalism” is tied to a kind of Third World “government behaviour” that would “drive almost any population crazy” (301) and the idea that Europe and America are lands where “freedom of thought and religion [are] accepted norms” (131). While this would be a somewhat simplistic juxtaposition of ideas from a rich and vibrant text, it nonetheless encapsulates some of the issues the text is raising about imposed, understood frameworks of thought.

I will suggest that the text dismantles the “West” as a space and time of intellectual, political possibility and promise that a “Third World” country can only aspire after. If it is possible to feel the texture of the frameworks somewhat more carefully, the relative “norms” of “democracy” and “freedom,” Leila

Ahmed's narrative hints at the limits of an eighteenth century European conceptual inheritance. In which case, our readings could be opened to possibilities that are generated from "other" historical experiences and political subjects, and not merely a superimposition of categories of thought and experience.

### 3

#### **Nawal El Saadawi: Sexual Mores and Subversive Moves**

Nawal El Saadawi (born 1931) is a leading Egyptian feminist, sociologist, medical doctor and militant writer on Arab women's problems; she is one of the most widely translated contemporary Egyptian writers, and her work is available in twelve languages. Born in a small village, Kafr Tahla, that does not show up on a map of Cairo, El Saadawi was raised amongst eight siblings, in a fairly traditional manner, which meant that she was "circumcised" at the age of six; on the other hand; in a very un-traditional way, she was also educated at an "English language" school and went to University in the "modern" way.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Despite socio-cultural as well as economic limitations imposed by both religious and colonial oppression on rural women, El Saadawi attended the University of Cairo and graduated in 1955 with a degree in psychiatry. After completing her education, El Saadawi practiced psychiatry and eventually worked as Egypt's Director of Public Health in the Ministry of Health from 1958 to 1972.

In 1972, El Saadawi was dismissed from her post in the ministry for publishing *Al-mar'a wa-al-jins*, which dealt with sex, religion, and the trauma of female clitoridectomy—all taboo subjects. In 1972, her first work of non-fiction, *Women and Sex* was published, which as the title suggests, dealt with the proscribed subject of women and sexuality and also sensitive subjects of politics and religion. Nawal El Saadawi was a writer at the High Institute of Literature and Science from 1973 to 1978. She was also a researcher at Ain Shams University's Faculty of Medicine in Cairo, and worked for the United Nations, as the director of African Training and Research Center for Women in Ethiopia (1978-80), and adviser for the United Nations Economic Commission for West Africa in Lebanon.

In 1981, Saadawi criticized President Anwar Sadat's one-party rule. She was arrested and imprisoned for two months in Qanatir Women's Prison under the Egyptian "Law for the Protection of Values from Shame." Although she was denied pen and paper, El Saadawi continued to write in prison, using a "stubby black eyebrow pencil" and "a small roll of old and tattered toilet paper." She was released in 1982, and in 1983 she published *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*, a partly autobiographical work. It is considered a pioneering work in modern feminist fiction in Arabic, though it is also critiqued for its narrative closure where the rebellious protagonist accepts her lot.

Nawal El Saadawi's early stories were published in newspapers and magazines. Her first books appeared in the 1950s. In 1958 she made her debut as a novelist with *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, a partly autobiographical work. In the 1970s she began to criticize openly the patriarchal norms of her society and write about unmentionable issues, such as female circumcision, abortion, sexuality, child abuse, and women's oppression in different forms.

Nawal El Saadawi's autobiography reflects on her early life in Egypt, framed by her exile in Carolina, U. S. A.<sup>15</sup> Her memories, claims the narrative, allow her to discover her childhood years more clearly than the more recent past. She inherited perhaps the dreams of her parents or perhaps she was born with dreams of another planet, "another world on earth and in the heavens" (6). Nawal could not succumb before a country that "robbed" her of "pride or freedom," a husband who "did not treat . . . as an equal partner" or a God who "made me only half a human being" (7).

But Nawal's narrative begins with the teacher who first taught her the gift of writing, her mother Zaynab: her mother, she discovers as she writes, has been the "spinal column" that has held Nawal up (2). She not only taught her daughter to read and write, but remained resolute—when finances were precarious with six girls and three boys to educate and bring up—that Nawal would continue her

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In 1982, she established the Arab Women's Solidarity Association, the first legal, independent feminist organization in Egypt. It was banned in 1991 after criticizing US involvement in the Gulf War, which El Saadawi felt should have been solved among the Arabs. When her name appeared on a fundamentalist death list, she fled with her husband to the United States, where she taught at Duke University and Washington State University in Seattle. She returned to Egypt in 1996.

