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## **Women Lost, Women Found: Searching for an Arab-Islamic Feminist Identity in Nawal El Saadawi's *Twelve Women in a Cell* in Light of Current Egyptian "Spring" Events**

By Ebtahal Al-Khateeb<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

Dr. Nawal El Saadawi, an Arab feminist, playwright, novelist, and thinker, has been one of the most controversial literary figures in Arab contemporary literature. In this paper, I examine El Saadawi's 1984 play *Twelve Women in A Cell* in light of the ongoing political dissidence that gave birth to the recent Arab Spring and its intricate relation to feminist dissidence. The play published twenty-eight years ago, deals with a bizarre situation that surprisingly and sadly, is still relevant to women's struggle within Arab-Islamic hegemony. The cell that hosts twelve Egyptian women, in El Saadawi's play, becomes the Arabic Islamic patriarchal world, within which these women struggle as their ultimate goal becomes survival. The cell hosts many types of women like a university professor, a prostitute, an atheist, and a fundamentalist Muslim, who only have their femaleness as the common ground on which they can salvage existence and their salvation.

*Keywords:* Nawal El Saadawi, Arab contemporary literature, feminist dissidence, Arab Spring

"I should need to do battle with a certain phantom," says Virginia Woolf in preparing to write one of her book reviews, "and the phantom was a woman" (Woolf 1996, 1345). While confessing to taking the battle to its ultimate conclusion, Woolf graphically explains:

I turned upon her and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her. My excuse, if I were to be held up in a court of law, would be that I acted in self-defense. Had I not killed her she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing. (Woolf 1996, 1346).

Almost every female writer in the East and West hides such a "crime." Generally, every woman who attempts to hold a pen in one hand finds herself holding a knife, of sorts, in the other. The pen points at the paper, and the knife points toward the self, the conventional woman within, "the Angel," as Woolf describes her, "intensely sympathetic...immensely charming...utterly unselfish...[who] excelled in the difficult arts of family life...sacrificed herself daily...never had a mind or a wish of her own...pure" (Woolf 1996, 1346).

Today, fewer and fewer Western women find themselves coerced into that type of combat; however, the battle still-rages on among Middle Eastern women. As they attempt to hold a pen during the writing process, their worst enemy confronts them: the angel within. This battle against the self and embedded ideology immediately brings to mind Nawal El Saadawi, a Middle Eastern woman and celebrated author whose name has been on the battlefield for more than sixty

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years. In her article “‘Tyrannical Femininity’ in Nawal El Saadawi’s *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*,” Khadidiatou Guèye states that “El Saadawi’s subversive writing shapes and is shaped by a resolute struggle against injustice.” Guèye quotes El Saadawi, saying “writing is like killing, because it takes a lot of courage...because you are killing ideas, you are killing injustices, you are killing systems that oppress” (Guèye 2010, 162).

El Saadawi has fought on all fronts: the social, the legal, the religious, the political, the public, and the horrifyingly taboo private fronts. Her life story is that of a crusade through which she battles her own conventional, rural upbringing and the authoritative ideas that this upbringing left resonating in her mind. This battle is described in all its grim details and intensely private spheres in her writings, interviews, and speeches. She exposes herself and her personal experiences to her readers. She disrobes her culture at the risk of sounding like a traitor. She illustrates her vulnerabilities as a woman; however, she is a woman independent of all other categorizations, and she is a woman with whom other women can identify and to whom they can perhaps relate in some unique way. In her article, “Framing Nawal El Saadawi: Arab Feminism in a Transnational World,” Amal Amireh explains that El Saadawi “addresses readers with the confidence of a physician, the passion of an activist, the credibility of an eye witness, and the pathos of an injured woman” (Amireh 2000, 231).

The genuine experiences offered by El Saadawi in her writings, grounded in her own life and sprung from a society to which she is tied and yet from which she is estranged, create the confrontational texts through which El Saadawi seems to direct her anger at her readers as contributors to, passive viewers of, or even shy protestors against the oppression of the minority in her society. The intent of this paper is to examine one of El Saadawi’s unique texts that drew together a number of characters based on individuals who are marginalized in Egyptian society; ironically, all of whom embody the ultimate marginalized form in Arab society, namely, women. For a controversial, out there writer such as El Saadawi, who better than a female prostitute to slab the readers on the face with this issue of marginalization? In an interview with Peter Hitchcock (1993), El Saadawi states,

I preferred to be in prison in Egypt rather than in exile. My creativity is linked to the soil, to the air, to the faces of my people. It’s my life, my blood. In a way, I cannot write except on concrete women like Firdaus, on flesh. I cannot write except as the other becomes the self—but I do this unconsciously of course. I did not speak for Firdaus: I spoke to her and she spoke to me. I didn’t speak about her, this is important. (176)

Firdause, a prostitute El Saadawi met in prison and wrote about in one of her novels and plays, is the ultimate marginalized figure in the Arab world. Not only is she powerless, but she is totally shunned and isolated, perceived a social disease, in many ways similar to the situation of women on the opposite end of the scale, the intellectual, revolutionary, outspoken, who is just as dangerous in an Arab society and just as deadly to its maintained hegemony. The marginalization of Arab women takes a number of forms mostly stemming from patriarchal knowledge upon which the Arab societies were built. In another interview done by Rajaa Gharbi (1987) and titled “International Interview: Nawal El Saadawi,” the latter speaks of the forms and roots of marginalization, she states:

we believe in claiming and acquiring knowledge of ourselves, by ourselves, in the past, present, and future, and not from patriarchal references. We believe in reversing the pseudo-knowledge in scientific work, the distortion of facts, and the absence of our history. Patriarchal knowledge is fragmented into segments: medicine, economics, psychology, history, etc., etc. we need to make our knowledge whole again. We are socialists because we believe in fighting the class system from women's perspective, and feminists because we better be fighting patriarchy! (8)

El Saadawi believes that the resolving of such marginalization only comes through the reversal of patriarchal knowledge, as stated above, but this mission requires collective effort not only of all women of the world, but of all women of all ages of the world. It is a struggle that has to be inherited, a battle that has to be passed on through generations of women. "Women need to tell our stories," she tells Gharbi, "our realities from our own knowledge of it. We must represent ourselves. But writing alone is not enough. It is still an individual effort. That's why I am also an organizer." (8)

An organizer El Saadawi is indeed, for "she is one of the few international feminists who have been able to link various threads of the international women's movement. This is particularly evident in el Saadawi's crucial role in forming the Arab Women's Solidarity Association (AWSA)" (Hitchcock, 170). This organization was shut down by the government in 1991. Of this story El Sadaawi states that

We started in 1982 after I came out of jail. We know, if you're an individual they can smash you, kill you, put you in jail, they can silence you, but if you're doing collective work, in a group, then it's difficult for them, much more difficult. At the time I didn't feel I could join any of the political parties in Egypt; I called them the 'official opposition' you know. As for women's organizations, they were mostly charities, or governmental, or both. But as soon as we formed AWSA we ran into trouble with the government. (Hitchcock, 172)

El Saadawi understood the importance of women's collective work, even more, a sense of genuine solidarity which she will prove true through her own activism in the issue of Palestine and toward Palestinian women in particular. The government refused to register AWSA and they were shut down after the gulf war. After that, the government attempted to freeze their assets then transfer these assets to an Islamic women group "you can see how the government is, ironically, encouraging the Islamic fundamentalists even if on other levels they appear to oppose them," El Saadawi comments (Hitchcock, 172). Because AWSA was opposed to the Gulf War, "the government invoked an article of the Law of Association which says that such groups are not allowed to discuss politics of religion" (Hitchcock, 172). The group was left with only sex to talk about "and sex is taboo anyway," El Saadawi maintains (Hitchcock, 172). El Saadawi acknowledges the activities of other Egyptian women but with no less criticism: "most of these groups (formed by women)—whether connected to charities, Islam, the governments, or other political parties—they are traditional. They do not deal with the issues addressed by AWSA, those of class and patriarchy, etcetera" (Hitchcock, 173).

