
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Feminine Re-Narrating the Nation in Nawal El Saadawi's: A Daughter of Isis

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ABSTRACT

This study introduces a postcolonial feminist analysis of Nawal El Saadawi's *A Daughter of Isis*, focusing on the lived experiences of Egyptian women within the intersections of gender, colonialism, and religion. It examines how patriarchal structures and colonial legacies collectively shape women's roles and identities in Egyptian society. Central to this analysis is El Saadawi's challenge of oppressive cultural and religious traditions, including female genital mutilation and gender-restrictive roles, highlighting women's resistance against systemic inequities. The study explores the strategies employed by women to assert their agency and reshape narratives of national and personal identity amidst patriarchal dominance. Additionally, it critiques El Saadawi's use of autobiography as a tool for resistance, emphasizing the re-narration of history through marginalized voices. By intertwining personal memory with broader socio-political critique, El Saadawi reclaims women's voices, offering a nuanced perspective on identity formation and the quest for justice in a postcolonial context.

KEYWORDS

Postcolonial feminism , Egyptian women's experiences , Patriarchy and resistance, Gender and power, Autobiography as resistance

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Introduction

El Saadawi's *A Daughter of Isis* is a powerful memoir that offers a distinct feminine re-narrating of the Nation. By focusing on her experiences as a woman growing up in Egypt, EL Saadawi, an Egyptian feminist author and activist, contests the prevalent patriarchal discourse surrounding the formation of the country.

In her memoir, EL Saadawi describes her life in intimate detail, including the social structures she encountered as she made the transition from childhood to adulthood. She offers a critical analysis of the intersectionality of gender, class, and religion as she describes the ways in which women in Egyptian society are marginalized and oppressed.

El Saadawi challenges the conventional historical narratives, which frequently ignore or marginalize the voices and experiences of women. She challenges the prevailing narrative and emphasizes the importance of women's experiences in forming the history and identity of the country by bringing attention to her own story and those of the women around her.

Additionally, El Saadawi critically examines the religious and cultural traditions that uphold the sexism of women. She questions the patriarchal institutions and customs that are ingrained in Egyptian culture, including female genital mutilation, arranged marriages, and gender-restrictive roles. She illustrates the oppressive nature of these traditions through personal anecdotes and fights to have them abolished.

El Saadawi's re-narrating of the Nation is also a call to action. She emphasizes the importance of women's empowerment and the need for collective resistance against patriarchal systems. By centering her experiences as an Egyptian woman writer, she challenges the dominant power structures and offers a vision of a more inclusive and egalitarian society.

This section focuses on reading *A Daughter of Isis* from a postcolonial feminist perspective. We examine the text through the lens of both postcolonial theory and feminist perspectives. It concentrates on how El Saadawi deals with colonialism, patriarchy, gender, and power issues in his autobiography, particularly in the context of Egypt.

An examination of El Saadawi's narrative in the context of postcolonial feminist theory would first focus on how it addresses colonialism's effects on Egyptian society, mainly how they affected gender roles and women's experiences. The study focuses on how colonialism, with its patriarchal structures and the imposition of Western norms, shaped the social, cultural, and political environment that El Saadawi experiences. The analysis not only evaluates how these colonial legacies are contested and resisted in El Saadawi's narrative but also investigates how El Saadawi's autobiography unveils the complex ways in which power operates along these intersecting axes and how it impacts women's lives.

Additionally, a postcolonial feminist perspective would critically assess the ways in which El Saadawi challenges and subverts the dominant narratives surrounding women's roles and identities. It investigates how El Saadawi challenges oppressive customs, beliefs, and religious doctrines that uphold gender inequality. The analysis looks at how El Saadawi's story challenges and reimagines conventional ideas of femininity while highlighting the agency, resiliency, and resistance of women in Egyptian society.

V-1- Reconstructing the Past through El Saadawi's Autobiography

V-1-1- Narrative Plotting in *A Daughter of Isis*

In addition to being well-known as a prominent feminist in the Arab world, Nawal El Saadawi also stands out as an accomplished writer in her own right. Her literary talent is evident in the autobiography under consideration, where she deftly combines originality with retelling historical events. El Saadawi intentionally uses the "association-of-ideas" technique rather than sticking to a straightforward, chronological narrative style (Peters, 1999:807).

This technique allows her to weave together various episodes and narrative threads from different phases of her life to underscore her points or bring specific issues into sharp focus. She creates a vivid and multi-dimensional picture of her journey and the social context in which it took place by drawing on her varied and rich experiences.

El Saadawi adds a sense of suspense by frequently starting her chapters "in medias res" (Peters, 1999:807). This storytelling device adds an engaging layer to her narrative, inviting readers to delve deeper into her life's complexities and the challenges she faced. It also serves to keep readers eagerly turning the pages, eager to discover how each narrative thread unfolds.

A Daughter of Isis serves as Nawal El Saadawi's autobiographical account, chronicling her life from early childhood to adulthood. This work encompasses the initial part of her life story, with the latter half covered in her second autobiography, titled *Walking through Fire, a Life of Nawal El Saadawi*. El Saadawi specifies in *A Daughter of Isis* that she penned it as her autobiography, "The Story Of My Life" (El Saadawi, 2002:2), at the age of over sixty while residing in North California. Written during her exile, her autobiography explores the key moments of her early life while shedding light on her struggles as an anti-colonialist, feminist, and political activist in Egypt. El Saadawi conveys the stories of Egyptian women with passion as an eyewitness to the injustices brought about by colonialism and patriarchy. Writing *A Daughter of Isis* turns into a tool for documenting history and reliving memories (El Nahla, 2014:28).

In this autobiography, El Saadawi metaphorically positions herself as a "descendant of Isis or her mother Noot" (El Saadawi, 1999:14). She decided to title her autobiography *A Daughter of Isis*, expressing her aspiration for the strength embodied by the ancient Egyptian Goddess Isis. In this respect, Moore-Gilbert asserts that El Saadawi positions herself as "a descendant of Isis or her mother Noot who enjoins her daughter to work for the well-being of the people as a whole" (Moore-Gilbert, 2009: 47).

By the same token Nabila Jaber perceives " *Daughter of Isis* as "a Goddess figure whom EL Saadawi admires and imaginatively inhabits, symbolizes a role model, embodying power/resistance duality in achieving an autonomous self"(Jaber,2000:47). El Saadawi therefore sought to create a representation of power and resistance. Her personal narrative intriguingly exudes

a sense of empowerment and independence. As a result, this self-image construction reflects El Saadawi's numerous struggles against societal injustices and various patriarchal limitations.

The narrative reveals a societal realm shaped by the author's firsthand encounters and astute observations of the challenges of maturing in a community governed by patriarchal norms, characterized by rigid hierarchical distinctions rooted in both gender and class. Simultaneously, persistent themes throughout the text include reflections on race, issues of national identity and belonging, as well as considerations of colonialism. In her autobiography, the author emphasizes gender, class, and race as the foundation of El Saadawi's understanding of womanhood. She delves deeply into these categories, recognizing how they influence how women are perceived, objectified, and positioned within a marginalized social class. As a result, the author examines existing societal constructs critically, considering how these factors shape the experiences and significance of womanhood within an Arab Muslim context.

Throughout her autobiography, El Saadawi adeptly integrates what Fraser and Bartky characterizes as feminist agency "the power of social constraints and the capacity to act situatedly against them" (Fraser and Bartky 1992, 17). The detailed description she offered about her life story allow her readers to examine her everyday life practices which were fraught with contradictions as far as hierarchical gender, class and race relations are concerned. Moreover, she portrays inspiring examples of national activists who strive for the liberation of their countries and view their own freedom as integral to the nation's emancipation. In other words, El Saadawi deals with vivid depictions of women's experiences, demonstrating that despite living in impoverished, hierarchical, and patriarchal societies, they not only endure but also surmount great challenges. This representation challenges Western misconceptions that label them as submissive and subordinate.