<sup>15</sup> Nawal El Saadawi, *A Daughter of Isis: The Autobiography of Nawal El Saadawi*, trans. Sherif Hetata (London and New York: Zed, 1999).

education and not be pressurized into an early marriage. That primary relationship, muses Nawal, “decided the course” of her life for even when she was filled with “hatred” against her mother at times, “something would come along” and the mother would once again be a “shining star,” a “goddess like Isis” (4). A housewife with no professional skills, property or income of her own, she had a “self-respect and pride” that empowered her to consider walking out of the house the one time her husband raised his voice at her (6). She was also a woman with dreams: as a young girl, she had wanted to become a musician, an inventor, a pilot, to see the world, but her father Shoukry Bey had pulled her out of school and married her off at age fifteen to Al-Sayed Al-Saadawi, a school-teacher sixteen years older to her (6). Nawal’s mother died in 1958, ten pregnancies and twenty-nine years later, at the age of forty-five (3).

The narrative’s most poignant and painful parts come from Nawal’s memories of her mother, the happy memories of their relationship and the sense of betrayal by her parent that Nawal wrestled with all her life. Writing at the age of sixty-two, Nawal’s senses conjure up for her the smell of her mother’s body: the “odour of her milk,” of “hot soup on winter nights” and “corn cake rising in the oven” (4). That smell—“of fresh milk and hot bread and steam rising from soup in the cold of winter” (24)—has never left Nawal’s nostrils, we are informed. It is “as though [it is] the smell of my [Nawal’s] body” (24). She remembers her mother’s voice in the stillness of the night “like the voice of God,” her laugh in the morning a “ray of sunlight” that resembled “no other laugh in the world” (24). Her mother’s laugh was something that “rang out in the house, swept through the walls into the street, into open space filling the whole universe” (24). The child Nawal would run to

her mother, who would lift the child to her breast, hold her, and sing and play with her eldest daughter. She is the voice that “speaks” to Nawal El Saadawi if something’s wrong, “rescues” her just in time and “encourages” in moments of despair (4).

And Nawal also recollects her mother’s last years, as she lay sick for two years in the same yellow brass bed where she lay on her wedding night, where she gave birth to nine children. But it was Nawal, the narrative mourns,

... who carried her mother in her arms when she lay on her deathbed, held her up to her breast and fed her. None of the males ever carried her in his arms, or held her close to his chest. (24)

And the narrative painfully lays out the aching memories of loss: it is almost as if the author lifts her head and glimpses in the mirror herself feeding her ailing mother, instead of the mother feeding Nawal.

Her head lies on my chest just as my head used to lie on her while I whispered my dreams to her, and now she is whispering her dreams to me. Her voice is halting, her breathing weak, her words disjointed, cut short, incomplete. I strain my ears, fuse all my senses into the one single sense of hearing. I pray that time, that the hands of my watch, go slower, let her say what she has to say. I bring my ears to her lips, try to wring words out of silence, to help her find them just as she used to help me find them and speak. She opens her mouth, tries to pronounce them but they escape her, just as time escaped her, just as everything else escaped her and turned to nothing. (24-25)

Though more than thirty years have passed since her mother's death, Nawal can still feel the spoon in her hand as she fed her mother, the touch of her head on Nawal's chest; it as though "she died yesterday" (25). The carefully controlled prose lays bare a heart-wrenching loss at the same time as it detachedly analyses the ramifications of that primary relationship, its continued effects and resonances on Nawal's life over the years.

However, the first lessons in philosophy, in religion and in politics came from her paternal grandmother. Mabrouka, the daughter of the woman from Gaza, later called Sittil Hajja by everyone, had "strong rough fingers," with a "long sinewy neck" whose muscles stood out from years of carrying heavy sacks, earthenware jars or similarly heavy weights (25-26). Her grandmother would tell Nawal stories of the Al Saadawi ancestors, and also the story of her own marriage. As the child listened in open-mouthed wonder, Sittil Hajja would pronounce that as Allah was her witness, it was true that in their village, the "wedding bed is a deathbed" (27). Bursting into "sudden laughter"—a "strange, jerky, gasping, muffled laughter" which was "almost like sobbing"—she would laugh until her voice "choked" and "tears welled from her eyes" (27).