In a report published on *Women's Media Centre* (WMC) website, and under the headline of *Women Under Siege*, Janine Zaltsman stated that the oppression and harassment experienced during Mubarak regime

has continued since the president's fall on February 11. During the early months of the revolution, the military subjected female protesters to so-called 'virginity tests,' acts of sexualized violence committed against women ostensibly to prove that no other forms of sexualized violence had occurred. An unnamed general eventually admitted that the military had authorized these tests: 'We didn't want them to say we had sexually assaulted or raped them, so we wanted to prove that they weren't virgins in the first place,' he said. 'The girls who were detained were not like your daughter or mine. These were girls who had camped out in tents with male protesters in Tahrir Square, and we found in the tents Molotov cocktails and [drugs].'

Women continued to suffer under Mubarak's Regime until the last moment of his presidency, for throughout the protests, one main weapon that was used to prevent men and women from participation and to break them within was the harassment of female protesters. The violation of women was not only meant to break the women but it also aimed to dishonor the men in their inability to defend the female protesters as well as in being suspects of this violation themselves. Women were also detained and "threatened with rape in detention, and stripped in the street" (*Women Under Siege*). Added to that, there was a targeting of female international journalists and broadcasters who went back home with horrific stories about their Tahrir experiences. Susan Kroll and Marian Smith, in a written segment on the NBC News website titled *Women violated in the cradle of Egypt's revolution, activists say*, state that:

Cairo's Tahrir Square, once the staging ground for the massive uprising that ousted Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, is quickly becoming notorious for something very different: an organized campaign of sexual assaults, activists say.

The past year has seen an increase in attacks against women at demonstrations, but recently they have been particularly rampant – and, according to witnesses and activists, they have been following similar patterns.

On the two-year anniversary of the revolution on Jan. 25, at least 19 women were sexually assaulted in and around Tahrir Square in one night, some with knives, activists said. Dozens more cases have been reported in the two months since.

'The message to women is, 'You should stay at home, you should stop protesting, you should feel stigmatized,' said Hania Moheeb, an Egyptian journalist who was herself assaulted in the square that night.

This torment did not cease for women as the situation matured toward the presidency of the Muslim Brother representative Muhammad Mursi. Women suffered a number of setbacks as Jenny Montasir states in her article that appeared on the *Middle East Voices* website titled "Women's Rights in Egypt-Re-Examining a Revolution." She explains that "the setbacks women

experienced since the Muslim Brotherhood gained political power vary, from the approval of a constitution that lacks a clear statement on women's rights, to the removal of the unveiled, historical feminist figure Doriya Shafiq from school textbooks." She asserts that:

In Egypt, UNFPA's (United Nations Population Fund) (Gihan) Abouzeid (consultant) stresses that the advancement of women's causes is further hindered by the fact that non-governmental organizations operate within a framework of harsh government restrictions and a perpetual lack of funding. But she also believes that women's rights groups have not changed their ways enough since the revolution, often working in a reactionary way rather than developing new ideas or tackling the deeper issues.

This goes back full circle to El Saadawi's own suffering with her organization and her own critique of other women's organizations, all of which never stopped her from further pursuing her objectives.

Thus, despite all this trouble in her home field, El Saadawi continued to run the course of the game on other feminist fields, believing them all to be connected. She ran a very strong position toward the Palestinian cause: "For me, feminists cannot oppose the oppression of women by men and accept or tolerate the oppression and exploitation of whole nations and cultures" (Gharbi, 8). She insisted on the involvement of Arab women in international matters: "How can a third World woman not discuss wider political questions? Everything is political: food, clean water, the way you love, the way you're loved. Survival is certainly political" (Gharbi, 8). According to her, writing is a method of resistance, but it will never be enough if it stayed isolated from activism, and it will never be enough if it remained limited to certain class or certain society or certain people. For El Saadawi, the struggle of women is universal and thus the solution has to be reached universally. In the Preface to her book *The Hidden Face of Eve* (1980), El Saadawi states:

The oppression of women, the exploitation and social pressures to which they are exposed, are not characteristic of Arab or Middle Eastern societies, or countries of the 'Third World' alone. They constitute an integral part of the political, economic and cultural system, preponderant in most of the world—whether that system is backward and feudal in nature, or a modern industrial society that has been submitted to the far reaching influence of a scientific and technological revolution. (i)

She asserts: "The situation and problems of women in contemporary human society are born of developments in history that made one class rule over another, and men dominate over women. They are the product of class and sex" (i). These two sources of discrimination, long-running through the history of women all around the world are the focus of El-Saadawi's literary and critical works.

By studying her play *Twelve Women in a Cell*, one can look at the ways in which the Arabic and Islamic female identities are integrated within the complex political sphere of the time of the play (namely, the early 1980s). This time was marked by the rise of fundamentalist public groups; its milieu perhaps stemmed from the influence of fundamentalist governments all around the world. Women comprise most of the victims under such circumstances—this situation

rarely changes and can be simply demonstrated by the relevance of El Saadawi's dramatic text to today's Arab female dilemma. The subject -reintroduced itself with the recent "Arab Spring," in which protestors took over totalitarian Arab regimes and vulnerable nations burdened with long-oppressed extremists expressed their hunger for power, with daunting uncertainties as to the fate of democracy and freedom. As always, women are the most vulnerable prey to these extremists. Within the current atmosphere in the Arab world, it seems hard to identify and then to define the extremists. In a way, everyone is an extremist and everyone is a victim. However, one thing remains certain: the same groups who deferred the progress of women are the ones who undermined the prospects of democratic transition. The Egyptian revolution is the greatest witness to this connection between the progression of women and that of their whole nations; Nawal El Saadawi speaks well of this dilemma:

Women who accuse me of being pro-Western are liars, or have never read my work. The most important characteristic of my work is that I don't separate off the neocolonial machine -- international politics -- from the family and the personal lives of my characters...even some of the leftist groups in Egypt accuse me of being pro-Western, but that is because I criticize their silence about gender when considering class. Meanwhile, the Right calls me a communist because I link class and patriarchy! And the religious fanatics call me an atheist because I'm critical of religious hypocrisy and because I say we need a real Islam, a real religion -- and that's justice. I didn't learn this sense of justice from the West, I learned it from my illiterate grandmother, a peasant who never read the Koran." (Hitchcock 174)

Just as El Saadawi is unable to belong to any ideology, class or even sex, as mentioned above, the politics of the Arab world seemed also unable to find sustenance or stability with any of these groups. The solution came from El Saadawi's illiterate grandmother, just as the solution for the Arab world came from the streets of the poorer areas and through those who were least elitist and most oppressed. Many of us who live in the Arab world, whether activists or otherwise, came to realize a very important fact: the solution starts with us, from the streets. For the longest time, the leftist, just like the Islamists, and the military, just like the civil organized society, were all part of the problem and not the solution. Even the opposition, any opposition for that matter, was an "official opposition" as El Saadawi calls it, a sweet lenient political resistance that only hindered the progression of democracy (Hitchcock 172). The Arab street roared with hunger, homelessness, unemployment, and illiteracy, and as the Arab institutions filled with corruption and bureaucracy, the left were busy with elitist ideological outdated conversations, the Islamists with an obsolete dream of an ultimate empire, the nationalists with a persisting delusion of unity, the secular with an isolated discourse that does not recognize religion as an intuitive force within the Arab person, the military with attacking people, and the right with stealing from them. Everyone was part of the problem as they were to EL Saadawi, everyone had to be made way with; it was the time for real people, real conversation and real action.