In this case, El Saadawi takes a historical approach, guiding her readers through her personal journey. She begins as a young girl from a disadvantaged background, a part of a large family with limited resources. The narrative then progresses to her educational accomplishments and the beginning of her medical career as a village doctor. Along this path, she intertwines Egyptian history, delving into her father's involvement in nationalist activism against British colonial rule as well as her own political awakening. During the 1940s and early 1950s, she actively participated in protests, emerging as a resilient and influential woman who spearheads a national campaign against colonial oppression. Essentially, her project entails documenting her unique journey as a woman within the vast textual tapestry of Arab history through political history, personal recollections, and a wealth of oral traditions.

By offering alternate accounts of Egypt and highlighting the experiences of Egyptian women, El Saadawi challenges the suppression of established historical accounts in *A Daughter of Isis*. El Saadawi states that "women have an unwritten history told orally by one generation to the other" (1999:75). El Saadawi's autobiography highlights the untold histories of these women, shedding light on their coping mechanisms and will to fight back against the oppressive forces that have historically tried to enslave them. This alternative historical account serves as a compelling testament that despite challenges, the subaltern have, throughout history, found ways to assert their agency and shape their own destinies.

The writer has made it her mission to record this history. Her straightforward approach to discussing the most delicate subjects brings a stark focus to the atrocities endured by the women in her region. From a different perspective, this text aligns with the female oral tradition, documenting these women's words while preserving their narratives in written form. El Saadawi emphasizes the value of oral tradition in preserving and promoting women's history. Women are able to preserve their collective memories, cultural legacies, and collective wisdom through the practice of oral tradition, which includes storytelling, conversations, and personal accounts. It acts as a means for women to pass on their knowledge, experiences, and difficulties to subsequent generations, ensuring the ongoing telling of their stories and preserving their unique perspectives.

Nawal El Saadawi underscores the importance of women taking control of their own narratives, expressing themselves in their own voices, and thereby shaping their own interpretations of their lives. Consequently, *A Daughter of Isis* is a representation of strong female characters from the Arab Muslim world in general and from the Egyptian context in particular.

One of the most crucial aspects to consider is that memory is inherently incomplete. Crafting an autobiography becomes a process of reconstructing the past, enriched by the advantages of maturity, insight, and awareness afforded by the present moment. Through this endeavor, individuals engage in a deliberate act of reflection, drawing upon their current understanding and consciousness to reshape and retell their personal histories. Given El Saadawi's extensive history of political activism and dedication to gender equity, she endeavors to recover, reverse, and rediscover the past. Her goal is to illuminate the discourses that have played a role in exacerbating the conditions faced by Arab women. Simultaneously,

she recognized the lack of women's tradition in Arabic literature and readdresses it by evoking the glories of women in history and their continuous active reaction against all sources of oppression which are meant to relegate women, for instance, female circumcision, the veil, and other forms of patriarchal oppression.

Furthermore, she introduces positive figures of women who lead difficult lives but are able to achieve their self-realization. El Saadawi's portrayal of these women serves as a direct response to Western misconceptions that portray Arab women as submissive and subordinate. In *A Daughter of Isis*, she vividly illustrates the challenges confronted by postcolonial feminism in the Arab Muslim world, highlighting issues like the intersection of class and race that signify power dynamics. Through her work, El Saadawi confronts and dispels stereotypes, offering a nuanced perspective on the complexity of women's experiences in the region.

V-1-2- Memory, Trauma and Scriptotherapy in *A Daughter of Isis*

Individuals who suffer from the immense pain caused by traumatic memories, according to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, are constantly tormented by memories that relentlessly intrude on their current experiences. Even after many years, these memories resurface in disjointed and fragmented forms, haunting the conscious mind. This haunting of memory is inextricably linked to significant changes in people's lives. "Crises of a personal sort, such as a sexual assault, or of a political sort, such as state-sponsored torture or imprisonment during war, may be speakable only in the halting fragments of traumatic or obsessive memory" (Smith & Watson, 2001 : 21).

Nawal El Saadawi's firsthand experiences exposed her to the dire situations women in her society and her own family face. She writes, "The life of women appeared to me to be full of pain. Around it floated the odor of onions and garlic, of alum or incense of perfume mingled with sweat, of laziness and apathy" (El Saadawi, 1999: 107). Beyond their responsibilities in the household, women were forced to endure the severe physical and mental anguish caused by the harmful practice of genital mutilation. The writer, herself, went through the same traumatic experience. She writes:

Since I was a child that deep wound left in my body has never healed. But the deeper wound has been the one left in my spirit, in my soul. I can not forget that day in the summer of 1937. Fifty-six years have gone by, but I still remember it, as though it were only yesterday. I lay in a pool of blood. After a few days the bleeding stopped, and the *daya* peered between my thighs and said, 'All is well. The wound has healed, thanks be to God.' But the pain was there, like an abscess deep in my flesh. I did not look at myself to find out where the pain was exactly. I could not bear to see my body naked in the mirror, the forbidden parts steeped in shame and guilt. I did not know what other parts in my body there were that might need to be cut off in the same way. So at night I lay in bed, my eyes wide open in the dark. I had no idea what fate had in store for me. (El Saadawi: 74).

The passage reflects a moving and deeply personal reflection on the long-term effects of childhood trauma. El Saadawi vividly describes the severity of the physical and emotional wounds she has carried her entire life. The physical wound may have healed, but the emotional and spiritual wounds have not, leaving a profound mark on her being.

The passage evokes a sense of timelessness, as if the traumatic event is still fresh in El Saadawi's mind despite the time span of 56 years. The pain is compared to an abscess buried deep within the writer's flesh, causing ongoing suffering. However, the author does not examine her own body to determine its exact source. This avoidance is driven by a sense of shame and guilt about her body, specifically the intimate and private areas affected by the trauma.

In the case of individuals grappling with traumatic or obsessive memories, engaging in autobiographical acts can serve as a therapeutic intervention, referred to as "scriptotherapy" by Suzette A. Henke. She argues that "Autobiography could so effectively mimic the scene of psychoanalysis that life-writing might provide a therapeutic alternative for victims of severe anxiety and, more seriously, of post-traumatic stress disorder..." (Henke, 1998 : xii- xiii).

In *Opening Up by Writing It Down* James W. Pennebaker and Joshua M. Smyth claim that "Writing about the thoughts and feelings connected with unexpected experiences forces us to bring together their many facets. Once we can distill complex experiences into more understandable packages, we can begin to move beyond them." (Pennebaker & Smyth, 2016:65). Hence, writing allows the writer to explore the depths of thoughts and emotions, examining them from various angles and perspectives. It pushes the writer to confront the complexities and intricacies of these experiences. Furthermore, the act of

reducing complex experiences to more understandable packages opens the door to healing and growth. It enables the writer to gain insights, learn from experiences, and move beyond the psychological destructive impact of these events. Writing becomes a tool for processing these events and incorporating them into the writer's personal narratives.

Through the act of speaking and writing about her trauma, El Saadawi undergoes a transformative process, finding the words to express what was previously unspeakable. The narrator confronts a significant aspect of her identity and initiates a process of healing and moving forward. In this light, El Saadawi recounts "That day it all came back. I picked up a pen and wrote one page about my circumcision, then tore it up. The pieces of paper flew up into the wind, then dropped to the surface of the ocean, floating up and down until they were out of sight" (El Saadawi : 13).

The statement captures a powerful moment of introspection and emotional release. El Saadawi has a profound recollection, which causes her to react strongly. In response to this outpouring of emotions, she reaches for a pen and begins writing about her circumcision, attempting to capture her thoughts and feelings.

The act of tearing up the written page, on the other hand, symbolizes a cathartic release. The torn pieces of paper, carried away by the wind and eventually landing on the ocean's surface, represent the release of painful memories and experiences associated with circumcision. This act of release provides the narrator with a sense of relief and liberation, as if the weight of the past has been lifted from the writer's shoulders.

Indeed this process of scriptotherapy leads to catharsis and motivates the writer to "fight against the evil which was spread over her country" (Joshi, 2014:242). The author not only emerged as a strong woman, who dedicated her life to abolishing this practice, but also an agent who increases awareness and understanding of women's mistreatment and actively support their rights and welfare.