The autobiographical narrative sets up early on the figure of Sittil Hajja—who was married at ten, gave birth to fifteen children during eighteen years of marriage, and was widowed at twenty-eight (31)—whom Nawal resembles. Nawal's feet are "big" and "steady" and "hit the ground" in "exactly" same rhythm; she tenses the muscles of her back, braces her shoulders and holds her body straight the way her peasant grandmother did (48). And her palms were

bigger than any that Nawal had ever seen: “bigger than that of the village headman, of the king, bigger than that of my father or our Lord Muhammad, or our Lord Abraham” (75).

But, to this day, claims the narrative, it has been difficult to comprehend the source of her grandmother’s pride—a “real pride” that came “born” in her “blood” and body, “something . . . from her mother, or her grandmother, that woman from Gaza” (48). Though completely unlettered, she could wave her big rough hand in front of the village headman’s face as she proclaimed “Allah is justice” and that people have comes to know through “reason” that they were not “slaves” (7). She laboured over a piece of land that she had inherited from her mother, like the three million poor peasants of the time. She laboured with her hoe alone, we are told, “from the moment the sun rose to the moment it set” (73). Her labour pains would come as she stood in the field, when she would

. . . squat on the ground, open her legs wide apart . . . take a long deep breath to fill her chest with air, let it out with all the force she could muster in her body, pressing down at the same time on her belly with the flat of her hand, and the child would shoot out sprawling on the ground. (73)

The narrative continues in a level tone about the rest of the procedure, as Sittil Hajja cut off the umbilical cord with her hoe, disposed of the placenta, put her baby in one of her baskets and walked home at the end of the day with the buffalo following behind her. It was Sittil Hajja’s foresight in educating her only son in the new, “modern” way rather than in the traditional religious mode of study that enabled him to become a civil servant in the government. For, in a complete

contrast, Nawal's father's step-brother studied Islam but never understood anything more than its rituals or its very limiting jurisprudence.

Women have an "untold" history, points out the narrative, passed "orally" from one generation to another, (75). As the narrative sketches in sure strong strokes the outline of El Saadawi's "self," her lineage stretches in vivid imagination to a mythical goddess Nefertiti or Queen Hatchipsut, and to the Isis of the title. Nawal had once been chosen for the role of Isis in a school play, when she sang and danced to such applause that when she walked on the street thereafter, people pointed her out, "There is Isis" (101). The narrative means of charting a genealogy of strong, proud women, with peasant-like reddish brown skin, is unmistakable, and the narrative repeatedly tells of Nawal's grandmother's strength and pride, and a strong sense of individuality that enabled her to confront even the village headman, waving her big hand "rough, with cracked skin" in his face emphatically (73). Similarly, intervening in family discussions on the king and politics, she could make the caustic remark that God could choose to be where He likes, but the king had the people on his side and everyone would burst out laughing (89).

However, the narrative remarks ruefully, when Nawal was a child she also hated her grandmother for proclaiming that a boy was worth fifteen girls (48) or for giving her one millime for the three she gave Nawal's brothers on Eid (84) or declaring that marriage was Nawal's "destiny," cackling in fits of laughter at the protests of the shrieking child (49).

And this is the other primary theme of the autobiography: the almost ritualized cruelty of a patriarchal society towards women. The narrative recalls vividly the trauma of her own circumcision when she was six: Nawal's mother did not rescue her daughter from the midwife who came to carry out the rites of female circumcision or the four "hefty" women who pinned her down, "as though crucifying" the helpless child while the midwife swooped down on her (62-64). Fifty-six years have gone by that summer day, when Nawal lay in a pool of blood, throbbing in pain. But the episode has left a far deeper wound, says the narrative, a wound in the spirit that is "like an abscess deep" in her flesh (63). Nawal's school friend Mariam, a Christian, too underwent a similar trauma. It was as if, notes the narrative, girls who believed in the Messiah did not "escape" any more than those who believed in Mohammad. The women of her family told Nawal that circumcision was ordained by the Prophet; the child is disturbed about how any prophet—Jesus or Mohammad—could carry such "hatred" against female anatomy (63). The "why" that arose of the brutal exercise has "stayed" with Nawal throughout her life (63).

