

VOICING THE VOICELESS: FEMINISM AND CONTEMPORARY ARAB MUSLIM  
WOMEN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

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## ABSTRACT

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Arab Muslim women have been portrayed by the West in general and Western Feminism in particular as oppressed, weak, submissive, and passive. A few critics, Nawar al-Hassan Golley, is an example, clarify that Arab Muslim women are not weak and passive as they are seen by the Western Feminism viewed through the lens of their own culture and historical background. Using Transnational Feminist theory, my study examines four autobiographies: *Harem Years* By Huda Sha'arawi, *A Mountainous Journey a Poet's Autobiography* by Fadwa Tuqan, *A Daughter of Isis* by Nawal El Saadawi, and *Dreams of Trespass, Tales of a Harem Girlhood* by Fatima Mernissi. This study promises to add to the extant literature that examine Arab Muslim women's status by viewing Arab women's autobiographies as real life stories to introduce examples of Arab Muslim women figures who have effected positive and significant changes for themselves and their societies. Moreover, this study seeks to demonstrate, through the study of select Arab Muslim women's autobiographies, that Arab Muslim women are educated, have feminist consciousnesses, and national figures with their own clear reading of their own religion and culture, more telling than that of the reading of outsiders.

**Key terms:** Arab Muslim women, Transnational Feminist Theory, Contemporary Arab Muslim Women's Autobiography, Third – World women, Western Feminism, Women's Movement in the Arab Muslim world.

## DEDICATION

First, I dedicate this dissertation with the deep love from bottom of my heart to the light of my eyes, the love of my life my two lovely kids Yanal and Ghaith, who were there for me while researching, reading, and writing my dissertation. They are the ones who shared me all the details of my trip all through the process of writing this dissertation. Promise my precious sons, I will pay you back all the minutes I was busy and you were nicely, wisely playing with each other like you are giving me the peace of mind to do my readings and writings. Although you were four years and three years when I finished my dissertation work, I always looked at you as mature sons who understand what mommy is going through. I hope a day comes and I stand there for you while you are working on your PhDs.

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## PREFACE

In the year 2001, the director of the Public Security Directorate, where I work in Jordan, decided to withdraw all the hard work I have done for a year preparing for a Chevening Scholarship. In just few words he ended my life dream by stating that trip to UK for my Masters is no longer applicable. At the same time he gave his consent to my colleague at work who is a male. My colleague did not achieve higher scores in his preliminary tests than mine. Anyways, my colleague continues his travel and started his masters in UK while I stayed pursuing all my efforts to follow him, but failed.

Two weeks later, the Jordan women Union conducted a workshop talking about violence against women and gender issues. They talked about my case as an example. One of the attendances called me to tell me that my name was mentioned in the conference as a victim of a patriarchal society and that I was a victim of discrimination between men and women in Jordan. I got mad and remember calling the boss there telling her that they directed the issue the way they like and never studied my case as a whole. They just took the surface of it to say why the director sent a man and refused to send a woman. Being mad that time was and still justified for me. I always believed that women in my society and other Arab countries take their rights regardless of all the unjust treatment toward women the Arab Muslim world. They are strong enough to defend these rights. In cases where women are derived their rights, like what happened with me, an explanation for this could be either that was an individual behavior from the man which never reflects the institution policy or the government politics since there is nothing in the Public Security Directorate regulations and laws states a man could pursue his studies and travels and a woman could not. Also, it might be that the woman herself is not qualified to gain the right she is claiming. However, I cannot deny the fact that there are cases of gender discrimination

based on some norms of cultural and patriarchal beliefs. In my case, I was very sure that it was an individual mentality that deprived me from my right to pursue my post graduate education which was a result of my fight to win the scholarship same as my male colleague did.

My theory was right. Some months later, the director resigned and I applied again for the same scholarship. The new director, also a man, allowed me to go and gave me one year leave of my work. It was one of the greatest experiences I have ever had in my life. This is evidence that women's subordination in the Arab Muslim world in most of the cases is not a planned, institutionalized, neither meant to be. Women status in my country and in other Arab Muslim countries is a consequence of many different factors that can only be interpreted by an insider and within the Arabic Islamic context. These factors are cultural, social, educational, religious, historical, and economical factors. Some governments pay all their efforts to combat a phenomenon in their societies and they fail because society itself is not ready for change as was the case with the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment in the US. Honor crimes against women in the Arab Muslim world are an example of this. Regardless of all the law changes and the strictness of the sentences against offenders, the honor crime continues in most of Arab Muslim countries because of the attitudes, mentality, and culture of individuals themselves in the Arabic community.