Nawal El Saadawi was born in 1931 to a middle-to-lower-class family from the rural Kafr Tahla village outside Cairo. Despite her parents being slightly more lenient than their peers regarding adherence to conventional norms of behavior, she still got a bitter taste of these norms when she was genitally mutilated (sometimes euphemistically called "female circumcision") at the age of six and then was hurried into marriage just as she approached the age of ten. Because

she was unable to resist the former, she lobbied against female genital mutilation for the rest of her life. However, she luckily was able to pass over the latter, revolting against all attempts at forced marriage and insisting on completing her studies all the way through medical school. Consequently, she had to relocate to Cairo, the big city that would shape and reshape her life in the harshest of ways. Like her father, who suffered professionally as a consequence of his participation in demonstrations against British colonialism, she was a tormented, outspoken activist who lost a prestigious job with the Egyptian Ministry of Health in 1972, as well as a number of other positions, as a consequence of her explicit discussion of female sexuality and strong opposition to female genital mutilation.

El Saadawi continued to write articles and publish novels that intertwined dangerous political and controversial sexual notions, which led to her imprisonment under President Anwar El Saadat's regime in 1981. She was incarcerated for two months and was released after El Saadat's assassination that year. She then had to flee the country on receiving an increasing number of death threats after accusations of apostasy. She lived in the United States from 1988 to 1996; on returning to Egypt, she and her daughter (who lobbied for the rights of women to give their surnames to their children to end the problem of illegitimacy in Egypt) were immediately confronted with further legal proceedings, which poured into the same accusations of apostasy and political radicalism. She suffered the shutting down of organizations and magazines she had founded, as well as the frequent banning of her books in Egypt and sometimes in other Arab countries.

El Saadawi, based in Egypt today, is still very active at the age of 81; she often travels in response to invitations to lecture at or to receive awards from prestigious universities worldwide. Still hard at work, she is writing as piercingly as ever about areas considered taboo for women to address, giving powerful, in-your-face interviews about her religious, political, and culturally estranged insights, battling all kinds of fundamentalism, religious and traditional, in courts of law. In 2011, she screamed, "Leave!" at the deposed president Husni Mubarak while attending the turbulent and roaring demonstrations in Tahrir Square in the heart of Cairo. She was old but also iconic and proud, and she meant the world to those people she stood amongst, people who were three generations distant from her, people who one day were, or their parents were, enemies of her. It was finally here, a movement like no other, where women, although still marked by gender differences, were able to be and to feel as just citizens. Elizabeth Rubin (2011), in her article "The Feminists In The Middle Of Tahrir Square," speaks of witnessing this particular phenomenon of women finding their complete identity in Tahreer square:

I saw the crowds cleaved by a stream of girls and young women in pink and blue veils. Men formed a shield around them so they could move through the square unimpeded. When a solitary man tried to join the procession, he was turned away: 'No! this is the women's revolution.' To which one of the women added: 'We are here as women, but we are speaking out for everyone' (66).

These women, as pointed out by their veils, are on the very end of the conservatism scale, but they are beginning to speak, and speak they shall throughout the revolution. Another woman that Rubin met in the demonstrations was the novelist and essayist Ahdaf Soueif who was in the Square passing out cookies. "What we are seeing is not a shift in personality," Soueif states, 'but people finally able to access their personalities' (Rubin 66). This access to one's self is one of the most important achievements of this revolution for the Egyptian person, but indeed of an



extraordinary significance for the Egyptian woman who used this historical moment to question gender divisions and limitations. Soueif tells Rubin that “she and her women friends were thinking of issuing a statement asking, “Can we get rid of this whole gender thing?” (Rubin 66). At last, people were speaking a common language devoid of fear, and of class and gender distinctions, despite the difficulty of making way with the latter. “There was no feminism or ideology. Women were simply demanding the same pragmatic constitutional changes that every Egyptian wants. Everything is up for debate, including the Islamic laws that remain within the constitution” (Rubin 66).

In the middle of all of this sprung the then-79 year old El Saadawi, a woman not only loaded with visions and dreams of a new democratic and prosperous Egypt, but one who was encumbered with memories of oppressions and violations and humiliations, a woman who was for a long time unable to publish at home, unable to work at home, and finally unable to live at home all together. “She still seethes that the regime shut down her Arab Women’s Solidarity Association back in the 1990s. ‘We had hundreds of women, and Suzanne Mubarak banned it!’” (Rubin 68). To Nawal El Saadawi, this was very personal as well. However, she was no stranger to the political activism she is assuming in Tahreer Square. She had volunteered during the 1967 war against Israel as a doctor in the Palestinian camps in Jordan. She often found her way to the street to demonstrate Arab troubles and worries, especially those of women. She was imprisoned, socially harassed, threatened, and thrown out of her homeland. This is a woman who has been through it all, and now, she was no less prepared for the probably grandest political event of her life. She was there and she made everyone know of it. Rubin tells of her chance to meet with El Saadawi:

On the 12<sup>th</sup> day of the demonstrations I visited her modest four-room home in the 26<sup>th</sup> floor of an apartment tower in the working-class neighborhood of Shobra. ‘The young men hugged and kissed me,’ she said. ‘They tell me, ‘You were inspirational to do this revolution.’ Even young men in the Muslim Brothers said, ‘Thank you for your books—we respect you.’ I was crying. (67)

If El Saadawi is to speak today, she will probably have a different attitude toward the Muslim Brothers, but at the dawn of the revolution, the barriers fell, the long history of battling between El Saadawi and the Muslim Brothers took a back-stand to the then current events. However, El Saadawi did not only, in the days prior to the revolution, anger Fundamentalist religious groups, she just as well made the whole elitist liberal society extremely uncomfortable and much embarrassed by her “vulgar” bluntness. Rubin explains this relationship between El Saadawi and the upper class Egyptians:

If you mention Saadawi’s name among intellectual Egyptian women in Zamalek, the upscale leafy old Cairo island on the other side of the Kasr Al Nil bridge that connects to Tahreer Square, or at the Gezira country club where Egypt’s upper classes (regime haters and beneficiaries alike) eat, play tennis, and gossip, you can see a slight contraction of the spine, a twitchy smile. Saadawi is a little too out there, too loud, too explicit. She writes boldly of her clitoris being cut out when she was 6. She began campaigning against female genital mutilation long before doing so was fashionable. She airs too many social ills, and many don’t appreciate Egypt being portrayed so harshly to the rest of the world. (68)

However, throughout the Egyptian revolution, loud was good, and El Saadawi became “recognized by her own people as an icon rather than an outcast,” for the status of being “a little too out there” became the norm during these days of revolution, even more, it became a necessity (Rubin 68).

“El Saadawi’s energy is still astonishing,” says Rubin. “And every day she returns to her flat, euphoric and filled with ideas. When people ask her how she managed in the chaos of Tahrir, she replies: “I was about to be knocked over by Mubarak’s horses. I felt I could kill the horse. It’s psychological energy. And the young people picked me up and carried me home” (68). El Saadawi was subjected to the same amount of violence and harassment the younger people at Tahreer Square were subjected to. Salma Said is a third-generation revolutionist that Rubin met in the Square. The then 26 year-old girl had experiences in the square that “will shape her for the rest of her life,” says Rubin, for “It was a medieval war—the regime’s thugs assaulted the protesters with horses, camels, swords, Molotov cocktails” (71). All of this violence only supplied the patience, anger and hope of the revolutionists with more ammunition. Even more, all of this violence came as a glimpse of hope to some people, it was a sign of something happening, something unprecedented. Gamila Ismail, a public and media figure, and the wife of the opposition politician Ayman Nour was at the verge of breaking down right before the revolution started. Mubarak’s regime succeeded in destroying her social and public life, imprisoning her husband and totally isolating her and her family from all they knew before. Thus to her, as it was to El Saadawi, “the revolution has been a vindication both personal and political—a sweet, unexpected victory against a regime that had persecuted her family” (70). To El Saadawi, as it was to Salma Said and Gamila Ismail, the revolution was a liberation not only from an oppressive regime but also from a gender boundary and an ideological and political historical burden (particularly in the cases of El Saadawi and Ismail) they never dreamt to dispose of in their lifetimes.