Another deeply distressing event in El Saadawi's life was the premature death of her mother from cancer when she was just forty-five years old. El Saadawi, despite her medical background, witnessed her mother's painful decline and felt powerless to alleviate her suffering. In her heartfelt tribute to her mother, El Saadawi pays homage to her enduring impact on her life. This poignant acknowledgment reflects the profound and lasting influence her mother had on her, shaping her values, beliefs, and resilience. In this regard, the writer recounts, "the smell of my mother's body is a part of me, of my body, of my spirit, of the hidden strength I carry within me. She is the voice that speaks to me if something's wrong, rescues me just in time, encourages me in moments of despair" (El Saadawi: 4). Catharsis, or emotional release and purification achieved through artistic expression, is important in Arab women writers' autobiographies. They can confront and process their own traumas, challenges, and triumphs by sharing their personal narratives. This self-reflection and exploration process allows for the cathartic release of emotions, allowing for healing, empowerment, and personal growth.

V-2- Patriarchy, Feminism and the Nascent Islamic Feminist Discourse in Nawal El Saadawi's *A Daughter of Isis*.

"I became a feminist when I was a child and started to ask questions...to become aware that women are oppressed and feel discrimination" (El Saadawi & Newson-Horst, 2008, 56). El Saadawi has consistently and vehemently expressed her deep dissatisfaction with the pervasive and oppressive system that traps women in Egypt. Her main criticism focuses on the triumvirate of politics, culture, and religion as crucial components in the complex fabric of Egyptian society. The aspect of religion, however, emerges as a pillar in the development of her story, meticulously illuminating its enormous influence on the foundation of societal functioning. She tirelessly emphasizes in her writing how religion, more than anything else, plays a crucial role in creating and maintaining the deeply ingrained patterns of subjugation that women in Egypt experience.

Being deeply embedded within Arab Muslim society, Nawal El Saadawi illuminates the social and cultural dynamics prevalent among its people. This unique perspective enables her to author an autobiography that not only recounts her personal experiences but also delves into the sentiments and hardships endured by individuals within a patriarchal framework. This society, characterized by religious misinterpretations and discriminatory practices based on class and gender distinctions, forms the backdrop against which El Saadawi unfolds her narrative, offering profound insights into its complexities and challenges

In an Interview with Jo Beall, Nawal El Saadawi argues that according to the history of early African civilizations a fascinating historical perspective is revealed: at that time, men and women were treated more equally in society. These ancient African societies showed a remarkable balance and parity between the sexes, in contrast to many contemporary societies where gender disparities are obvious.

Furthermore, El Saadawi describes how the collective memory of Isis has been meticulously shaped, resulting in a diluted and uninteresting portrayal of a once powerful goddess. In this respect, El Saadawi says:

But if we go back to ancient civilisations in Africa we find that men and women were more equal. In Egypt for example, there were gods and goddesses and the statues of them were equal in size. After slavery came to Egypt there was a division in society between masters and slaves. From then the status between men and women became unequal because gender and class go together. Statues of women goddesses became smaller. Our great goddess Isis was the goddess of justice. With the evolution of slavery she became the goddess of the body and was owned by her husband. In this earlier time of polytheism when there were many gods and goddesses, there was a sort of democracy. But when monotheism came with its insistence on only one god, it was like a form of monopoly. Monotheism went together with dictatorship. And this shift from polytheism to monotheism went hand in hand with the evolution of slavery and class society (El Saadawi & Beall, 1989:37).

It is clear how heavily the conservative, patriarchal social norms have influenced modern interpretations of the Isis legend. Isis' historical significance is stripped away in this transformation, making her into a one-dimensional character in the annals of mythology who represents patriarchal ideals and desires. Isis, who was once praised for her multifaceted power that included social, political, sexual, and personal influence, has been changed into a role model mother, devoid of her powerful abilities and content to play a supporting role. The narratives no longer echo her extraordinary magical prowess, surpassing all other deities, nor emphasize her solidarity with women. The image of the courageous woman who defied destiny, challenged domineering men, orchestrated revenge, and embodied wisdom has all but faded. Our generation is instead shown a kinder, more forgiving version of the world—a male fantasy of the ideal mother and wife (El Nahla, 2014:28).

El Saadawi's novel serves as a practical example of Said's idea of imaginative geography, demonstrating how historical perspectives can be an essential tool for comprehending the pervasiveness of these societal constructs. Said explores how male dominance develops within the Occident-Orient dynamic, highlighting the idea that the presence of the Orientalist is made possible by the Orient's actual absence (Said, 2019:208). This idea is similar to the establishment of manhood in El Saadawi's text, where the Occident, which stands for the man and the subject, is the only presence and the Orient, which represents the woman, is noticeably absent. Said's framework for analyzing the relationship between the Occident and the Orient can be used to analyze gender dynamics in El Saadawi's book.

The experiences of El Saadawi's ancestors, who were taught to embrace their subservience to men, are highlighted in her narrative. This reinforcement of male supremacy establishes a void through which men confidently assert their dominance and wield their power. Gender hierarchies in El Saadawi's work are revealed by Said's analysis of power dynamics in the Occident-Orient relationship, where women's submissiveness forms the basis for male dominance.

In *A Daughter of Isis*, El Saadawi questions the role of patriarchal authority, she suggests a connection between unhappiness and the oppressive power dynamics present within the family and society. The weight of traditional gender roles, societal expectations, and the control exerted by patriarchal figures are implied as potential contributors to the unhappiness experienced by those closest to the narrator.

Was it my grandfather who caused the unhappiness which filled this house? Was it the army discipline he imposed on it? Patriarchal authority destroying those who are closest to us? The feudal class collapsing at the end of the Second World War? The patriarchal class system which rules over our world to this day? Was it a poison which runs in the blood, ran in my veins, in my arteries, a poison I used to breathe in with the air when I lived surrounded by the sadness and desolation of that house (El Saadawi : 244)

The quote suggests a deep introspection into the roots of unhappiness within the household and the broader societal structures that contribute to it.

By grasping the true essence of feminism and its principles, one poses a threat to the existing class system. This is because feminism inherently challenges the traditional power structures and social hierarchies that perpetuate inequality and discrimination based on gender. Nawal El Saadawi explains how feminism must be understood. She says:

Feminism is a battle on many fronts. It is a political battle, it is a sexual battle, it is a sexual battle, it is a psychological battle and we have to fight on all these fronts That is why feminists in our country go to gaol. When I was speaking this exact same language under Sadat, I found myself in gaol. When you understand feminism well, you endanger the class system (El Saadawi & Beall, 1989:34).

In *A Daughter of Isis*, the intersection of feminism and religion is a prominent theme. El Saadawi critically examines the relationship between gender inequality and religious beliefs and practices, particularly within the context of Islam. In her writing, she employs vivid and creative descriptions to illustrate the treatment she personally endured as a female.

A Daughter of Isis is replete with instances that demonstrate the gender predilection perpetuated by the patriarchal culture. In "The cry in the Night", the second chapter of the autobiography, the writer chronicles the day of her own birth and describes how The Daya would express an exuberant cry of joy, known as 'Yoo-yoo,' upon seeing a penis; the revered body part that Allah has granted exclusively to males. Conversely, if she encounters a female's genitalia, she would somberly lower her head and become "as silent as the dead if all she could find was a cleft" (El Saadawi: 22). Hence, when Nawal was born, no joyful 'Yoo-yoo' erupted from 'Um Mahmoud,' the daya. She writes, "I happened to be that thing which the *daya* turned over between her hands sucking at her lips with a sound of deep regret before she let it drop to drown in the basin full of water." (El Saadawi: 22)

Similarly, when Sittil Hajja gave birth to Nawal's father, she ensured the presence of the male genitalia between his thighs before jubilantly exclaiming 'yoo-yoo.' Despite battling a fever that took strong hold of her, she triumphed over it, fueled by the immense joy of giving birth to a male child. Once the postnatal bleeding subsided, Sittil Hajja "performed her ablutions, then knelt in prayer to Allah for not having let her down by giving her a girl" (El Saadawi, 35).