Three years after returning from UK with a distinction degree of LLM in Human Rights Law, I competed for the Fulbright Scholarship with six of my colleagues from the Public Security Directorate. I was the only female and had the chance to be one of the three who have been awarded this scholarship through the Directorate of the Public Security in Jordan. The three of us have been treated equally in all the matters. This is another example that women in the Arab world are not vulnerable, not subordinated, not humiliated. They



only need to be qualified same as men in order to compete with them and to fight for their rights. Nevertheless, I fully believe that qualification requires competing in an equal environment which most females in the Arab Muslim World lack due to many factors like poor economic, imperfect democracy, misinterpretation of religion, and the patriarchal society culture.

When I was in UK for almost a year, I heard a lot about Arab Muslim women and was sometimes a subject of really embarrassing questions about women's status in the Arab Muslim world like is it true that you women in the Arab world eat after men and children finish? How comes you are not veiled and not stoned yet? Do Arab women really see their husbands only in the night of wedding? Is it true that Arab women walk in the back of their husbands and not beside them in street? These kinds of questions took the same path here in USA. Adding to that, the books and articles I usually read for the purpose of my degree which are written by Western feminists. Most of the work I read about Arab and Muslim women portrays Arab Muslim women through the lenses of these Western women. Western women recommend reforms that are not applicable in the Arab Muslim world. Moreover, these women do not interpret women's status in the Arab Muslim world as Arab Muslim women themselves see their own status. Moreover, reading some Arabic translated novels and literary works that are written by both men and women from the Arab Muslim world shocked me because in most of the time these works present the stereotype image of Arab Muslim women status just to please the Western audience and to meet their expectations about the Arab Muslim world that the Western media presents in general. All the previous reasons have motivated me to write my dissertation on Arab Muslim women status to show the truth and only the truth. I am not intending to decorate the real picture in order to show it nice and bright neither I am going to choose the worst examples of individual behavior to

please the Western audience. Rather, I am going to put the real picture in its original frame in order to show my audience the picture as it is and leave the judgment and evaluation for them to do.

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## INTRODUCTION

Women's status in the Arab Muslim world has been a critical issue in many recent debates especially in the West. There have been many mistaken perceptions and assumptions about how women in the Arab Muslim world live and how they are treated by society, state, and family. Arab Muslim women have been portrayed by the West in general and Western feminism in particular as being oppressed, weak, and passive. Women's oppression in the Arab Muslim world has been depicted and interpreted through the lens of Western feminists and audiences. Women's status in the Arab Muslim world, most of the time, has been read out of its social, cultural, religious, and historical context.

As an Arab Muslim woman, I was raised in a caring and an over protective family that has been always concerned about reputation and what other people say about us and about how we behave, talk, and even think. However, the many opportunities I had through my job and although lived in a traditional Arab Muslim family gave me the chance to travel to many places of the other part of the world. My travels to some of the European countries and the opportunity I had in living one year in UK as a Master's student there opened my mind to think of the way that we Arab women live and been treated not only by families, but also by the formal system itself. In particular, coming to the United States to pursue my PhD and staying in this country for five years have widen my insights and enhanced me to think as both an insider and an outsider. As an Arab Muslim woman, I understand my culture, religion, and how people in my Arab World as Third World think. At the same time, I consider myself an outsider because I came close to the Western culture and have the greatest opportunity to mix with people of this culture, to read their literature, and to study as an academic person in their universities. As an

outsider, I can claim that I have an accurate eye now in distinguishing between the perspectives that Western feminists have about Arab Muslim women and how these perspectives have been mistakenly utilized to portray Arab Muslim women. Thus, as an outsider and insider, I still can read accurately that not all Western feminists are as naïve as we think in the Arab Muslim world to miss read Arab Muslim women out of their context.

However, even Arab Muslim feminists have their own stereotypical perceptions about Western feminists. Arab Muslim women as part of the Third World women still consider Western feminists the perfect example to follow in feminism. Also, Arab Muslim women's mistakenly perceive Western women in general as liberal women who enjoy all the rights and freedom those women of the Third World lack and dream of. Sometimes, Arab Muslim women, in general, portray Western women as deprived of their ethics and morals judging them through what they wear and the open relationships they have with men. Nevertheless, it is crucial to admit that there are many Western feminists especially the contemporary ones talk fairly about Arab Muslim women and Third World women in general as educated, strong, and positive women. On the other hand, there are many Arab, Muslim, and Third World women and Western women within their contexts and have not judged them according to the Arab Islamic standards. Here comes the severe need to bridge the gabs between Western feminism and Third World feminism. This bridging will assess women of the world to reach a reconciliation that take women to a better status to enjoy the best of the two worlds First and Third so as to empower all women of the glob socially, economically, mentally, physically, and politically.