Nawal was the second child in the family; her older brother Tala'at was the first born, and was the darling of both sides of the family. When her father bought toys for the children, he bought airplanes that could be wound up to fly in the air, or a boat, or a pistol for his son and dolls for Nawal. Nawal, the narrative tells us, "hated" the "dumb lifeless" dolls that "could not move from their place" (44). When Nawal tried to hold the pistol, she would be reprimanded. Bigger in build than her brother, Nawal could run faster than him and did better than him at school. Her brother hated school and would cry and kick every morning; Nawal

would be dressed and eager to “shoot out of the house” (45). Her brother could bare his chest, but though the child Nawal’s chest was as flat, it had to be hidden for it was a “stigma, a shame” (58). He played all year round and failed in his examinations at school while Nawal worked at school and at home, and never had a holiday. She knelt over bathroom tiles and scrubbed, she peeled bowl after bowl of onions and the people seemed to be happy: they were happier, thought the bitter Nawal, when she scrubbed the floor than when she did well at school (130). Therefore, her anger grew, even as she heard the constant refrain that excused her brother but damned her: “He is a boy and you are a girl.” It grew, reflects the narrative in a strangely lucid image, like weeds grow in the sea.

The narrative carefully remembers how her mother diligently strained to teach Nawal how to cook, wash dishes and cut onions into rings. But Nawal dreamed of escaping the house, where the kitchen was the space of suffering the “humiliation of being female” (46). She would listen from a corner as her father narrated stories to her brother and spoke to him about the Koran and God. The father looked towards Tala’at, as though addressing only him, turning to Nawal only when he was thirsty and wanted a glass of water, or her mother was laying the table and the father would admonish the girl to help out (67). Nawal, recollects the narrative, no longer saw her mother as she grew older, except in the kitchen—she was “withdrawing” from Nawal’s life as the child sought the world of her father and her brother. Vividly conjuring a visual image, the narrative recalls that as the distance between mother and daughter grew her mother seemed to sit farther and farther away on the couch, “shrinking” even as her belly got swollen with child. Her breasts hung down as she suckled one child after another, her waist

disappeared, fat appeared around her body and her world made Nawal “shiver”—a world of the pungent odours of “onions and garlic” choked with “smoke or soot rising from a kerosene-burning stove” (60). And, the narrative recollects in tones of aching sadness, Nawal could no longer believe her mother for the child never saw the mother read anything, leave alone the Koran and neither did the mother know any of the stories about the prophets that her father told her (83). The text is carefully, systematically, charting the systemic alienation of women from women under a patriarchal value system.

Similarly, she was only six when the words “God, calamity, marriage” became a sentence in her heart and head: marriage was a mysterious word that had made her forty-four year old maternal grandmother look seventy (39), drained of all blood just as it drained her paternal grandmother to produce fifteen children in eighteen years, born often as she was working in the fields (31-32; 73). When her cousin Zaynab was married at the age of ten, the narrative recounts how Nawal could detect beneath the smiles of the women the sadness and the tears that had “dried over the years,” the “gloom” which “enveloped their wedding night” when the groom had to first traditionally beat his wife before forcing himself on her (124). As she learns of her own impending marriage with an uncle’s widower son, the narrative remembers that the walls seem to “close in” and “collapse” on her (125).

The life of women, it appeared to the young Nawal, was full of pain; again and again, the narrative smells the “odour of onions and garlic, of alum and incense, of perfume mingled with sweat, of laziness and apathy” (107). It was reading and writing that has saved her, claims the narrative, from the first to many more later

prospective grooms, even ones with degrees from Cairo or Sorbonne or Oxford. In dramatic and provocative images, the narrative recounts that as they discovered Nawal “loved the touch of the pen” more than the “feel of the ladle” or the “handle of the broom,” they “disappeared” like a “whiff of gentle breeze” (129). In a chapter entitled “Uncles, Suitors and Other Bloodsuckers” the narrative gives a humorous account of how the clever Nawal made the first of many suitors take to his heels. When her first suitor was due to visit the family, the living room was given a thorough cleaning. And her two aunts grabbed Nawal and pinned her inside the bathroom: their job was to remove body hair off Nawal with hot wax. As Nawal’s screams ripped across the house, her grandmother Sittil Hajja patted her that this was for Nawal’s best interest. It was as if these assorted aunts—spinsters, divorcees, widows, barren females—had found in Nawal