In fact, traditional Arab culture, being patriarchal and patrilineal in nature, defines the value of women in terms of their capacity to bear children, especially sons. Although many parts of the Arab world are rapidly changing, this cultural norm persists (Abudi, 2011:10). As Suad Joseph points out: "In most Arab societies it is by birthing a son that a woman makes her claim to status" (Joseph, 2005: 187).

El Saadawi witnessed the hardships that women faced in the early years of her life. She saw how patriarchal norms oppressed and engulfed them. She writes: "Beneath the smiles of the women I could detect the sadness, the tears that had dried over the years, the gloom which enveloped memories of their wedding night."

The writer sheds light on yet another manifestation of patriarchy. She shares a poignant account of her experience after her mother's passing, where the father single-handedly bestows his name upon the children, granting them legitimacy and honor, while her mother's name is consigned to oblivion, lost forever. She passionately laments, "In this deeply patriarchal society of ours, a mother's name holds no significance; a woman is deemed worthless, both on earth and in the heavens" (El Saadawi, 1999:3).

This excerpt poignantly illustrates the patriarchal nature of the society Nawal resides in. The act of the father alone deciding the children's name and identity after their mother's death reflects a system where women are marginalized and denied their rightful place in shaping the identity of their offspring. This loss of a mother's name signifies the erasure of her existence and contributions, perpetuating the notion that women's worth lies solely in their roles as mothers or within the confines of patriarchal norms.

The writer emphasizes the far-reaching consequences of patriarchal systems, extending even to the heavens, metaphorically suggesting that the oppression and devaluation of women persist even in spiritual realms. The patriarchal world she describes is one where women's voices are silenced, their agency is diminished, and their names are forgotten, contributing to the perpetuation of gender inequality and reinforcing the dominance of male-centric traditions.

El Saadawi's poignant words serve as a powerful reminder of the urgency in challenging and dismantling patriarchal structures. Recognizing the value of women and their contributions beyond traditional roles is essential in fostering a more inclusive and equitable society, where the identity and worth of both men and women are celebrated and acknowledged without prejudice or discrimination.

In this context, During the celebration of Eid El Sagheer, Sittil Hajja; the writer's paternal grandmother, would give money, known as millimes, as a gift to the children. She started with the boys, giving each of the writer's three brothers two millimes. However, to the girls, she only gave one millime. Feeling angry and frustrated by this gender-based inequality, El Saadawi took a stand and expressed her discontent by throwing the one millime back into Sittil Hajja's lap. The latter would address the writer saying, "God had told us that a girl is worth half a boy" (El Saadawi, 1999: 99)

While the writer's brother seemed to spend his days playing without worry, he continuously failed in his examinations. On the other hand, El Saadawi diligently devoted herself to both school and home, rarely taking any breaks. Yet, what was the outcome of her tireless efforts? She was rewarded with just one millime, while her brother received double the amount. This inequality struck the writer deeply and led her to question the fairness of divine justice.

The author makes several mentions of these discrepancies. Boys enjoyed significant freedom and autonomy in their actions, which was not extended to girls. Nawal could not understand why girls weren't allowed to participate in certain activities while boys were given those rights. In one instance, the author describes how she tried to expose her abdomen, shedding light on this unequal treatment:

I used to pull down the straps from my shoulders, uncover my chest and my belly, but my aunt Ni'mat would raise her hand and slap me. Her sharp voice pierced my ear. 'Shame on you' I would point to my brother and say 'Why him?' And back would come the answer. 'He is a boy and you are a girl'. This voice bored repeatedly to my ears from the day I was born. My mouth swallowed it with the seas water and I chocked. 'He is a boy and you are a girl.' I could feel the bitter tang of salt burn my throat. It was a bitterness as though the blue of the sea had turned into crystals of pure salt, as though the sun was burning my skin. All the colors, the blue, the green, the golden, turned grey or black. (El Saadawi: 67).

The author's actions, such as pulling her straps down to reveal her belly and chest, show her naive curiosity and desire for equality. Her aunt's reprimands and the explanation that "He is a boy and you are a girl" serve as a constant reminder of the strict gender roles ingrained in her society. In my view, the affirmation "He is a boy and you are a girl," is repeated several times, illustrating how deeply ingrained this concept has been in the author's mind since birth. She compares the bitterness to the taste of salt and uses it to represent the weighty burden of gender norms and societal expectations. The transformation of vivid colors into grey or black suggests how these gender distinctions can obscure and dull the beauty and vibrancy of life, highlighting the significant influence of gender-based discrimination on the author's perspective.

El Saadawi has devoted her entire life to fighting against male dominance, and a crucial part of her opposition is reviewing the morally deficient philosophy that supports this male dominance. She primarily accomplishes this by emphasizing the idea of "awra," which is one of her main methods. The Arabic word "awra" connotes shame and is closely associated with the female genitalia as well as ideas of imperfection and unsightly exposure (Sazzad, 2012:816). Malti-Douglas has suggested that "awra" is a crucial component of the physical and moral discourse in Arabic culture, where a woman's "awra," or her body, elicits moral judgments of shame (1991:122).

According to El Saadawi, the idea of "awra" has morphed into a means of torturing women within the context of the "physico-moral discourse." First and foremost, introducing the concept of "shame" into the consciousness of a young girl obstructs her ability to fully embrace her childhood, as it prematurely propels her into the domain of womanhood (Sazzad, 2012:816). El Saadawi describes in her autobiography how frustrated she felt when this transformation took place in her life:

My anger was still nascent, growing inside me like tender green shoots . . . my chest was a stigma, a shame that had to be hidden from people's eyes. The word 'stigma' ('awra) pierced my ear like a nail. It was an ugly word. My chest was as flat as that of my brother. I was a small child, younger than my brother . . . yet I had become a part of the big world, and my place in it had already been fixed just because I was a girl (El Saadawi, 1999 : 68).

El Saadawi astutely draws attention to the corrupted societal values that negatively impact women's awareness from their very birth and how the idea of 'awra' is used as a manipulative tool to keep women in subordinate positions. Her writings run counter to the widely held belief in society that women are primarily physical beings and inferior beings. This is due to society's restrictions on women's ability to discover their true calling in life (Sazzad, 2012:816).

In *A Daughter of Isis*, El Saadawi felt a deep sense of dismay when she observed the extensive measures women would undertake in the pursuit of beauty. She vividly recalls a childhood memory that left a lasting impression on her: the hair removal ritual performed by her mother and her mother's friends:

They emerged from the bathroom, one by one, looking like skinned rabbits, their arms and legs and eyes all red, their eyebrows plucked and their eyelids swollen. One by one they sent angry looks in my direction as though I had unveiled something shameful, unmasked what should have remained concealed, revealed what humiliated them, dragged them down, made them knee (El Saadawi, 1999: 126).

This memory symbolizes the societal pressures and expectations placed upon women to conform to certain beauty standards, often involving painful or labor-intensive practices. It serves as a poignant reminder of the sacrifices and discomfort that women endure in their quest for societal acceptance and beauty, highlighting the need for a more inclusive and compassionate perspective on female appearance and self-worth.

Women, regarded as "properties" rather than individuals, endure various forms of torment. One such evil practice is genital mutilation, commonly carried out in rural areas of Egypt. Despite being outlawed in 2008, this harmful practice remains widespread. The act of cutting off a young girl's clitoris is believed to be a rite of passage into womanhood and a means to preserve purity and chastity according to traditional norms falsely believed to purify girls. While certain Egyptians strive to eliminate it, others openly endorse it, justifying their support with religious arguments. They view the custom as a human creation aimed at controlling a girl's sexual desires (Joshi, 2014: 243).

El Saadawi sheds light on how the practice of female circumcision is perceived as a religious duty. She writes, "When I was six, the *daya* (midwife) came along holding a razor in her hands, pulled out my clitoris from between my thighs, and cut it off. She said it was the will of God and she had done his will." (El Saadawi: 13).