In her book *The Nawal el Saadawi Reader*, El Saadawi (1997) speaks of the idea of dissidence, one that she believed not only to be displayed in the field, but also at home; one that cannot only be political but also personal. She states that

I have tried to find the Arab word for dissidence. In Arabic we say protest (al-ihitijaj) or opposition (al-mu’arada) or disputation (al-mukhasama) or rebellion or revolt (yatamattadu or yethurur). But each of these words has a different meaning according to the context in which the dissidence or struggle take place. For me the word struggle in Arabic (al-nidal) sheds most light on the meaning of dissidence. The dissident in Arabic (al-munadil) means the fighter who cooperates with others to struggle against oppression and exploitation whether personal or political. (160)

Thus, El Saadawi’s revolution has long started before the late Egyptian revolution. Her pen was and still is her “mace,” one that she directs at the eyes of the “ignorant” with no mercy. Her most controversial work, which often subjects her to charges of the most serious crime in the Islamic world (that of apostasy), is her critique of religion in general. In her article “Conversations with Nawal El Saadawi,” Adele Newson-Horst states that El Saadawi’s “critical examination of both the Islamic and Christian world offers insight to those who question women’s roles in religion” (Newson-Horst 2008, 55). The emphasis on these two religions stems

from the fact that today, Egypt consists of a Muslim majority and Coptic Christian minority, alongside a number of people who practice other marginal religions, nearly all of which work, in cooperation with conservative traditions, to oppress and control women. However, El Saadawi's theological discourse is not at ease with other religions, for she "believes that all religions are 'inimical to women' and the poor" (Newson-Horst 2008, 55). El Saadawi does not excuse the West's role in boosting fundamentalism; as Newson-Horst clarifies, "she insists on the connection between 'capitalism and religious fundamentalism'" (Newson-Horst 2008, 56). El Saadawi displays agnostic tendencies and speaks of the order of the universe and an ultimately knowable soul as possible forms of deities, in close acquaintance with the Indian tradition of Brahmanism. All of these controversial views, political and religious critiques, and strong feminist assessments are still relevant to the world of Arab and Muslim women today and are strongly put forth in her notorious play, *Twelve Women in a Cell*.

Pauline Homsy Vinson (2008) talks about the autobiographical work of Arab women in her article, "Shahrazadian Gestures in Arab Women's Autobiographies"; she indicates that this type of work, born out of personal memory, reflects the general political movement of the time. Vinson analyzes the autobiographical work of El Saadawi and another Arab female writer, Leila Ahmad, indicating that

Personal memory in their texts becomes integral not only to representing the self in autobiographical form but also to reevaluating political perceptions of the historical events that have shaped their lives...they construct resistant narratives, presenting their own views of themselves and the world around them. (Vinson 2008, 88)

Vinson's article centers on El Saadawi's autobiography, *A Daughter of Isis*, in which El Saadawi speaks extensively about her imprisonment, which lasted for two months in 1981. In 1984, she transferred this experience into the play *Twelve Women in a Cell*, a symbolic text in which the female characters appear to be allegorical representations rather than realistic characters. The play introduces twelve women from different social and ideological backgrounds and brings them together throughout the action of the play, reflecting El Saadawi's support "of the feminist argument that women and minority groups tend to forge collective rather than individualistic notions of identity" (Vinson 2008, 90).

### *Twelve Women in a Cell*

In the play, we meet Salma, the young, uneducated street girl; Alia, the freethinking divorcee; Samira, the fundamentalist Muslim; Bassima, the progressive Muslim; Azza, the Westernized researcher; Labiba, the unhappily married clerical worker; Madiha, the atheist; Nagat, the Christian girl; Hadia, the unveiled Muslim; Etedal, the devout Muslim high-school student; Neffissa, the university student and governmental spy; and Rachida, the devout Muslim who is pregnant. Ironically, the play's "mirror" characters, on whom reality is reflected and evaluation is maintained, are not among the twelve women mentioned in this paragraph but are rather the three most socially tainted characters: Zouba the prostitute, Zeinab the criminal, and Sabah the beggar. These three women, mostly functioning in the manner of the Shakespearean fool, constitute the glue that keeps the rest of the women—the political prisoners that El Saadawi simply calls "the politicals"—connected and ever aware of the austerity and bleakness of one

another's lives. Despite being apolitical, these women are the ultimate victims of the politics of the time.

In the opening of Scene One, authority is immediately established through the "portrait of a man...hanging in a huge golden frame decked with a string of fairy lights. The facial features are stern, the eyes piercing, the smile is broad and sardonic" (El Saadawi 1994, 12). This portrait is extremely significant; its symbolism would be immediately recognized by Egyptian and Arab readers, as it is customary to hang bulky framed portraits of eerily smiling leaders in all governmental buildings in these totalitarian countries. Sabah, the beggar, opens the scene with a chant:

Honest people thrown in the mud  
The son-of-a-bitch ruling as he pleases (El Saadawi 1994, 12)

The framed portrait and Sabah's chant verify the nature of the political atmosphere under which the twelve women come together. These women are shown, however, to come apart at the beginning of the play, separated by their social classes and religious creeds. The scene opens with the women quarrelling as to who should clean the cell's floor and the bathroom. Labiba objects to cleaning, indicating that she has "three domestics at home," which starts a conversation that defines the women and sets the initial boundaries of their discussion:

SAMIRA: (*imitates Labiba*) "I have three domestics, Madame Fahima!" Look at who's sticking up for the working classes.

LABIBA: Look at who's got nothing to do except read the Koran.

SAMIRA: The world passes, only God remains.

LABIBA: And who's going to work to feed you? God?

RACHIDA: May God forgive you.

NEFFISSA: The real food is from God and the real cleanliness is from your faith and dirt comes from...

SAMIRA: Sinners! (El Saadawi 1994, 15-16)

From this segment of the conversation, El Saadawi establishes class distinctions and religious discourse as patriarchal powers that cause female solidarity to disintegrate. In a paradoxical gesture, the Warden finds a woman from the prostitutes' cell who will complete the cleaning job; when the others object, the Warden comes out as the feminist authoritative voice of the group:

What's wrong with prostitutes? They're the cleanest of the lot. I've seen 'em all: criminals, drug dealers, thieves and some of them are good people, it's life that's let them down. Lots of innocent people inside, ladies. Bet you never thought you'd land up in here" (El Saadawi 1994, 16).

The Warden, although assertive of the hierarchal power within the prison in her adherence to rules and orders, often functions as the chorus of the play, commenting on incidents and judging situations; in a simple, direct manner, she brings the voice of logic and justice to the chaotic atmosphere of the prison. In a conversation with Salma, the young, naïve street girl, the Warden tries to explain who the man in the portrait is, indicating that he is the man "on top, on

top, on top” (El Saadawi 1994, 17). This steers the conversation immediately toward the patriarchal powers to which some of these women cling in loyalty:

SALMA: As high as the sky?

WARDEN: Even higher.

SALMA: Higher than the sky, higher than God?

WARDEN: Heavens above! Who’s higher than God? You’re joking.

RACHIDA: Don’t be stupid, he’s the one who’s put you here.

SALMA: (*even more naively*) Does he know me? I don’t know him. Reminds me of someone.

RACHIDA: (*mocking*) Perhaps he looks like your dad?

Salma: (*hurt*) I don’t remember what he looks like. All I remember is my mom’s old man—I used to call him dad. He looked like this one.

(*Everyone laughs.*) (El Saadawi 1994, 17)

In the simple and direct conversation among her characters, El Saadawi draws a portrait of the persona of the political and religious patriarch whose actions are the main source of all these women’s agony and suffering, whether they recognize it or not. Nevertheless, El Saadawi instantly and humorously turns the table on the patriarch in the immediate conversation that follows Neffissa’s screaming:

WARDEN: What’s up? Another cockroach?