My dissertation's main question is how these perceptions on Arab Muslim Women's status are shaped and why it is important for a Western audience to understand the facts and the real image of Arab Muslim women's status in the Arab Muslim world. My dissertation aims to

re-correct and to shatter some of the Western assumptions and stereotypes about Arab Muslim women being oppressed and passive. I will make all efforts to help to situate contemporary Arab Muslim Women's autobiographies for English speaking audience in a way that covers most of the themes that these autobiographies handle. I also aim to direct the Western reader to the reality that Arab Muslim women have understood and have interpreted their status through their own lens and have read their rights according to what they believe they need and feel comfortable with in accordance with their culture, religion, and social context as transnational feminist theory suggests. Arab Muslim women reveal their rights, vulnerability, and oppression in a different framework than that the Western feminism read. For the sake of this dissertation, I am choosing four Arab Muslim women who have written their autobiographies to tell their own stories. I am choosing their autobiographies to show how these four women writers as insiders expose the reality of their existence and representation within the Arabic context. My dissertation also aims to explore the historical and cultural issues that have impacted Arab Women's way of portraying themselves.

In my dissertation, I examine Arab Muslim women's status in the Arab Muslim World as an insider. For the purpose of my research, I have chosen autobiographies rather any other genre because I am interested in women's life stories since I think these life stories reveal facts and miracles. I chose these four autobiographies in particular for different reasons. First the four women writers are Arab Muslim women and have lived most of their lives in the Arab Muslim World and have experienced the Arab Islamic culture. All of these authors have published their works in English language or translated their works into English language. The four writers are known in academia here in the USA, especially among those who are interested in women's and gender studies or Middle Eastern studies as well as in the Arab Muslim world. Also, four of



them were born to Muslim conservative families. Finally, four of these writers are women, Arabs, Muslims, and contemporary writers.

My interest in women's life stories goes back to the year 1997 when I started working in the Family Protection Department within the Public Police Directorate in Jordan. My job there has been to interview females who are victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, and child abuse. During the process of interviewing these women, I often heard unbelievable stories about their lives. They told me about their experiences as women who live in a Muslim Arab country controlled by a patriarchal society. They also told me how they see themselves and their rights within this community. What I concluded was that these women were not seeking the liberation that Western women enjoy, but they have acknowledged the rights and freedom which are given to them by God and positive cultural norms. When they talked about God and Islam they usually refuse the way their husbands and men of their families interpret the verses of Qur'an and the Sunna (Prophet Mohammad's words, behavior, and guidance).

In the process of looking at a topic for my dissertation, I was eager to look at women's life stories. Due to my love for literature in general and women's literature in particular, I decided that writing about Arab women's autobiographies will be the best to analyze in order to examine some of the subjects that these women's narratives undertake and to explore how they portray their status within a patriarchal culture.

This dissertation consists of a preface, an introduction, six chapters, and a conclusion. The introduction establishes my topic and maps the whole body of the dissertation. Chapter one of this dissertation is titled "Transnational Feminist Perspectives on Third World Women". This chapter attempts to examine perspectives of transnational feminists on Third World Women and of course Arab Muslim women are included because they are part of the assumed Third World

women. In this chapter, I explain and define some of the concepts I am using in this dissertation. Drawing on Transnational Feminist theory, this chapter discusses several titles. The first title is Transnational Feminism. Under this title, I introduce the transnational Feminism theory and present some of the transnational feminist's arguments regarding the theory and their approach. The second title of this chapter is Western Feminist' Thought in which I tackle some schools of Western feminism thought that show the different approaches and thinking of Western feminism. The third title of this chapter is Women in Western Feminists' Discourse and here I draw on the arguments and thought of some of the contemporary Western feminists' argument regarding women and related issues like gender, men, sexuality, and patriarchal system. Chandra Mohanty calls for opening up borders within feminism. She draws on diverse sites of struggle and activism that are informed by transnational feminist practices. So, towards the end of this chapter, I stress Mohanty's call for opening up all borders and gates within feminism, so women around the world may appreciate other women's status and achievements. This would be clear in the last title of this chapter when I show the debate of some of the transnational feminists on issues related to Third World women and how Western feminists depict them