Later on, the writer discovered that every woman and girl in her village had been subjected to this tradition without exception. This deeply ingrained custom had been practiced within their families for generations. She writes,

My paternal aunt, Rokaya, said that the Prophet had ordained that the *bazar* of girls be cut off. Yet I could not imagine that Prophet Muhammad, or Jesus, or any other prophet could ordain that such a thing be done. Could any prophet be like that? How could the prophets carry such a hatred for the *bazars* of young girls, and if they did, why was it so? The word 'why' stayed with me throughout my life. It led me to read what prophets and gods had written, starting with the God Amoun in ancient Egypt right down to our Lord Muhammad, the last of the prophets.(El Saadawi: 74).

This highlights the cognitive dissonance experienced by El Saadawi, as she struggles to reconcile the idea of a prophet who promotes harm against young girls with her existing belief in the righteousness and compassion of religious figures. It also demonstrates the importance of critical thinking and seeking knowledge as a means of finding answers to complex questions about faith, religious teachings, and the actions of historical figures.

Through her unique perspective as a medical professional and feminist activist, El Saadawi becomes a powerful voice in the fight against gender discrimination and societal injustices. Her contributions extend far beyond medical practices, as she addresses the broader social issues that perpetuate gender disparities and seeks to transform the lives of women in the Arab world. By merging her medical expertise with her feminist principles, El Saadawi establishes herself as a trailblazer and a catalyst for change, using her platform to shed light on the interconnected struggles of women in a society bound by patriarchal norms:

As a rural doctor I lived close to village people, shared their experiences, learnt about their lives, witnessed what the triple scourge of poverty, ignorance and sickness did to them. Women bore a double burden since they also suffered from the oppression exercised on them by fathers and husbands, brothers and uncles and other men. I saw young girls burn themselves alive, or throw themselves into the waters of the Nile and drown, in order to escape a father's, or a husband's tyranny. I tried to help them but the men with power in the village in agreement with the state authorities had me transferred

somewhere else, accusing me of not respecting the traditional values of their community, of inciting women to rebel against religion and its laws (El Saadawi :351)

Through this quote, El Saadawi sheds light on the pervasive gender inequalities and patriarchal control that not only marginalize women but also hinder efforts to address their suffering and improve their circumstances.

El Saadawi discusses her high school experience as the reason for her disillusionment with religion. Her religious studies professors purposefully presented the Qur'an as difficult to understand and unappealing. She writes,

No-one ever made me hate religion more than those who taught it to us. They seemed to take pleasure in picking out the most difficult verses in Allah's book, the words that curled up in one's throat like a knot and stopped there, in choosing meanings that one's reason refused, explanations that made things more confused, in proffering threats of hell-fire, or hopes of a paradise where there was nothing to do except loll on sofas, or sleep, or eat (El Saadawi ,1999: 259-260)

El Saadawi's perspective emphasizes that religion's impact can vary significantly depending on the interpretation applied. She suggests that Islam, for instance, has the potential to be a progressive force when its principles of justice and freedom for all are emphasized. The potential for progress becomes evident when Islamic principles that prioritize justice and freedom for all individuals are highlighted and emphasized. Like Mernissi, the writer believes that Islam, like any belief system, can evolve positively when its core values are interpreted and applied in ways that promote fairness, equality, and liberty for everyone, irrespective of gender, race, or social status. By focusing on these principles, Islam can serve as a catalyst for social advancement and positive change within communities and societies, fostering inclusivity and respect for human rights.

El Saadawi's perspective underscores the idea that interpretations and applications of religious teachings can significantly shape the social and political landscape, potentially leading to greater harmony and empowerment for individuals and groups within Muslim-majority societies and beyond. However, what El Saadawi highlights is that imperialist influences often promote distorted interpretations of religion, using isolated Quranic quotations and contradictory incidents to sow discord among different sects. Unfortunately, women often bear the brunt of these regressive interpretations, leading some to instinctively reject religion. What is important to remember, though, is that an enlightened and progressive interpretation of religion is also possible, despite the prevailing narrative that suggests otherwise. El Saadawi's perspective underscores the need for a balanced and thoughtful approach to religious interpretation that upholds the principles of justice and equality for all, including women (Sazzad, 2012:823).

El Saadawi challenges patriarchal interpretations of religious texts and traditions, arguing that they have been used to justify and perpetuate the subordination of women. She critiques the ways in which religious doctrines have been manipulated to enforce oppressive social norms, restrict women's rights, and control their bodies and choices.

El Saadawi's exploration of feminism and religion in *A Daughter of Isis* encourages a dialogue between feminist principles and religious beliefs. She calls for a critical examination of traditional interpretations, challenging the status quo to create space for gender equality and social justice within religious contexts. By discussing her own experiences and the experiences of women within Islamic societies, El Saadawi highlights the complexities, contradictions, and possibilities within the relationship between feminism and religion. She acknowledges the challenges of navigating cultural and religious norms while advocating for women's empowerment and the dismantling of oppressive systems.

V-3- Women's Agency in El Saadawi's Autobiography

My relationship with my mother decided the course of my life. I used to think that my father's influence on it was greater than hers. I discovered while I was writing [my autobiography] that this was not true. (El Saadawi, 1999: 2-3)

The persistent absence of forward-looking and visionary governance from succeeding governments was one of the main issues that deeply irritated El Saadawi. In response, she passionately encouraged Arab women to take advantage of the opportunity to express themselves, actively seek education, and assert themselves as significant contributors to the complex fabric of Egyptian society. She believed that Arab women could be crucial in influencing the Nation's future. El Saadawi left

behind a legacy of unyielding tenacity and unwavering dedication to women's emancipation, emphasizing the importance of these women in the transformation of the state (Shaw, 2023: 753).

El Saadawi carries on the legacy of the women who came before her by drawing on existing oral traditions and matrilineal tales to assert her own sense of self. In doing so, she seeks to rectify the omission of women's experiences and contributions in male-dominated religious and academic accounts. Her goal is to ensure that women's voices, experiences, and accomplishments are not overlooked in the written narrative of history. This approach not only reaffirms her own identity but also serves as a corrective to the historical imbalance that has marginalized women's perspectives and stories (Vinson, 2008:90).

Many women authors continuously resort to their mothers and pay them homage in their political writing. For them, mothers always remain a source of inspiration and emotion. El Saadawi is not an exception. In her autobiography, El Saadawi explicitly draws a parallel between her mother and the revered deity, Isis. She writes:

My mother ... the real mother that I knew, her head held high, a woman full of pride, a goddess like Isis, a halo of light around her head, like a full moon, a silvery crown that the ancient Egyptian goddess wore above her brow. When I watched her move it taught me to be proud, to dream of better things, of a place for myself in this vast world. I did not know from where arose her strength, her pride. Did it come from an unknown woman I had never seen, a grandmother, or a female antecedent of hers born many years ago, a descendant of Isis or her mother Noot, goddess of the heavens five thousand years ago? For was it not Noot who, speaking to her daughter, had said before she died 'I say to you, my daughter who will inherit the throne after I am no longer here, be a merciful and just ruler of your people rather than a goddess who depends for her authority on sacred power.' (El Saadawi, 1999: 5).

Nawal El Saadawi begins her autobiography *A Daughter of Isis* by recounting the pivotal role her mother played in her education. She describes how her mother taught her the alphabet, guiding her hand to form the four Arabic letters of her name. Through this process, her mother instilled in her the importance of literacy. El Saadawi highlights her mother, Zaynab Shoukri, not only as a teacher but also as a pivotal figure in resisting her marriage at the age of ten. Despite her own lack of formal education, the writer's mother insisted on her daughter's schooling and pursuit of a medical career, disregarding her father's suggestion to withdraw Nawal from school to assist with household duties. (1999:3).

Although Nawal El Saadawi's father, an educated man, valued the education of all nine of his children, financial constraints compelled him to prioritize the schooling of his three sons over his daughters. Nevertheless, El Saadawi's mother, drawing from her own experiences of being withdrawn from school at the age of ten to marry, was determined to prevent her daughter from facing a similar fate. Despite the family's financial struggles, her mother staunchly advocated for Nawal's education, recognizing its importance for her daughter's future and independence.

One day he said to my mother:

Zaynab, the work you are doing at home has become too much for you. Why not take Nawal out of school so that she can give you a helping hand?' The answer came right back without a moment's hesitation: 'My daughter will never be made to stay at home. I don't need help', pronounced in a ringing voice which still echoes in my ears (El Saadawi: 3).