NEFFISSA: No. A man. (El Saadawi 1994, 17)

In a later conversation between Zouba and Hadia, the former responds to the screams of the latter:

ZOUBA: What is it? Another roach?

HADIA: A man!

(*The women rush to put on their veils. Zouba rushes to the door.*)

ZOUBA: No men in here. (El Saadawi 1994, 27)

In both instances, the women immediately scatter to put on their veils. This image degrades the patriarch as a cockroach and censures the women for granting to a “cockroach” such massive, unmerited power.

The veil, or Muslim women’s head-covering, stands as an ambiguous icon in this play. El Saadawi’s stance toward the veil is no secret; she voices a dogmatic opinion on the subject in almost all her interviews. Rubin testifies to hearing El Saadawi speak to reporters from Tahrir Square, the center of the recent Egyptian Revolution: “[V]eiling and nakedness are two faces of the same coin,” she told one reporter. “Women are sex objects in the free market. I am against makeup. Plastic surgery is a post-modern veil” (Rubin, 67). However, being a very private, female-identified religious object, the veil is sometimes introduced in the play as an icon of resistance and a tool for the imposition of power. The Governor, who makes an appearance in Act One while visiting the women’s ward, is made to wait outside their cell for the women to cover their heads. He angrily poses the question, “I don’t understand them. How can they be political? Overturn a government with their veils on?” (El Saadawi 1994, 18). These veiled women are shown in the play to maintain their stance, bonding with other women in the face of

chauvinism represented as political oppression. We hear them form an alliance of resistance as they comment on the Inspector's observations of them as women:

SAMIRA: They're all the same. Real jokers. Snakes in the grass.

BASSIMA: It's true. A few minutes ago he implied I was some sort of criminal.

AZZA: He told me to stay at home and mind my children.

SAMIRA: He called me a spinster.

*(RACHIDA takes off her veil; her long hair falls about her shoulders.)*

RACHIDA: *(Mimics Inspector.)* Which one are you?

NEFFISSA: *(Unveils and mimics Inspector.)* The veil or the University? What's it to be? May you burn in hell.

*(SALMA takes off her veil and imitates the Inspector's walk.)*

SALMA: And you, where do you live? None of your business. I live where I like.

*(She bursts into laughter).* (El Saadawi 1994, 24)

El Saadawi accentuates the effectiveness of women's collective power through such dialogues of allegiance; however, she shows how that power is obliterated under pressure by religious fundamentalism; this implies that religion, as a patriarchal construction, serves only to further disperse women's power. These same powerful women are seen having juvenile and impractical conversations when religion rears its ugly head, serving only to debilitate their efforts toward freedom and unity:

SAMIRA: There's no education to be had at schools or the universities.

INSPECTOR: Really? Then where?

SAMIRA: Only the Koran can teach us. As the Prophet has written. (El Saadawi 1994, 23).

In another instance, the women argue about the presence of Zouba, the prostitute, in their cell to do cleaning work. Once more, religious conversations break up their unity:

HADIA: Anything's better than a whore.

AZZA: Really? You don't think stealing or murder is worse?

HADIA: Selling oneself is the worst crime of all.

AZZA: How can you tell which is worse?

HADIA: There are major crimes and minor crimes. The sins I commit are small and God forgives me.

SAMIRA: Nonsense. If you're a believer, any sin is a crime.

HADIA: I know what I'm saying.

RACHIDA: You know nothing at all, Hadia!

HADIA: I know more than you.

NEFFISSA: Shut up!

HADIA: Why should I?

SAMIRA: We don't want to know.

HADIA: Then put your fingers in your ears.

BASSIMA: Come on, prostitutes and criminals, they're all as bad as each other.

HADIA: You can't compare a thief and a murderer. God permits a hungry man to steal—

SAMIRA: God permits us to kill the infidels. A sin of any kind is a crime against God. (El Saadawi 1994, 26)

In other instances, the women disagree as to the religious permissibility of laughing (El Saadawi 1994, 30), using cologne (El Saadawi 1994, 31), looking at pictures, and entering a house that hosts dogs (El Saadawi 1994, 29), but the ultimate rupture happens during the conversation that brings together the Muslim and the non-Muslim women:

MADIHA: I grew up in a house where no one prayed. One side of the family were Muslim, the others Coptic.

ETEDAL: Coptic? Infidels?

*(Nagat gets upset, moves away.)*

MADIHA: You've upset her.

ETEDAL: I forgot she's a Christian.

LABIBA: How could you forget?

ETEDAL: She looks exactly the same as us.

LABIBA: Well, she's not. They're not like us.

ETEDAL: Sorry.

SAMIRA: There's only one God, the prophet Muhamed, the greatest of them all, has said so. Come here, Etedal, don't waste your time with them. (El Saadawi 1994, 33)

The rupture between women of different faith traditions is extremely intense within Egyptian society. Not only are women essentially divided into the categories of Muslim and other than Muslim but there is also an intensifying struggle, particularly between Coptic and Muslim women in Egypt, stemming from the occasional love stories between men and women from both religious camps. Women are viewed as the essential tool of this struggle; they are "stolen" from their religions by means of these love affairs, sometimes deliberately, to subdue and even dishonor the other party. The animosity expressed by the men's reactions to "the stealing of their women" is extended to the women themselves, who fall prey to the categorizations of "us and them."

This fracture, then, is deepened when Alia (the freethinker, as El Saadawi identifies her) is added to the group in Act Two. Alia is most likely the character who represents El Saadawi herself. She is introduced in the play as a balanced, fearless leader; this is how El Saadawi often presents herself, explicitly in interviews and implicitly in her autobiographical works. Alia stands up to the Inspector's threats and chauvinistic remarks. She has the most diverse religious background: "[M]y father's a Muslim, his father was a Christian. My mother's a Muslim, her grandfather was Coptic. So what does that make me?" (El Saadawi 1994, 37). The girl has staggering confidence, shown when the Inspector asks her whether she is "[H]appy here?" She replies, "[A]bsolutely. It's infinitely preferable in here, away from the newspapers and the photographs" (El Saadawi 1994, 39). She is the eager optimist who answers the Warden's complaint that "[T]hey won't garden. These ladies," by saying, "[O]h no, we're not. We're going to plant things" (El Saadawi 1994, 47). She describes her family as peasants living in a village (El Saadawi 1994, 47), which is comparable to El Saadawi's own background. When the

Inspector's questions her social status: "[D]ivorced?" she affirms, "I divorced him" (El Saadawi 1994, 39). This statement echoes El Saadawi's description of her own social status: "I divorced three men. Why? Ha ha! For my freedom. So I could write" (Rubin, 68). The women in the cell discuss Alia, who is presented as the stubborn, free woman every one criticizes but secretly wants to be:

BASSIMA: We'll never get out with Alia around.

(*Alia is joking with Salma, Azza, Madiha, and Nagat.*)

BASSIMA: She's forgotten all about her son. I'd go out of my mind with worry.

LABIBA: Alia's like that. She can forget anything.

BASSIMA: Anything but herself. Never lasted two minutes on a committee. Too headstrong.

LABIBA: Full of herself.

BASSIMA: She's always got to make herself felt. Nothing but trouble. She's always banging her head against a wall like a kid. She's free to do as she likes, so long as she doesn't hurt us. (El Saadawi 1994, 48-49)

Alia is a mother with a philosophy: "[W]hat does bringing up children mean? Feeding them, clothing them, paying their school fees? Everyone's frightened of speaking out because of their children. And so it goes on." And, when Alia is warned that she could die in prison, she insists: "I'd die out there if I said nothing." (El Saadawi 1994, 51). Alia is the selfless hero who offers to be taken instead of Neffissa, who has suspiciously been called by the Inspector. And, she, in the dramatic scene that concludes the play, replies to the new Inspector's question, "[W]hat are you?" by answering, "[H]uman." (El Saadawi 1994, 57).