... a victim, a piece of flesh in which they could dig their hard cruel fingers seeking to wrench out of it some unlived pleasure buried deep in them, to bring to life some repressed desire hidden in the secret recesses of their bodies, like a soil so parched, so thirsty for water that it cracks open to imbibe, to devour whatever drop of moisture it can get. (144)

As Nawal contemplated the options before her—running away, committing suicide, burning down the whole house—she made a plan. Nawal stood passively as the women of her family pinched and probed at her, dressed her and painted her. When the guests arrived later that evening and were waiting for her, Nawal paused before entering the living room to quickly wipe off the red on her lips, tousle her hair, and bite into a raw eggplant that would stain her white teeth in an unattractive manner. When she stood before the suitor with a tray laden with cups of hot coffee and glasses of cold water, the pointed spike of Nawal’s narrow heel

caught in a hole in the carpet and all the hot and cold liquids tipped over on to the chest of the suitor (146-147). An earthquake or a volcano lasts a few moments, comments the narrative on a wry note, but the aftermath of that catastrophe lasted several weeks; however, chuckles the narrative, a “sound thrashing” was of little or no consequence, compared to the disappearance of her suitor like a “wispy summer cloud” in the wind. And the coffee tray “did not need to be upset after that first time” (154)! Nawal acquired the reputation of “making suitors take to their heels”; opinions and theories abounded about the reasons, ranging from her dark complexion, the signs of poverty of the family, her height, her big mouth, her protruding teeth to her undesirably developed muscles (154).

But by the time Nawal was fourteen, in 1945, she no longer had to waste her energy on fighting battles against the suitors mustered by various members of the clan. Her parents took over the task. She lived as a boarder at a school in the city and met girls her own age from different backgrounds. She wrote her first play at school inspired by *Adam Bede*, and was nearly expelled for staging it surreptitiously one night. She distributed pamphlets for a patriotic demonstration against the British and participated in the demonstration; later on, she became the only girl singled out for expulsion. The expulsion did not materialize, though, thanks to Nawal’s father.

After her secondary school, Nawal dreamed of becoming a famous writer and wanted to join the School of Literature at the University. But her mother pointed out that she who had passed with the highest grades ought not to aim for a life of poverty as a writer. Thus, urged by her mother, Nawal joined medicine at the

University when she was eighteen whereas all the girls on both sides of the family had been long married and had become mothers too. The narrative recalls how the fees for medical school were steep for her family; Nawal noticed the “tremble” of her father’s hands and inhaled the “print of his fingers on the banknote smelling of sweat” (266). Burdened by “guilt” and an “uneasy conscience” over the definite hunger her siblings would have to face to pay for Nawal’s schooling, she walked into the Dean’s huge office. Nervous and overawed, Nawal nonetheless managed to blurt out that she deserved an exemption because of her consistent high grades; that her father was educating all nine of his children without discrimination, and that he had participated in the 1919 revolution. Impressed by her courage and her arguments, the Dean signed her application for exemption of the medical school fees for her entire period of study (267-269). The rejoicing that followed in the El Saadawi household raised Nawal’s stature immensely.

The period of medical school was also a time of political opposition, nationalist movements, strikes and demonstrations, and rumours of rampant corruption in the system. Nawal was the only girl at school who delivered speeches, or wrote articles or stories. The abrogation of the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty by the Wafdist government in 1951 led to demonstrations, where Nawal joined as the only girl among crowds of male students. And the narrative stops here, abruptly, in the middle of medical school. The “Afterword” which follows glances back, in 1995, at the preceding page and wonders why her life story has halted at that particular juncture: perhaps, suggests the narrative, it was because the years she has so painstakingly detailed were crucial to the directions that her later life took.