Following this extract, reader can notice that the significance of the mother resides in instilling the early seeds of rebellion against hegemonic discourses which prevent women from their primary basic rights. Hence, El Saadawi portrays her mother as a positive female figure whose feminist awareness led her to understand the vital importance of her daughters' education

As previously noted, mothers typically exert the greatest influence on the lives of many female authors. However, while Zaynab, El Saadawi's mother, held significant sway over her life, her grandmother occupies a prominent position in her autobiography. Sittil Hajja emerges as the primary source of El Saadawi's understanding of God, culture, and family. For instance, her grandmother's personal narratives of resistance inspired El Saadawi to undertake the task of documenting

women's history. These tales led her to reflect that "Many were the stories that I heard about Sittil Hajja and her mother, the woman from Gaza"(El Saadawi: 88)

Indeed, it was through the narratives of Sittil Hajja that El Saadawi came to appreciate the economic role women played and how they utilized their finances to support family members, particularly men, in obtaining education, marriage, and establishing businesses for financial stability. Sittil Hajja recounted how she raised six children single-handedly, describing her daily routine of waking up before dawn with her daughters, working in the fields with animals until sunset, and returning home carrying heavy sacks on her back. She shared with El Saadawi how she then went to the market to sell the contents of these sacks, proudly recounting how she diligently saved "one Piaster on top of the other" (El Saadawi: 33) until she accumulated three whole pounds. She then gave this sum to her only son, Sayed, to purchase a train ticket from Banha to Cairo, pay school fees, and buy books.

Even though Sitti l'Hijja was unable to read or write, she valued the importance of education. She saved her earnings to educate her sole son, convinced that a good education would benefit both him and his sisters. Paradoxically, Sittil Hajja did not afford the same educational opportunities to her daughters. From a Western feminist perspective, this unequal treatment and discrimination can be interpreted as a violation against women's basic rights. However, the religious dimension soars within the novel. Sittil hajja who is represented as an ardent believer in Islamic teachings hold the belief that males bear the responsibility of providing financial support for the entire family. This perspective reflects a widespread notion across the Arab Muslim world, wherein sons are traditionally expected to financially support their families. Conversely, daughters are anticipated to marry and integrate into their husbands' families, leading to the perception that investing in their education would yield no financial returns. Thus, within this cultural framework, educating daughters is often regarded as a financial burden or loss. This viewpoint underscores entrenched gender norms and expectations prevalent in many Arab Muslim societies, shaping perceptions of familial roles and educational priorities.

Sittil Hajja's feminist awareness was omnipresent in her tales with respect to marital relation. Her union with her husband was marked by hardship and disillusionment, beginning with her marriage at the age of ten, even before her first menstruation. Within three to four years, she experienced her initial pregnancy, resulting in the birth of El Saadawi's father, Sayed. Sittil Hajja resided with her husband, El Saadawi's grandfather, Habash, for eighteen years until his passing away when she was twenty-eight years old. Throughout their marriage, she endured the toll of fifteen pregnancies, tragically losing eight of her children, leaving her with one son, Sayed, and five daughters: Fatma, Baheya, Roukaya, Zaynab, and Neffisa (1999:31). Nevertheless, despite being widowed at the age of twenty-eight and left with six children, Sittil Hajja did not mourn her husband's passing away with tears. Instead, she summoned inner strength, turned to prayer, and expressed gratitude to God for her circumstances. Subsequently, she started working hard as a peasant in the fields, working nonstop to provide food for her six children. This highlights Sittil Hajja's steadfast devotion to her family's welfare in the face of difficult circumstances and demonstrates her resistance and determination in the face of misfortune. The different experiences that El Saadawi's grandmother went through made her strong independent women and strengthened her will to overcome all the restrictions imposed by the Egyptian patriarchal society.

Most significantly, El Saadawi attempts to dig deeper into history to find hints of women's power and agency. She evokes the era of Sittil Hajja's mother, referred to as "the woman from Gaza" (1999:37). This woman gained renown for publicly humiliating and reprimanding the village's headman in front of his residence. In response, the headman's supporters retaliated by coming to the mother's home, where they killed her dog and subsequently murdered her. As a tribute, villagers dug a grave for her at the village entrance, lining it with green maize husks, and erected a stone and cement monument in her honor. This episode vividly illustrates the type of women admired by the Arab Muslim mentality, as evidenced by the unique burial and commemoration bestowed upon Sittil Hajja's mother. It can be deduced that women have never been passive and submissive to authorial power. Instead, the prototypes of Sittil Hajja's mother came as a reaction against the accounts which had objectified women throughout history.

Similarly, Sittil Hajja emerges as a formidable woman who boldly confronts entrenched social injustices. It appears that she inherits the strength, courage, and fortitude of her mother, as evidenced by an incident where she confronts Omda, the village headman. On this occasion, she fearlessly asserts her reverence for God, expressing that her fear of divine judgment far outweighs any fear she may have of him. In my view, this demonstration of moral conviction and defiance against authority underscores Sittil Hajja's resilience and determination to uphold principles of justice and righteousness in the face of oppression. Such acts of resistance against established power structures highlight her role as a symbol of strength and defiance within her community, challenging prevailing norms and advocating for greater accountability and fairness. Resisting the headman is a clear example of women agency which El Saadawi celebrates through her entire autobiography:

The voice of Sittil Hajja echoes in my ears despite the passing of the years. I see her tall figure, her head upright as she walks through the village, treading firmly on the ground with her feet clad in *balghas*, watch her knock with the flat of her sunburnt hand on the door of the Omda's house and shout, 'Come out, Omda, and speak to me. I am Mabrouka, the daughter of the woman from Gaza and my head can reach as high as the head of any man in this village (1999:38).

El Sadaawi weaves her own story into the stories of her grandmothers and mother, echoing her paternal grandmother's powerful stories of female forebears. This quote reflects the narrator's long-lasting impression of Sittil Hajja, a strong female figure whose actions demonstrate her confidence and defiance of societal norms. When she knocks on the Omda's (village chief's) door, she demands to be heard and recognized, challenging the traditional power dynamics that frequently favor men. Her words resonate with pride and self-assertion as she proclaims her identity as Mabrouka, the daughter of a Gazan woman. This statement emphasizes her heritage and establishes her worth by claiming that her head can reach as high as any man in the village.

Furthermore, the quote encapsulates the significance of Sittil Hajja's character in challenging gender roles and advocating for gender equality within the village. She becomes a symbol of empowerment and resistance against patriarchal structures that seek to marginalize women. The narrator's memory of Sittil Hajja serves as a powerful reminder of her strength and the potential for women to assert their voices and claim their rightful place in society.

The mother, grandmother, and other women discussed in El Saadawi's autobiography exemplify the individual effectiveness of Arab Muslim women as catalysts for colonial to postcolonial changes. Their empowerment and resilience do not derive from formal schooling or interaction with Western thoughts. Rather, it emerges primarily from their own wisdom and experiences in a patriarchal society; it also stems from their continuous resistance to the male-dominated systems. In fact, these depictions give critics body to observe the autonomous subjectivity of Egyptian women.

V-3-1- Women's Roles in Nation Building: The Case of Fikrya and Samia

In *A Daughter of Isis*, El Saadawi initially discusses her perception of the nation. She underlines that the patriarchal class structure that governs her society is the source of the division between the liberation of women and the nation. Hence, she refutes turning a blind eye to gender issues at the expense of paying close attention to nation liberation, rather she considers gender issues as a top priority in the agenda of nation liberation. In this respect, she states,

Literary criticism in our country is under the control of a small group of men and a few women who think and write like them, who say there is no such thing as an issue related to women's rights. For them the only important issues are related to the Nation or to people in general, irrespective of sex (El Saadawi: 11).