The female characters in the play run the gamut of extremes, from the religious fanatic to the atheist and from the naïve street girl to the highly intellectual academic; this further challenges the representation of Alia and weakens the critical legitimacy of El Saadawi's play. Amireh observes that in her work, El Saadawi "does not show herself as a part of a feminist movement, as someone learning from the experiences and building on the achievements of other women, but rather as exceptional and a pioneer" (Amireh 2000, 228). She asserts that:

While [El Saadawi] admits that her prison experience taught her the value of "collective political work" (1992b, 35), her representation of that experience in *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* (1986) confirms the superiority of her political independence. Some of the main objects of satire in that book are Marxist and Muslim fundamentalist women prisoners, whom El Saadawi represents as fanatic and ideologically dogmatic. At the same time, she casts herself as the leader of the women prisoners, the one making decisions and initiating action. (Amireh 2000, 228-229)

Although a sense of superiority is undeniably evident in the works of El Saadawi, I will argue for her attempts to acknowledge the efforts of other women, even those with ideologies that conflict with her own. During her own prison time, she befriended a prostitute, argued with women Islamists, clashed with women classists, but she always had something positive to say about each of these women, always ready to vindicate them, to understand where they were coming from. The play in its framing of all these types of women: Islamists, atheists, liberal,



classists, illiterate and highly educated, is in a way foreshadowing not only the diversity that is going to display itself in Tahrir Square, but also the attitude that is going to connect the people. These women argue, disagree and sometimes even despise one another, but when the oppressive authority makes an appearance, they unite as women and as citizens dispensing of all things that set them apart; an eerie foretelling of the Tahrir gathering. The women of Tahrir were not much different than the women of El Saadawi play, they ranged from the prostitute to the professor, standing shoulder to shoulder, taking refuge in each other. These women protested, resisted thugs' attacks, delivered medicine and food, first-aided people, and despite the incidents of sexual harassment that the regime tried to pin on the revolutionists themselves, these women never ceased to demonstrate, they stood their ground and continued their daily presence, some camping in the Tahrir Square for all days and nights. Salma Said, mentioned earlier, camped out from 28<sup>th</sup> of January until 11<sup>th</sup> of February, using all possible social networking methods while taking to the streets (Rubin 70). Jessica Winegar states, in her article *The Privilege of Revolution: Gender, Class, Space and Affect in Egypt* that, "perhaps the most famous martyr of the revolution was Sally Zahran who, many say, died after jumping off her balcony in a provincial southern town because her mother, afraid for her daughter's life, prevented her from going out and joining the demonstrations" (69). Today with the conclusion of the second Egyptian revolution of 30<sup>th</sup> of June, the role of women is even more evident in toppling a regime, that of Muslim Brothers, that tried, in its attempt to control the nation in the aftermath of the first revolution of 25<sup>th</sup> of January, to subdue women and confine them back into the private sphere. More women took to the streets, more mothers sent their young boys and girls to the protests, and more female activists took hold of the social media agencies. All previous discussion that haunted the female protesters of the 25<sup>th</sup> of January revolution, seized to exist. A discourse about the legitimacy of women taking to the streets or raising their voices or standing adjacent to men in crowds was no more. Egyptian women during these revolutions broke all social barriers and religious taboos, much like the women of El Saadawi play were hoped to do. In her Preface to *Hidden Face* El Saadawi states that male thinkers

Wish to separate the arduous struggles of women for self-emancipation from the revolt of people everywhere, men and women, against the present structure of society. Yet it is only this radical change that can end foreign and national class exploitation for all time *and* abolish the ascendancy of men over women not only in society, but also within the family unit which constitutes the core of patriarchal class relations. (i)

This attempt at separating women's struggles from current events of Egypt is disputed among women. It is undeniable that the dominant symbol of the revolution is the young exuberant man. Winegar states that "in visual representations, especially photographs, [the young man] is typically rising a fist, throwing a rock, or standing in front of tanks in some famous focal space in a major city . . . He is not at home getting the children dressed, for example, or sitting both bored and anxious watching the news on television"(67). Winegar asserts that women were there, in both spheres of the public and the domestic, serving fervently and tirelessly. She states that

Asma Mahfouz, Nawara Negm, Isra Abdel Fattah, Gigi Ibrahim, and countless other women activists rallied people to Tahrir. Women in Egypt also cooked for

their neighborhood watch committees, donated medical supplies and food to the people in Tahrir, and encouraged friends and relatives to who were able to go downtown to do so. They also cooked for their male relatives who were demonstrating, took care of the children whose schools were closed, managed the house hold budget after banks closed and people were not paid, and stood in long lines for food in anticipation of shortage (69)

Thus major revolutionary work was taking place in the domestic sphere, for as Winegar words it: “although the ‘real event of revolution may seem to happen in places like Tahrir, fieldwork on major political change can and should take place in the home” (68). This takes us back to El Saadawi’s above quotation in which she wishes radical change to “abolish the ascendancy of men over women not only in society, but also within the family unite.” Women became central figures in this revolution, as they played crucial roles in Tahrir as well as at home, their very own private sphere. These women began to practice and feel the value of their authoritative voices. Today, many women are speaking up, be they of the world of elitist academia or of the world of the street. When the latest crisis exploded between Egypt and Qatar in consequence to the latter’s support of Muslim Brothers, it was a very harsh mainstream song performed by a female dancer that circulated among the Egyptians in critique of the Qatari stance. The song is vulgar, the dancer is of the lower classes of Egypt, but the iconic song was certainly used as a semi-formal response to the political stance.

Most important of El Saadawi women are the most humble. Even on a personal level, she best “identifies with the Egyptian peasant origins of her paternal grandmother” (Vinson 2008, 92); this identification is hidden within the characters and their lines in *Twelve Women in a Cell* and *Memoirs*. She is indisputably more sympathetic toward socially outcast women than toward the “women-politicals”; again, this can be regarded as a sense of superiority that pities the less fortunate but challenges the reader, rather than finding any sense of conformity with the opposing ideology. El Saadawi admits her affection for Zouba, the prostitute, who helped Alia acquire a pen and toilet paper to write on; these “dangerous” tools were denied to all in prison except prostitutes. This affability and even sense of admiration toward Zouba is evident in the play. Zouba sings her folk songs, only to hear comments from the others such as, “[S]he would lead us astray” (El Saadawi 1994, 25) and “[A]nything is better than a whore” (El Saadawi 1994, 26). She is the only one who dares to stomp on the cockroach (El Saadawi 1994, 27) when all the other women retreat. She is a loving mother to a daughter who was led into prostitution by the same man that ruined Zouba’s life (El Saadawi 1994, 28). She argues with the fundamentalist views offered by the politicals. Additionally, she smuggles letters to desperate mothers waiting to hear from their daughters and only asks for a cup of tea in return. When Azza asks Zouba how she acquired a letter from Azza’s daughter, Zouba sneeringly answers, “[I]t fell out of the sky” (El Saadawi 1994, 50). Alia admits that Zouba is “a good soul” and that she thinks of Zouba as one who feels disgrace but is unable to escape it: “I want to kill myself but I go on for my daughter” (El Saadawi 1994, 51). She offers a humorous, street-savvy critique of men: “[I]f he’s honest, he’ll be poor. If he goes off you, he’ll remarry. If he goes abroad for work, he might not come back; if he dies, you’ll end up begging” (El Saadawi 1994, 52). She cleans the floor and washes the clothes: she is the one who keeps the cell “real[ly] spotless” (El Saadawi 1994, 30).

Vinson (2008) claims that El Saadawi, along with Leila Ahmed, gain a sense of self-definition and empowerment through speaking out against what they consider to be false or unjust forces within and outside their native societies...both writers insist on the need for

constructing resistant narratives to redefine their relationships to their societies (Vinson 2008, 81).