Chapter two of this dissertation is entitled "Contemporary Arab Muslim Writers". In this chapter, I start by a background of Arab Muslim World in general and show their culture and religion. Then I show some details of the status of women in Islam and back this status of evidence from The Qur'an and Sunna. I will trace the history of women's rights movements in the Arab Muslim world and examine Arab feminists' roles in empowering women and defending their rights. I will show some of the difficulties they faced and still face like the claim that women's liberation movements in the Arab Muslim world are directed, paid for, and led by Western feminist movements. This biggest section of this chapter will explore, in particular,

Arab Muslim women in the literature field and will focus, in particular, on contemporary Arab Muslim women writers. Specifically, I will focus on the genre of autobiography that is written by Contemporary Arab Muslim women. I examine the historical background of this genre and the topics these writers deal with and how these topics which I found that they differ sometimes from the topics that Arab Muslim males handle due to the conservative society and the taboos that surround Arab Muslim women writers especially the taboos of Sex, religion, and Politics. Here, I show that most of the obstacles that hinder women's writers are shared with those that hinder Arab Muslim men writers due to the fact that Arab Muslim world still struggle to achieve real openings and true democracy. I examine the genre of autobiographies especially what was written by women and point out the fact that there are only few critical works written on women's autobiographies although there are many women's autobiographies. I look at the topics that women's autobiographies handle especially the contemporary ones.

Chapter three analyzes the first autobiography that I chose for the sake of this dissertation and that is Huda Shaarawi's *autobiography Harem Years the Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist*, published for the first time in Arabic in the year 1981, years after Saarawi's death and translated to English by Margo Badran in the year 1986 and republished in English in the year 1987. Shaarawi is an Arab Muslim activist for women's rights, a foremost, and a nationalist. She was born in Menya, Egypt in 1897 and grew and educated in Cairo. She was the daughter of a wealthy and upper - Class Egyptian family. She was married against her will when she was thirteen years old and separated from her husband for seven years in which she came to her awareness and feminist work. After attending an international Feminist conference in Rome in 1923, she unveiled herself at Cairo railway station marked the end of the harem years for herself and the beginning for other women. She was the head of the Egyptian Feminist Union that she

established until her death in 1974. Although Huda Shaarawi wrote this as her memoirs, I will go with Leila Ahmed, in her pioneering study of this Arabic text, when she links Shaarawi's memoirs to the genre of autobiography in Arabic classical literature. (Ahmed 154-5).

Shaarawi's autobiography reflects her life who although came from an upper class that was able to utilize the advantages of modernization, emerged as a feminist because even in her upper class community controlling women was seen as crucial to sustain the upper class privileges. She was not only a feminist, but also a nationalist who contributes a lot to Egypt's liberation. Her autobiography shows her own interpretation of religion and culture. This chapter analyzed some examples where she interprets Qur'an and recognizes "I decided to attack the problem of the backwardness of Egyptian women, demonstrating it arose from the persistence of certain social customs, but not from Islam, as many Europeans believe" (Shaarawi 81). Shaarawi's autobiography gives insights into harem experience in Egypt in its final decade and at the same time it reveals how the roots of upper class women's feminism are found in the harem experiences.

Chapter four analyzes the second autobiography in this dissertation and that is Fadwa Tuqan's, a Palestinian poet, autobiography "*A Mountainous Journey*", published in 1984. Fadwa Tuqan is one of the most revolutionary contemporary Arab Muslim poets. She was born in Nablus, on the West Bank of Jordan in 1917 and died in 2003. Her autobiography *A Mountainous Journey A Poet's Autobiography* was published in 1984 in Arabic and Translated by Olive Kenny into English Language in 1990. The poetry included in the autobiography was translated from Arabic to English by Arab American poet Naomi Shihab Nye. In her autobiography, Tuqan tells her life story from childhood between the wars to the occupation of the West Bank in 1967. Although, as Shaarawi, came from a privileged family, she had a very

limited formal education and had a very conservative and stiff upbringing during the British mandate of Palestine. She educated herself and became one of the most distinguished Arab Poets. I will examine her autobiography and touch on the status of Arab Muslim women and their role in national, educational, social, economical, and political levels.