El Saadawi argues that individuals who advocate for human rights are often masking the oppression of women behind broader calls for human rights. She contends that women constitute half of society and thus there should be no distinction between the liberation of women and the overall emancipation of the country. El Saadawi views the notion of "Nation" as the country she passionately loves and cherishes, a sentiment cultivated during her childhood and youth. She envisions a nation that guarantees women their full rights. However, she laments that this idealized concept of Nation eventually transforms into a source of fear and discrimination against women. As she reflects, it becomes akin to a prison, symbolized by figures like a policeman donning "a fez, a skull cap..." (1999:16). She goes on to say that

School, despite the headmistress, was the only road to freedom, and to me freedom was more important than the liberation of my country. Nation was a word we chanted with our slogans, but I was not a word. I was my body, the living flesh that was being beaten with the edge of the ruler, the blood dripping from my swollen fingers, the joints between my bones that were wincing with pain (El Saadawi, 281).

To El Saadawi, the notion of "Nation" was often echoed in public slogans, yet she placed greater emphasis on her personal freedom than on the liberation of her country. It is evident that El Saadawi consistently intertwines her individual emancipation with the liberation of her nation. She believes that her own liberation is intricately connected to the freedom of her country, and if compelled to make a choice, she would prioritize her own liberation. This perspective underscores

her belief in the interconnectedness of personal and national liberation struggles, reflecting a deep commitment to both individual and collective freedom. El Saadawi's stance highlights the complexities inherent in the pursuit of freedom and underscores the importance of individual agency within broader societal transformations.

Considering the prevalent theme of nation-building in her autobiography, El Saadawi emphasizes her upbringing in a family deeply rooted in a strong sense of nationality. Her father was clearly devoted to his country because he was an ardent critic of the King and his government, as well as the British colonial rule and occupation of Egypt. Throughout the narrative, El Saadawi portrays her father engrossed in reading both government and opposition newspapers, consistently discussing issues such as governmental corruption, British colonization, and the privileged elite. El Saadawi's father demonstrates a thorough grasp of Egypt's political, economic, and social landscape, and he offers his own analysis of the poverty and lack of education confronting the nation. El Saadawi's father, on the other hand, ignored gender issues and the challenges facing Egyptian women. No instance can be found within the autobiography showing her father's interest in political challenges which contribute to the development of women status and conditions.

El Saadawi's autobiography serves as a compelling exploration of the impactful contributions made by Arab women across historical contexts. Through her narrative, she illuminates the pivotal roles these women have played in the empowerment of their nations and the broader Arab Muslim civilization. El Saadawi illustrates that involvement in protests and politics was not considered a woman's domain. In patriarchal societies such as Egypt, women were restricted from entering the political sphere, as it was believed they should not make decisive political decisions or engage in street demonstrations. As a response, El Saadawi felt inspired by Heroines whose effort has been eminent throughout history, she states,

I advanced, holding the pole of the banner up in my right hand, hour after hour without tiring, as though in a dream, holding up the torch of liberation above our heads, as though I were Joan of Arc, or Zarq'a AlYamama leading her country to freedom A caressing voice seemed to reach my ears, floating in the air, like a song being sung to the rhythm of the *ood* in the midst of the warm blue sea, its waves rocking me gently up and down, like the arms of my mother when she held me on her knees and sang 'Sleep, sleep, sweet child' (El Saadawi ,1999:347).

Expounding upon the involvement of Egyptian women in nationalist demonstrations serves as a testament to their vibrant engagement in nationalist activism. El Saadawi depicts young women actively participating in demonstrations and aligning with political parties during the early 1940s and 1950s in Egypt. Among those highlighted in El Saadawi's autobiography are two classmates from her time at Helwan Secondary School. This portrayal underscores the significant role played by Egyptian women in shaping the socio-political landscape of their nation during that period.

Fikreya and Samia have contrasting viewpoints regarding politics and involvement in nationalist demonstrations. According to El Saadawi, Fikreya demonstrates a robust political and national awareness. She expresses criticism toward the ruling regime and employs her artistic skills as a means of resistance against the system:

Fikreya could not bear listening to anything about modern or ancient history. She considered that all rulers were corrupt and all people ruled by them cowardly and submissive. She used to draw King Farouk in the form of a sheep ready to be slaughtered on the occasion of the big Eid and changed Al-Nahas Pasha ¹ into a cross-eyed clown in the circus. Ahmed Maher Pasha ² she portrayed as a sack of cotton riddled with holes (1999: 254).

Similarly, Samia exhibits a critical stance toward the corrupt regime in Egypt, opting to voice her dissent verbally rather than through artistic expression like Fikreya. Her outspoken critique targets government officials, the monarchy, and their associations with the British. This sharp scrutiny of the system reflects Samia's political alignment with the Communist party. El Saadawi portrays Samia as frequently making her feel guilty, asserting that she is merely indulging in writing and imagination while the nation grapples with crises. Moreover, Samia emerges as a proactive figure among her peers,

¹ Leader of the Wafdist Party after the death of Saad Zaghloul in 1927.

² The prime minister of Egypt who declared war on the Axis in September 1945 and was assassinated as he was leaving Parliament House.

informing them about a significant patriotic demonstration scheduled for the following day, which all schools are expected to participate in. This illustrates Samia's deep sense of national consciousness and commitment to her country and its people. In fact, Fikrya and Samia are depicted as agents of change. They motivate the girls' sense of patriotism and nationalism. El Saadawi repeatedly admires their strong influence over their classmates. These prototypes of resistance bring to the students' awareness the necessity to participate in demonstrations and voice out their opinions.

Being zealous, the girls did not sleep a wink the night of the demonstration, and in the morning, they assembled in the courtyard clad in grey uniforms, adorned "with the badges pinned to our breast and with the slogan embroidered in red letters standing out: 'Evacuation by Blood'"(El Saadawi: 273). Despite the headmistress securing the outer gate with a sturdy lock and chain, hundreds of young girls successfully forced it open, underscoring their heightened political consciousness and unwavering conviction in the imperative of their country's liberation and freedom:

the hundreds of [women's] arms became a single powerful arm that twisted the metal, snapped it with the strength of anger building up since the day they were born, with the force of a dream suppressed in childhood, with the power of a great love imprisoned in the chest, with all the pent-up hatred against doors, and chains, and locks, with all the hope of a coming freedom (El Saadawi:274).

The quote highlights the emotional depth behind these women's actions. The suppressed dreams from their childhood, aspirations that had been stifled or denied due to societal norms and expectations, now find an outlet in this act of rebellion. Moreover, the girls paradoxically developed a political identity through their temporary submersion in political engagement, highlighting the notion that, in some cases, the loss of individuality can contribute to the formation of a collective identity. This experience aligns with feminist arguments asserting that women and minority groups often construct collective notions of identity rather than individualistic ones. This collective identity formation allows individuals to recognize and draw strength from their shared experiences, amplify their voices, and advocate for social change together.

El Saadawi found herself leading the demonstration and repeating nationalist chants. Indeed the autobiography shows the political identity women are able to construct regardless of gender and social restrictions.

My heart was big with the freedom I was living My heart was big with the freedom I was living as though I now possessed it, held it firmly in my two hands, like the window-sill onto which I was holding. I flew along breathing in the fresh air, my hair blowing in the wind, the voices of the girls resounding in my ears as they chanted in unison, 'Long live Egypt in Freedom', then sang, 'My country, my country I give you my heart and my love', with the sound of the wheels racing over the rails to the rhythm of the song, and the train letting out sharp whistles like a trumpet or a flute (El Saadawi :257).

That initial demonstration marked Nawal El Saadawi's first foray into public activism. However, her involvement resulted in her expulsion from school, as she was reprimanded for spearheading a national protest—contravening the Ministry of Education's ban on demonstrations. Despite the disciplinary action, her father intervened, securing her reinstatement. Throughout her university years, El Saadawi recounts her active engagement in numerous national demonstrations, driven by her deep love and allegiance to her country.