In *A Daughter of Isis*, reflections of Nawal's early life in Egypt are framed by her exile in Carolina. Although the "Afterword" as well as the autobiography mention brief vignettes of Nawal El Saadawi as a rural doctor, at the first meeting of the Egyptian Women Writer's Association, or with her children and current husband, these people and events appear to occur in the writer's life merely in passing. The events in the narrative actually stop with Nawal still in Al-Mashraha School of Medicine. It leaves us at a point where Nawal is not very formed as a person, where her desires to be a good woman, law abiding citizen, and a pious Muslim, clash with her desire for closer involvement with the revolutionary forces driving out the vestiges of colonial power.

Writing half a century later, as the sounds of the night "reach" her in Carolina, U. S. A., Nawal El Saadawi notes that "The written word for me became an act of rebellion against injustice exercised in the name of religion, or morals, or love" (292). The medical profession did not attract Nawal much; it "seemed unable" to do much in the face of sickness and poverty linked to politics, money and power. Instead, writing became a "weapon" to fight the system, an "act of rebellion" against injustices exercised in the name of religion, morals or love.

Worrying over the reasons for penning her autobiography—sitting in a house overlooking tall cedars, pines and oak trees very unfamiliar to a lifetime of visuals of fields of crops, orchards and the Nile flowing by—Nawal wonders how to express anger or rebellion against loved ones. As a child, the word "God" had meant "justice" or "freedom"; the narrative speculates on how over time it has become a "sword over my head" or a "veil over my mind or face" (16-17). As a

child, Nawal was told that pre-Islamic practices included female infanticide. The practice of burying a female infant alive had been discarded by the time of Nawal's birth; by that time, when a female was born, "nothing happened." Life merely "came to a standstill" (17). Instead of the sin of infanticide, people were sad for it was "easier to bear" a "sorrow." There might lurk a "latent desire" to bury that female infant, but a mask of sorrow "repressed" it.

Nawal El Saadawi's narrative focus on being female is untouched by any differential of rural/urban, class, religion or racial variables. Throughout the narrative, all the women suffer, and the differences in the degree of their sufferings are relatively small. Rural or urban, rich or poor, married or widowed or a spinster, Muslim or Christian—all the women of Nawal's country seemed to be overwhelming victims of a relentless patriarchy. Though the men were also victims of poverty, ignorance or sickness, they were too threatened by Nawal's presence and accused her of "inciting" the women to rebel against religion and its laws (291). It is as if the conditions of being female are so overwhelming that they push away all other markers of an "identity."

Words, on the other hand, shock and provoke, maybe inflict pain too, but they force us to "... face ourselves, to question what we have accepted for thousands of years" (292). And autobiographies are

... more real, more true than fiction, more creative, and more steeped in art. Autobiography seeks to reveal the self, what is hidden inside, just as it tries to see the other. (293)

The pen allows her, contends the narrative, to work like a scalpel and probe at the roots of things. It has empowered her to see her life “emerge under a different light” (294).

It is almost as if, I suggest, that the narrative framing of Nawal’s life-story has to focus on the problems of being female in her past, in fact a past long past, for the complexities raised by issues of race and religion in her present cannot be articulated—they must lie submerged like weeds, to use the narrative’s image—until those earlier ones are laid out. After all, the narrative is enabled by its location in North Carolina, in exile, and the demands of this academic/activist space push the narrative, I would suggest, narrowing its gaze on the problematic of gender. Thus, the very interesting ways in which Nawal eventually integrates her personal, intellectual life and her politics are missing from this volume. One can only speculate on the many pragmatic reasons behind the narrative choice of a closure. It is also possible, however, to look at the politics of this pragmatics; it is hardly probable, in my view, that Nawal did not encounter her race or her religion vis-à-vis her colleagues, friends or critics outside of her more focused target audience in Egypt. The narrative choices and ellipses therefore hint at the other issues confronting it.

Nawal’s reminiscences about her childhood years in rural Egypt and formative years at Al-Mashraha School of Medicine sketch a life that is in a way a complete paradox of Leila Ahmed’s life. The paradoxes are, at one level, obvious: a very marked class differential frames the two narratives. Nawal’s life story is very strongly, emphatically, marked in the narrative by her early rural, peasant and