Fadwa Tuqan's autobiography unveils many practices within the Arabic Islamic culture that hinder women's empowerment. Example of this is when she was forced by her elder brother to quit school at the age of 13 after he saw a boy trying to give her a flower in her way back home from school (Tuqan 48). Tuqan's autobiography will be examined not only as a private life that represent public life, but also a summary of the history of being a woman in the Arab Muslim world who share in politics, struggle, and national resistance to liberate not only her country, but also herself as a woman.

Chapter five of this dissertation examines the autobiography of Nawal El Saadawi, an Egyptian feminist and writer. El Saadawi born in a small village called Kafr Tahla in Lower Egypt Dealta in the year 1931. She entered the medical school at the University of Cairo and received her M.D. in 1955. She herself was subjected to circumcision at age six. She wrote two memoirs one is *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*, published in 1994 and the other is *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* published for the first time in 1957 in the Egyptian magazine "*Ruz al-Yusuf*".

As other women's writers in this dissertation El Saadawi provokes the issue of conservative interpretation of Islam. She rebels against all forms of injustice exercised in the name of religion. El Saadawi was prisoned, exiled, her books are banned in some Arab countries, her name put in a death list by a fundamentalist Islamic group in Egypt, and is stigmatized by being infidel because of what she writes.

El Saadawi's autobiography is a model of a creative power which is found in her word to rebel against injustice. In her autobiography, El Saadawi presents different examples of women who were misfortunate but fighters for the sake of themselves and other women. Similar to both Shaarawi and Tuqan, El Saadawi describes her activist role in Egyptian feminism and as a national figure who share her people in struggle and resisting colonization of her country.

Chapter six of this dissertation analyzes the autobiography of the Moroccan feminist and writer Fatima Mernissi *Dreams of Trespass Tales of a Harem Girlhood* published in 1994 and details the period between the 1940s and the early of the 1950s. Mernissi was born in Fez, Morocco in 1940 to a Muslim conservative and an upper class family. She is a Western educated sociologist, feminist, and scholar. She is now a sociologist at the University of Mohammad V in Rabat, Morocco.

In examining Fatima Mernissi's autobiography, I attempt to show examples of where I can correct Western misperceptions of Arab Muslim women oppression by touching on what she offers of a complex narrative framework that reveals the diversity of experiences of women who live in harem in Morocco. In her autobiography, she shows images of women who although live in harem they are positive figures in the surroundings of Moroccan nationalism and the emerging of women's rights movement. She presents women in harem fighting for their rights but in each in her own way. I also bring up the topic of feminism, Islamist feminism, nationalism, and French colonialism as Mernissi handles it to show the role of Arab Muslim women even in that period of time. My examination of Mernissi's autobiography shows her brilliant feminizing of stereotyped religion and Arabic culture's context while telling the stories of the women harem (the word used by her of women, daughters, mothers, aunts, and grandmothers who live "inside"

her family's urban house). The word harem in Arabic language means women of seclusion or the seclusion of women.

Also, in examining Mernissi's autobiography, I show how Mernissi manages to simplify the harem and put Arab Muslim women in their right frame in highly respectful manner. I will explore the nature of women's power and the value of oral tradition (Scheherazade's tales) as put by Mernissi. I examine women, in her autobiography, who represent strong women characteristics and have different responses to cope with the restricted life in harem. Other great women figures are those who were nationalists and rebel against the French occupation of Morocco.

An obvious limitation of my dissertation was the lack of resources that tackle Arab Muslim women's autobiographies both in Arabic and English. Not only autobiographies that have written by Arab Muslim women are limited, but also the critic work that handled these autobiographies are fewer and limited. In the Arabic literary tradition, there are only few books that tackle works written by women in the Arab world. Almost, none handled women's autobiography until recently when some Arab women critics started looking at such genre by women. By contrast, critics of Arab Women's status portray women as being oppressed by religion, State, and culture. Some of the literature articulates women's rights and status in the Arab Muslim world, as portrayed by Arab women writers themselves through their autobiographies, acknowledges the fact that women are passive, vulnerable, and submissive. Few critics like Golley have read Arab women's literature and focused on Arab women's autobiographies depict Arab Muslim women as positive figures, knowledgeable about issues in their communities and the world, and having a feminist consciousness.