El Saadawi's representation of the character of the prostitute in her dramatic text constitutes a great resistant narrative that, in a sense, transforms the whore into the Madonna, an idea that is far from accepted or even viewed sympathetically within Middle Eastern culture. Along the same lines, El Saadawi has been hard at work deconstructing the women's conversations, using the setting of her play: the prison. By placing this social, ideological, and class assortment of women within a single prison cell, El Saadawi inflates the ambiguity in her play, asserting women's losses and their imprisonment within the masculine institution of the law. Shaded by "the man's" portrait, which stands "illuminated and seems even more menacing" (El Saadawi 1994, 55) towards the end of the play, the extremist views offered by some of the female characters are betrayed by the speakers, the absurdity of the setting, and the contradictions these views offer. These extreme, often simple, conversations are thus further inflated; their ugliness is further accentuated, and their effects of alienation and voiding of logic (or even sense of normality) are certainly magnified by their own simplicity and obscurity.

Thus, one can argue that El Saadawi's conscious intention is to invite stereotypical views of the Middle East simply, as she has often bluntly stated, because she believes them to be true. Amireh believes that El Saadawi allows "her works to be used to conform prevailing prejudices about Arab and Muslim culture" (Amireh 2000, 228). That could be true; however, the more important question is, is there any truth to these prejudices, which constitute painful realities for women and minorities in the Arab world? Vinson (2008) argues that the willingness of El Saadawi's works to criticize the native societies from which they sprang puts women in the Arab world at risk of "disparagement from both Arab and Western readers. On one hand, their work could fall in the service of Western negative stereotypes of Arab culture; on the other hand, Arabs and Muslims could accuse them of cultural betrayal" (Vinson 2008, 82). Whereas it is certainly true that El Saadawi is captured by this vicious circle of condemnation, she seems to have stepped into it willingly and with confidence, which might be specifically what invites her indictment based on her alleged sense of superiority. El Saadawi is highly aware of the problem of "the various interpretations of [Islam] that empower men and oppress women" (Guèye 2010, 161), a point she deliberately attributes to the problematic structures of the whole religious institution as a patriarchal hierarchy that denies women any chance of social advancement. This shift between the problem of interpretation and the problem of the ideology itself clearly manifests itself throughout the play, starting with El Saadawi's blunt assertion of these stereotypes, which she regards as valid and finds no shame in admitting in her characters' descriptions at the beginning of the play. As illustrated earlier in this paper the progressive, devout, and fundamentalist women argue the religious feasibility of the simplest of issues such as pet hosting, picture viewing (El Saadawi 1994, 29), cologne wearing (El Saadawi 1994, 31), and calls to prayer that disturb the sleep of some of these women (El Saadawi 1994, 31), to the more serious issues such as the religious feasibility of using modern medicine (El Saadawi 1994, 48), mingling with non-Muslims, the immanency of the veil (El Saadawi 1994, 49), the obligation to obliterate infidels, and the ability to communicate with God:

SAMIRA: I know she's a spy (*talking about Salma*) and I'm never wrong. God speaks to the pure and the faithful.

ALIA: God speaks to us all and you're not being fair to Salma.

SAMIRA: I'm never wrong.

HADIA: You are, Samira. Where's your proof?  
SAMIRA: God speaks to me every day.  
HADIA: And God tells me every day that she's not a spy.  
SAMIRA: I know God. I've seen him. You haven't.  
HADIA: I have, too.  
SAMIRA: You've never seen him. You Faramawia.  
HADIA: You're the Khomeiniste. (El Saadawi 1994, 53)

(Faramawia and Khomeiniste are two schools of Islamic thought.)

These arguments all feed into El Saadawi's contention of the variability of religious interpretation; this variability serves only to further deepen the rift between the women and to distance the women from the true objectives they should aspire to attain: their total freedom and full equality. El Saadawi, in her rejection of "all coercive and intolerant practices espoused in the name of religion" (Guèye 2010, 161), is herself intolerant of her own religious characters. Being partial to her more liberal characters, El Saadawi proves that the many attempts of communication between women arrive from the "free-thinkers." As Azza, the Westernized character, tries to draw Etedal, the devout Muslim, into her circle, she says, "[C]ome and sit with us." Etedal's reply reveals an inner conflict often connected with the extremist mindset: "I like you, you know, but...you'll suffer forever" (El Saadawi 1994, 52). This inner conflict takes a critical step forward with Samira, the most religiously extreme character in the play, as she recurrently suspects the most naïve girl in the group to be a spy (El Saadawi 1994, 52-53).

El Saadawi's final ethical condemnation of fundamentalism comes near the end of the play, as religion is shown to conspire with authority to further violate the women. This is revealed when the readers discover that the actual spy in the play is none other than the young, veiled university student, Neffissa. The Inspector, revealing the malice of this alliance, spitefully addresses Neffissa: "[T]ell me what you tell God, Neffissa, and take off that veil, since we're alone" (El Saadawi 1994, 55).

Nevertheless, these distressing dramatic moments of the fracture among women are interrupted by other moments of female unity, when all the women are in a cohesive state of agony, united by their unanimous condemnation of authority. These are the only moments of power for the women throughout the play. Although the women have theological and ideological differences, their convictions about "the man" seems to always bring them together:

BASSIMA: God know when we'll get out of here.  
LABIBA: God didn't put us in here.  
BASSIMA: Who else can we ask for help?  
AZZA: There are people outside, you know. No one person can change the law where there are fifty million who believe in it.  
BASSIMA: There's the one that's to blame. Up there.  
(*She points to the portrait.*)  
AZZA: He can't break all the laws and get away with it.  
BASSIMA: You'd think so, but who's to stop him? (El Saadawi 1994, 29)

It is clear that the women, in their conversation that condemns the leader—most likely Anwar Al Saadat, during whose reign El Saadawi was imprisoned—are subconsciously

interrogating the fundamentalist vision of God as a patriarch, the one to blame for their agony, who is reserved and disconnected from them, being “up there.” Every time these women confide in one other, trying to find a comforting thought, God is integrated into the conversation as a representative of fate or an authoritative power:

LABIBA: When will God save us from this?

BASSIMA: I can't take much more.

AZZA: They won't forget us. I know it.

MADIHA: We have to think of something.

LABIBA: We've nothing to read except the Koran.

MADIHA: Then let's read it.

BASSIMA: You can read it. I'll give it a miss.

AZZA: Then tell us, something else. (El Saadawi 1994, 35)

In this conversation, Madiha, the atheist, and Bassima, the progressive Muslim, switch roles. Tolerance is born from their shared anguish as they search for a release valve. Even the Warden, the woman who represents authority, is supportive of the female prisoners: “I'm on your side, but in front of them, I can't be. I can't lose my job” (El Saadawi 1994, 41). Azza, the Westernized character, also finds a way to relate to Zouba, the prostitute. When Zouba sarcastically laments her profession by saying, “[W]e know we've got bodies—we sell them,” Azza finds a way to compare and connect: “[A]nd we sell our opinions. When we refuse to, they send us here. That's what politics is about” (El Saadawi 1994, 51). Finally, in a conclusive scene of collective power, Alia is called to see the Inspector as a result of her disobedience. The Warden begs, “[M]adam Alia, couldn't you just do what he asks? He'll destroy you,” to which Alia nervously replies, “[M]y father tried it. My brother tried it. My husband tried it. They tried it at work—and now this little man wants to try it. Let him. I'm not afraid.” (El Saadawi 1994, 54) This heroic stance by Alia is an obvious illustration of El Saadawi's view of herself and is rewarded by an amazing collective show of power among the women:

WARDEN: (*mutters*) Wish he'd drop dead...

HADIA: (*Raises her arms.*) May God strike him dead on his way.

SAMIRA: May God take him and all men like him.

ETEDAL: May God take him.

AZZA: Who is he? He's a nobody. We should complain to his boss.

SALMA: Yeh. Why don't we?