class background, whereas Leila's life-lines are linked to the preceding generation's urban, relatively wealthier context. But these obvious dissimilarities are the less interesting aspects of the two narratives: more intriguing, I suggest, are the choices the two autobiographical narratives make to frame their lives. Both the texts, I will argue, make strategic choices about the issues they wish to stage, with a view perhaps on their audience. So, Leila dwells lovingly and leisurely on the spaces and the women's lives that are the warp and woof of her memories. Though she mentions the problems of single or unhappily married women in the family, and obviously is aware of the class profile from which she is working, the narrative chooses not to take off from there. She talks of the injustices the women may have faced, the relative powers they may have enjoyed but the narrative clearly decides not to dwell, apart from the odd mention of the live-in servant girl in her mother's house or the maid she interviews in her Epilogue, on the ramifications of "class" in her review of women's status in Egypt. Instead, the narrative focus is on issues of race and religion. On the other hand, Nawal El Saadawi dwells on the hunger and poverty that rural, poor women face and which adds to the misery of their being female. Her childhood memories are delicately balanced in a prose that conjures pain and strength, loss and inheritance. Having lived through activist and aggressively interventionist life, having been arrested in early hours of the morning, jailed and interrogated by the secret police, having lived a life of exile, the publicly political compulsions outweigh any other narrative choices on race or religion that Nawal El Saadawi might want to discuss. Clearly a guest in a US academic space, the text politely allows the curiosity of a certain kind of audience and dwells at length on issues such as female genital

mutilation, an issue that focuses exclusively on patriarchal control over female sexuality without reference to the specificities of male violence or gender.

Leila talks of the racial prejudices amongst western feminisms, and the ignorance of relationships between patriarchy in Islam and in Judaic and Christian histories. The narrative is equally emphatic on the impossibility of institutionalized, official Islam, almost as if to offset any charge of being “religious.” Aware as the narrative is of the “aggressive” secularism of public spaces in the West, the narrative can be seen as trying to rescue a “folk” or “women’s” Islam, a “true” Islam in fact, that is equitable and just and all that official Islam, male, written Islam is not. Though she quotes from Jalaluddin Rumi, a twelfth century Sufi poet of Central Asia—and tongue-in-cheek perhaps, points to Rumi’s popularity in the current publishing market—the narrative suggests, I argue, that once the “true” Islam is rescued and recognized, the world, of Muslim women in Egypt at least, will offer greater possibilities of justice or equitability.

At the risk of simplification, I will venture that such a framework does not enable us to look at the framework of “justice,” “freedom” or “rights” more critically. It is almost as if, now that Egyptian women are working “professionally,” the hijab or veil can be read as not seclusion but a symbol of communitarian and self assertion, chosen by the individual “freely.” The implication seems to be that with some kind of economic “progress” and on a further arrival of “modernity,” there will be in contemporary Egypt a social “development” more complex than in an earlier phase, when electricity and plumbing came to the nation. It would be simplistic to say that the text implies women in Egypt are beginning to catch up,

in some way, with the women of the west; in other words, there is an ideal always already in the west where “freedom of thought and expression” exist, unconditionally. However, in this context, I find Leila Ahmed’s concern with the Egyptian aspect of her identity very curious: it is as though in asserting the non-Islamic part of her heritage, she is nudging into the limelight the rich cultural and political genealogy of her people that was somehow erased or repressed. The strong desire to bring to centre-stage a more inclusive or tolerant “folk” or “women’s” Islam—repressed heritages, again—as something that can needs to be explored for the possibilities it had offered in a different matrix points to the potential it holds for contemporary politics.

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The narrative efforts in the case of both Leila Ahmed and Nawal El Saadawi complicate issues. The intention is to bring to notice the rich cultural and intellectual heritages of the Egyptian people that cannot be subsumed under clear-cut notions we may have about Arabian Muslims in the contemporary context, of “freedom” and “fundamentalism” and also draw attention to the gendered discrimination of a society.

In both cases, the texts reveal the richness of the lives and identities they record—the economic, racial, religious axes along which the identity of “Muslim” and “women” needs to be negotiated. In other words, I argue that the Egyptian Muslim women’s texts engage in the primary task of assembling and recording genealogies as well as to place the frameworks of our genealogies under similar scrutiny. I have tried to demonstrate through detailed analyses of the two texts the

complexity of the identity of “Muslim women” across time and space. My intention has been to organize and lay out the varied threads around which lives and identities—textual or temporal—are woven and critically unraveled. The framework of such autobiographical ventures strategically roots itself at a particular angle—Egyptian or woman—even as it questions the premises of such generical impositions, forging in turn intimidating questions about the impositions.