Few books like Golley *Reading Arab Women's Autobiography* (2003), an effective book that brings history, contemporary literary theory, and a culturally informed perspective to twentieth century Middle Eastern autobiographies written by women, undertake the simplistic generalities found in the Western discourse surrounding Arab women. Golley does a close reading of a variety of feminist texts and acknowledges the similarities between Western and Arabic feminist, asserting that feminism is not a Western import to the Arab world but an indigenous movement often ignored by Western feminists. My work agrees with Golley in many aspects and differs in that my dissertation shows the solidarity of Arab Muslim women's movements. It shows the activities and organizations that feminists in the Arab Muslim world established at the same time Western feminists emerged. Some women's feminism's activities went a long with the Western women movement. My dissertation reads Arab Muslim women's movements within the Arabic Islamic context and not as a copy paste from the Western version. However, Golley (2007) explores the many routes that Arab women writers have taken to speak to each other and to their readers. She depicts that Arab women writers have played roles in varied geographic regions, at home, and abroad. Robin Ostle et al. (1998) address autobiographical writing in Arabic literature that is written by both men and women. Robin Ostle et al. give due consideration to women writers. These scholars suggest that autobiography has been central to the literary tradition of the Arabs.

Many articles by both Arab and Western critics discuss autobiographies that are written by Arab Women writers. Al-Nowaihi's "Resisting Silence in Arab Women's Autobiographies" studies three Arab women's autobiographies and shows their struggle in the personal, political, and literary arenas. Al-Nowaihi finds out that Arab women writers has chosen to express these struggles in terms of finding a voice that resists silence, but also they acknowledge that silence is



a form of resistance. Vinson's article "Shahrazadian Gestures in Arab Women's autobiographies: Political History, Personal Memory, and Oral, Matrilineal Narratives in the Works of Nawal El Saadawi and Leila Ahmed" examines two autobiographical works, the first is by the Egyptian writer Nawal El Saadawi, *A Daughter of Isis* and *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America — A Woman's Journey* Leila Ahmed. In this article Vinson explores the ways in which political history, autobiographical tradition, oral heritage, and the transnational reception of postcolonial texts all play a part in the construction of identity in the life narratives written by these two Arab writers. My dissertation is unique since it seeks to examine women's status in the Arab Muslim world through their autobiographies and how issues like nationality, religion, and feminism consciousness are portrayed in these autobiographies. It also looks at how Arab women as insiders reveal their own subordination and submission from their own lenses and not as Western feminism represent them.

This dissertation contributes to the field of women's study in general and to the field of Arab Muslim as Third World women in particular. The field of Arab women's autobiographical writings remains under researched and in need of more examining and studying. Also, the available studies and critics on Arab women's autobiographies are so limited comparing to the increasing number of women's autobiographies in the Arab Muslim world. So, my dissertation contributes to the research field on Arab women's autobiographies since it uses Arab Muslim women's autobiographies as the unit of analysis for the purpose of this work. Through this analysis my dissertation becomes one among only few other studies that searched women's autobiographies from the Arab Muslim world. My dissertation significance lies in the point that it steps forward in the study of contemporary Arab Muslim Women's autobiographies which might sparkle more studies in other proportions of the genre. It may also inspire those who need

to know about Arab Muslim women's status and about transnational feminist's perspectives on Arab Muslim women. Towards the end of reading my dissertation, I wish it leaves the reader with a better understanding, appreciation, and a better estimation of the status and lives of Arab Muslim women judging them in accordance with their context.

CHAPTER # 1

**TRANSNATIONAL FEMINISM PERSPECTIVES ON ARAB MUSLIM WOMEN**

“Women do not need to eradicate difference to feel solidarity. We do not need to share common oppression to fight equally to end oppression.... We can be sisters united by shared interests and beliefs, united in our appreciation for diversity, united in our struggle to end sexist oppression, united in political solidarity” (hooks 1984, 404)

***Transnational Feminism***

The 1995 Beijing Women’s Conference titled *The Challenges of Local Feminism: Women’s Movements in Global Perspective* marked the coming age of transnational feminism and the rise of locally based women’s movements. Local feminism connotes the supposed particular provincialism and primordialism of the Third World Women while global connotes the breadth and universality that is often associated with Western Feminism (Basu, 2003).

Feminism’s engagement with globalization coincided with the second feminism in the 1980s and was popularly known as international feminism. International feminism grew out and continued to be sustained by feminist networking that takes place around the world. International feminism was critiqued by feminists from the South of America since the 1990s. They were critiqued for being too preoccupied with commonalities and solidarities without taking seriously the specific differences that women in the South encountered, particularly the oppressions that women faced on the basis of race and as a result of colonization (Spivak, 1996). This theory shares its roots with Postcolonialism theory. Many perspectives that vary from socialists to liberal are represented under the rubric of transnational feminism. However, the

tendencies that are of interest are those that speak to the formation of autonomous, affinity groups, as opposed to those which aim to promote women in leadership roles by working with static and capitalist institutions. Example of those is the transnational feminist group Women's Environmental and Development Organization (WEDO).