This sequence of events, in my view, underscores El Saadawi's early commitment to social and political activism, despite the personal risks and consequences she faced. Her experiences highlight the tension between individual agency and institutional authority, as well as the resilience and determination required to challenge oppressive systems. Moreover, they reflect the broader context of political repression and resistance in Egypt during that period, illuminating the ways in which individuals navigated and confronted authoritarian regimes in pursuit of social justice and democratic ideals

El Saadawi argues that she, like her classmates, was driven by great enthusiasm to take part in the demonstration. Not only does political event present one of their primary concerns, but also demonstration and rebellion are their gateway to self realization so long as political participations allow them to move from docile submissive bodies of hegemonic and colonial order to human beings who had to struggle against unjust political and social conditions.

To recapitulate, in Nawal El Saadawi's *A Daughter of Isis*, the theme of women's agency emerges as a central and powerful narrative thread. Through her personal journey and experiences, El Saadawi unveils the complex interplay between

patriarchal structures, political repression, and the indomitable spirit of women striving for liberation and empowerment in Egypt. El Saadawi vividly portrays the societal constraints and gendered expectations that shape the lives of women in Egyptian society. From her early encounters with familial expectations to her experiences in educational institutions and political activism, El Saadawi exposes the multifaceted challenges that women face in asserting their agency and autonomy within a deeply entrenched patriarchal system.

One of the most compelling aspects of El Saadawi's narrative is her exploration of women's resistance and resilience in the face of oppression. Despite facing expulsion from school and punishment for her participation in national demonstrations, El Saadawi refuses to be silenced or deterred. Instead, she harnesses her experiences to fuel her commitment to social justice and political change, embodying the transformative power of women's agency.

Moreover, El Saadawi's autobiography serves as a testament to the collective strength and solidarity among women in Egypt. Through her interactions with classmates, friends, and fellow activists, El Saadawi illuminates the bonds of sisterhood and shared struggle that unite women in their quest for liberation. Together, they challenge societal norms, confront institutional barriers, demand recognition of their inherent rights and dignity and ultimately assert the need for a democratically-gender nation-building.

V-4- Autobiography and Resistance in *A Daughter of Isis*

In *Women claim Islam*, Miriam Cooke explains how Djebbar, Mernissi and El Saadawi firmly believe that writing is a powerful tool in their ongoing struggle to establish justice in an inherently flawed system. Such a system "draws its authority from the autocratic power exercised by the ruler of the state, and that of the father or the husband in the family" (Cooke, 2001: 75-76). El Saadawi declares that "the written word for me became an act of rebellion against injustice exercised in the name of religion, or morals, or love" (El Saadawi, 1999:292). For El Saadawi, as well as Mernissi and Djebbar, writing becomes a daunting weapon to challenge the status quo, spark critical reflection, and ultimately help transform the social framework, making it more just and inclusive.

There is a profound connection between writing and identity in Nawal El Saadawi's life. Writing serves as a reflection of her life and actions as well as a form of resistance to traditional values and patriarchal norms. She redefines herself and asserts her agency as a woman through writing. It serves as a metaphorical "home" for her and a number of other feminist authors (Pavlović, 2013: 158). In my view, El Saadawi uses writing as a platform to express her convictions, confront oppressive forces, and claim her agency in a society that frequently tries to silence dissenting voices.

El Saadawi perceives writing as a powerful tool for self-expression and self-discovery rather than just a profession or a creative outlet. She explores her thoughts, feelings, and experiences in detail through her writing, which enables her to sort out the complexities of her own identity. Writing becomes a personal sanctuary where she can explore the depths of her being and make sense of the world around her. El Saadawi's conviction in the redemptive power of writing extends beyond self-discovery, she writes: "Autobiography seeks to reveal the self, what is hidden inside, just as it tries to see the other. My pen has been a scalpel which cuts through the outer skin, pushes the muscles aside, probes for the roots of things" (El Saadawi, 1999: 354).

Nawaal El Saadawi places immense faith in the transformative potential of her writing, considering it the key to discovering her true self. She views her ability to write as a form of salvation, a refuge that has shielded her from numerous hardships and calamities that might otherwise have befallen her. "It was reading and writing that saved me... I loved the touch of the pen in my hand much more than the feel of the ladle or the handle of a broom" (El Saadawi, 1999: 155).

The autobiographical perspective offered by Nawal El Saadawi in her autobiography goes beyond her own personal experience to include the struggles and tribulations endured by the Egyptian working-class women, farmers, and poor people (Aouadi, 2014:45). Instead of claiming to speak for them, she acknowledges their suffering as a vital component of her own. By doing this, she incorporates their suffering and stories into the framework of her own story, emphasizing how closely linked her life is to the larger socioeconomic and gender dynamics of her native country. The writer uses her autobiography not only to share her own story but also to represent the perspectives of those who are frequently silenced and marginalized in Egyptian society.

In Menouf and Kafr Tahla I often saw children who were blind, or with one eye open and the other closed, or with a white spot creeping over the black pupil, or with swollen eyelids exuding pus and with flies all over their faces (El Saadawi, 1999:156).

El Saadawi experiences a wide array of difficulties in her life due to her frank and outspoken writings, which span from being incarcerated to facing threats of death (Deyab, 2000:33). "Since I started writing I have understood my crime. My crime has been to think, to feel. But writing for me is like breathing in the air of life. I cannot stop" (El Saadawi 1999:63).

El Saadawi utilizes various means to challenge the system, yet she finds the written word to be her most potent tool. To her, writing is synonymous with activism. Even at the age of seventy-five, she persists in her quest for truth. She believes that while words may at times unsettle and discomfort us, they also compel us to confront our truths and challenge long-held beliefs that have persisted for centuries (El Saadawi: 292).

Nawal El Saadawi refers to the process of writing her autobiography as a profound «struggle against death» in a clear reference to Scheherazade's story (El Saadawi, 1999:18). She makes a risky move akin to Scheherazade's own, trying to put off the inevitable end of life. This daring achievement is highlighted by the fact that El Saadawi wrote her life's story while constantly being threatened with death by Islamic fundamentalists (Vinson, 2008: 93).

El Saadawi's autobiography becomes more complex because of this comparison with Scheherazade, the illustrious storyteller who avoided being put to death by using the persuasive power of narrative. Her resoluteness in the face of danger is a reflection of the heroic figure from legend, and it highlights the unbreakable spirit that inspires her writing. As a result, El Saadawi's autobiography bears witness to the strength of language as a weapon against oppression and death, echoing the timeless themes of Scheherazade's tales of survival.

In essence, creative writing turns into a potent tool for fighting oppression and hegemony, a way to uncover hidden stories, and a source of inspiration and empowerment for those who have been marginalized. Individuals and communities are given the power to confront and change the oppressive structures that work to silence their voices and aspirations through the written word. El Saadawi's writing brings to life the lived reality of her struggle for freedom. Her writing serves as a powerful tool for advocacy and activism. She uses her autobiography to document and illuminate the difficulties, obstacles, and injustices that she and others faced in Egypt. The writer provides a comprehensive understanding of the social conditions that have shaped her journey by weaving her personal experiences into the fabric of the political and economic landscape. She skillfully blends personal reflection with societal critique through the use of creative narrative techniques, what could have been a simple memoir is transformed into an engaging and thought-provoking work.

El Saadawi's works serve as a vehicle for women's stories and experiences. She creates a rich and multifaceted portrayal of womanhood by incorporating her own journey alongside the narratives of other females, fostering empathy, understanding, and solidarity. Her writing serves as a platform for reclaiming and celebrating the voices of women, both past and present, resulting in a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of female experiences.

In *A Daughter of Isis*, El Saadawi delves into various societal issues prevalent in her community, including gender disparities, education, national identity, resistance against imperialism, and misinterpretations of religion. She scrutinizes these constructs, recognizing their collective influence in defining the experiences of women within Arab Muslim societies.

Nawal El Saadawi's autobiography transcends mere historical narrative; it serves as a profound testament to her literary prowess. It captivates readers intrigued by both her individual odyssey and the broader societal challenges she grapples with, including gender disparities, education, national identity, imperialism, and religious misinterpretation. El Saadawi meticulously examines these constructs, recognizing their collective impact on shaping the experiences of women within Arab Muslim societies. Through her introspective exploration, she invites readers to contemplate the multifaceted dimensions of womanhood in a complex cultural landscape, offering profound insights into the intricate interplay of personal and societal forces shaping identity and existence.

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