MADIHA: We've nothing to write with.

ETEDAL: I've got something

(*She brings out a pencil and a scrap of paper from under her cape.*)

AZZA: I'll write it and we'll all sign it. (El Saadawi 1994, 54)

Although the revolutionary plan is interrupted by Samira's refusal to sign, she objects, “[W]hat's the use of complaining about one tyrant to another” (El Saadawi 1994, 54). The Act ends triumphantly for the women, as gunfire is heard in the distance, lights fade on the portrait of “the man,” and the Warden shouts: “[I]t's over! You're free to go! Free...” (El Saadawi 1994, 56). This ending is taken a step further with an assertion of renewed heroism among the women, which is brought to light when Alia, yet again, is interrogated by a new Inspector:

INSPECTOR: ...Aren't you tired? (*Alia says nothing.*) I'm tired. I really am. I'm worn out but it seems you're not. What are you made of? Tell me? What? Steel?"

ALIA: Yes.

INSPECTOR: What are you?

ALIA: Human. (El Saadawi 1994, 57).

Appearing "to find a sense of belonging through political activism within her country" (Vinson 2008, 81), El Saadawi concludes her play with a triumph pregnant with future battles. In many instances in her writing, El Saadawi seems to assert her need for political activism, not only for the nourishing of her "sense of belonging" but also for the nurturing of her ability to relate to the women of her own hometown. Political activism seems to mostly connect El Saadawi to Egypt and to Egyptian women, from whom she feels estranged because of her ruthlessly vocalized, controversial ideas.

"Creativity is related to knowledge. In order to be creative," El Saadawi tells New-Horst in her "Conversations," "we must be disobedient, like Eve, if we are afraid of the Creator, we will be reluctant to trust ourselves. If you don't feel you are a genius, you cannot create. To write you need confidence, courage, trust of self, and dissidence" (New-Horst 2008, 56).

In the Arab and Islamic world, however, the act of writing is inherently a form of dissidence. El Saadawi not only tries to enlighten the mind but also tries to liberate and energize the female body, the most sacred and controversial entity within the Arabic and Islamic context. Amireh states that El Saadawi's "original contribution to [the] radical critique is her foregrounding of sexuality and gender" because El Saadawi's feminist critique was "instrumental in popularizing discourse about sexuality and about women's rights" (Amireh 2000, 231). Most Arab and Muslim feminist writers do not adhere to the full discourse of liberation that deals with the body and mind. The subject is repellent to their audience; even more, addressing it endangers the writer's life. El Saadawi finds strength in this battle; she is invigorated by it. Her discourse thrives on the disarray it creates as it endeavors to challenge: to El Saadawi, change is only maintained through ferocious confrontation.

Nonetheless, it is a challenge to write about Nawal El Saadawi, particularly if you are a female researcher from the Middle East. My writing of this paper is a personal stance because I write from within, from ground zero, from the hot zone. It is a different experience to write under fire, from within the inferno of a culture that is deeply rooted in misogyny, a culture that does not even need a blade but can cut you easily, with a gesture, a word, even a smirk toward you... a woman. It is just as easy to destroy a woman in an Arabic or Islamic nation by the mere mention of her reputation, and she is thought to be asking for it if she dares to address her own body or to acknowledge its needs. Nawal El Saadawi took this leap by holding on to her inner strength and sense of superiority, which, luckily, came to serve the purpose of her writing and to fulfill the role she insisted on playing from the very beginning of her career.

For El Saadawi, "the quest for self-realization is deeply rooted in particular experiences of and reactions to turbulent sociopolitical events in the Middle East" (Vinson 2008, 80). Hence, this inherently autobiographical quality is evident in most of her work. However, although it does not always accurately reflect the events of her life, from which she derives her narrations, the female characters in her play *Twelve Women in a Cell* (and the characters in most, if not all, of her work) triumph in one way or another. Her criticism is harsh; she is often blunt and she never fails to tread the border between candor and stereotyping. However, her message is clear

and her diction simple, giving her books “journalistic flavor and appeal to a wide reading public” (Amireh 2000). Most importantly, in her works, all the women who are lost are somehow found at the end, forgiven and freed in one way or another. Ultimately, she strives to tell the truth, albeit her own truth, for “if I don’t tell the truth, I don’t deserve to be called a writer” (Newson-Horst 2008, 55).

El Saadawi’s truth however is always non-conforming, it is a form of dissidence not much different than that expressed in Tahrir square, bold, loud, and striving for balance. Her women resonate even more strongly now in the light of the actual historical collaboration of women in Tahrir as they strive to get rid of their own “man in the picture” not only the political but also the social. Dalia Adbelhammed Ali, a member of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, speaks about the double price women had to pay during the Egyptian revolution just as they pay in daily life, in an interview conducted by Kayte Fairfax at the Amnesty international event in London, she declares:

In daily life Egyptian women have to pay double price by being in the public sphere so they have also to bear the whole burden of the domestic sphere, they have to take care of the children, they have to clean the house, and it is very legitimate for the men of the house not to participate in such domestic work. It was also the same in the revolution that people always asked where is the woman in the Egyptian revolution although women were there from the very beginning, but it wasn’t until women have been subjected to systemic violence and physical violence and sexual violence, it was only then that their rights have been identified and their roles have been identified by other revolutionaries and by political parties. Women have to even challenge what is called the traditional roles, I don’t perceive the feminine traditional roles as bad values because I believe in non violence, but they had to go to the front line and they had to be subjected directly to the police brutality and the military brutality to prove that they are equal.

Thus, according to Abdelhammed, it is only when women were subjected to high degrees of violence, bearing two roles and enduring doubled pressure that their impression in the revolution became evident. Winegar asserts that the domestic role is not less important if not actually more. She explains that

Although the ‘real’ events of revolution may seem to happen in places like Tahrir, fieldwork on major political change can and should also take place in the home. At home, there is an opportunity to track more closely how day-to-day practices can support or impede such changes. These practices, far from public centers of protest, are not as dramatic and moving as the fervent, demonstrative, and at times, celebratory calls for dignity, social justice, and freedom that ring out in places like Tahrir. But everyday domestic experiences are crucial for the public staging of claims to these abstract principles and their potential (always partial) realization in the aftermath of dramatic events. (68)

Very much like the women of El Saadawi, the women of the revolution came from many social, economic and educational spheres, fought in many arenas, and suffered on many levels.

According to Dalia Abdelhammed, the answer for the women is in their regrouping and reorganizing themselves, a phenomenon she witnesses to be taking place currently:

I see a very positive aspect of people organizing themselves in movements, in independent movements and in coalition, and many of these coalitions are women's coalitions and women's movements and youth movements and by having the power to organize yourself and by having the power to organize yourself and to advocate for your rights you're empowered, so even if they will take our rights from us we will always be there we will always be demanding for our rights.

She asks one thing of the world:

Solidarity is very important with women rights cause and human rights cause and also understanding more about the national context and understanding more that the Egyptian population is a diversified population with diversified demands, but, yes, I guess solidarity is really important.

Once more, it is solidarity that women find to be the answer to their daily life-pressures as well as to their exceptional struggle as revolutionaries and participants in the streets. This solidarity is what El Saadawi ultimately suggests in her play and in her work in general, and it is the ultimate demand of women revolutionists in Egypt as they struggle during their daily lives juggling domestic duties and public revolutionary duties. The women of El Saadawi resonate strongly in the images of the women of Tahrir square in their varied roles and diverse backgrounds but ultimately in their coming together to topple the "man in the picture" and with him the patriarchal standards that held their lives hostage. In the very last sentence of El Saadawi's *Twelve Women in a Cell*, Alia declares herself "human" (57) which is exactly what Dalia Abdelhammed describes of herself and fellow women revolutionists: "we are there, we are participating, we are dreaming with everybody else, we are sharing with them the worries and the hopes of the revolution, the good and the bad sides of it."



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