International feminism was also critiqued for articulating its struggle against gendered injustice within a liberal human right discourse that overlooked the practices of the State. More recently, an alternative mode of political activism and scholarship has been gaining prominence in the area of feminism and globalization. Feminists working in this alternative identify themselves as transnational feminists. Those grew up out of an engagement with solid, economic, and political struggles that related to dominance and exploitation in terms of colonial and national contexts. It focuses on the role of gender, race, class, and sexuality and on "the organization of resistance to hegemonies in the making and un-making of the notion state" (Mohanty 2003, 9). So, rather than focusing on generalizations of oppression that are assumed of all women transnational feminism examines the specific nature of oppression as it occurs through intersectionality of race, class, and other social identity locations within a particular local context. In understanding such analysis, it also examines the integral role of autonomous groups of resistance that occur in the making and unmaking of the state. A good example of this that came to my mind while working on this chapter is the work that undertook with both Israeli and Palestinian women who both had suffered the loss of some of their family members as a result of Palestinian – Israeli conflict. These women were able to come together because of their common resistance to the military practices of their states.

Mohanty described transnational feminism as a mode of intellectual and political activism that focus on conditions that allow for transnational solidarity on the basis of common

for all exploitation that women divide, but grounded it on the specific form that this oppression takes within women's lived realities (9, 10). Transnational Feminism maintains that women's struggle must be understood in relation to historic, cultural, economic, and political contexts, which render it impossible to speak of an average third – World women. Transnational feminism seeks to understand oppression as it is in different cultures, by incorporating positions of class, race, gender, and sexual orientation among a host of others. Transnational feminism also embraces a commitment to activism that seeks to promote dialogue through the construction of alternative structures that allow for the flourishing of multiple voices and subjectivities. Transnational Feminists have made effective use of the human rights framework for achieving local global objectives of women around the world. Some challenges caused by differences in local contexts, activists' goals and obstacles, and conceptualizations have appeared and pose political challenges and opportunities to the movement and to the human rights approach.

Amrita Basu thought it is time to replace the sentence “Think Globally, Act Locally” with “Think Locally, Act Globally” (McCann, 68). By contrast, Basu uses the term local to refer to indigenous and regional, and global to refer to the transnational. She maintains that there is still controversy about the significance of transnational movements, NGO's, networks, and advocacy groups. She also claims that some scholars speak of the emergence of a global civil society; others are more skeptical (68). On the other hand, Valentine Moghadam argues that transnational networks are organizing women around the most pressing questions of the day, reproductive rights, the growth of religious fundamentalism, and the adverse effects of structural adjustment policies. Moghadam believes that the recent networks have a broader and more far reaching impact than local movements (Moghadam, 2005). As women's movements have become more transnational, their commitment to grass roots mobilization and cultural changes

has diminished. On the other hand, Sonia Alvarez argues that women's movements are becoming increasingly bureaucratized as they have come to work more closely with NGO's, political parties, state institutions, and multicultural agencies. One explanation for the difference between the positions of Valentine Moghadam and Sonia Alvarez is that they examine such different contexts. Moghadam's optimism about the role of transnational networks may be born of the pessimism she feels about the potential form women's movements in face of the growth of Islamic fundamentalism. By contrast, Alvarez expresses concern about cooptation because historically women's movements in Latin America have been strong and closely tied to left wing parties and human rights movements. Basu explores the relationship between the transnational of the 90s and the feminism of the 60s and 70s, when Robin Morgan controversy claimed "Sisterhood is Global" (McCann, 70). Basu found herself in front of a big question and that what is the challenging of local feminisms and women's movements in Global perspectives? She found herself navigating two things:

1. Resisting the tendency narrowly to equate women's movements with autonomous urban, middle class feminist groups
2. Defining women's movements so broadly that the term includes virtually all forms of women's activism.

Basu argues that women's movements must be situated within the particular political economics state policies and cultural politics of the regions in which they are active. She emphasizes the indefinite character of transnational activism in the late 1990s and early 2000s (70).

White transnational ideas, resources, and organizations have been extremely successful around certain issues in some regions; their success with these issues is more circumscribed

elsewhere. The international women's conferences that occurred in Mexico City (1975), Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985), and Beijing (1995) provide a fruitful opportunity to explore changing relationships among women's organizations transnationally. These conferences provided insights into the working of the international state system of what some describe as a burgeoning global civil society.

Transnational women's movements are themselves extremely diverse. A minority of them seek to challenge the feminization of poverty and class inequality that globalization entails. A much larger group of women's organizations has sought to extend women's civic and political rights, particularly to address violence against women and the denial of women's rights by religious nationalists. Women's groups have supported transnational campaigns against sexual violence in countries where the state is repressive or indifferent and women's movements are weak. Conversely, transnational feminism has provoked more distrust in places where women's movements have emerged, grown, and defined themselves independently of Western feminism. In brief, transnational feminism breeds solidarity issues like violence against women, working with men in zones of conflict, and postcolonial literature have transnational appeal.

### ***Western Feminists' Thought***

Mohja Kahf, an Arab American scholar, studied Western representation of Muslim women in Medieval's, Renaissance's, and Enlightenment's texts. Her study concluded that the image of the Muslim woman in Western cultural has been a changing, evolving phenomenon. The Muslim woman occupies less central place in the narratives of the Medieval texts than she does in texts of the nineteenth century (Kahf, 4).

The Muslim woman in the Medieval literature typically appears as a queen or a noble woman exercising power of harm over the hero. These figures usually represented feminine and

reflect the failure of their parent religious to repeat proper gender roles. The main plot of Western stories about Muslim women was usually about a noble Muslim woman who attracted to a Christian man imprisoned in her father or husband. Then she aids him and converts to Christianity and transfer her father's or husband's wealth to the Christians. In Medieval texts there were no mentioning for the veil or the seclusion of Muslim women (5, 6).

In Renaissance's texts, the depiction of Muslim women in some European literature shows the features of the "Wanton" queen of old. In many Renaissance texts a Muslim woman continued to be portrayed with the same constrains that Western counterpart have functioning in a field of similarity or indifference rather than the "Otherness" (5). The veil and the harem did not exist in medieval representation of the Muslim women and are barely present in the Renaissance age. However, in the seventeenth century, the two concepts of veil and the seraglio or harem enter into Western representation of Muslim women. The word "seraglio" was seen in English texts in 1581 while the word harem appeared in English texts in 1631 (6).

In the nineteenth century the Western's discourse of harem and veil rise up due to the colonization era in particular. Kahf claims that Western colonization of Muslim countries was the only responsible factor for the emergence of narratives that portray Muslim women as victims. The domination of the Muslims' land composes the image of the Muslim woman in the imagination of the West. The Western discourse regarding Islam as the main source of women's oppression reached its summit towards the end of nineteenth century and Western discourse started tackle Muslim women as helpless and slaved in harem (7).

Western feminists' representation of Arab Muslim women has been a debated issue in both the West and the East. Western feminists' representation of Third World women, which Arab Muslim women are part from, stemmed from their own thought as Western feminists who



have their own approaches and particular theoretical frameworks in exploring and studying women's status and subordination worldwide. So, it is important in this work to give an overview of the focuses of some important Western feminism though to understand why and how they portray Third World women they way they do.

Therefore, it is significant to clarify that feminism is identified by its women's orientation and attitudes towards different issues. Some of these issues are women, men; gender related key terms, women's oppression, patriarchy, women's economical and social lives, physical and mental well being of women. In this section, I am going to tackle some of the most important Western feminists' approaches that constitute Western feminists' thought and at the same time are well articulated by Third World feminists. I also chose these feminist's approaches because they show the issues that Western feminism and Third World feminism argue about like the views on women – men relationship, women's reproduction rights, the patriarchal society as a source of oppression and other debating terms. Some of the Western feminists' approaches I am handling in this section are:

### **Liberal Feminism:**

Liberal feminism complaint that women were confined to a main “job” of wife – mother and that what was the theme of Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique*. Women who wanted jobs or who have ambitions to move in politics were suspect unless they were also “good” wives and mothers. There is another problem which left women down and that is men's devaluation of them as not too bright, clothes – conscious and overly emotional.

Liberal Feminism claim that gender differences are not based on biology and therefore women and men are not all that different. Their common humanity supersedes their procreative differences. If women and men are not so different then they should be treated differently under

the law. For them, women should have the same legal rights as men and the same educational and work opportunities. Liberal feminism accepts and works with the gender system aiming to remove it of its discriminatory effects on women. Marry Wollstonecraft argues in favor of educational partly in practical terms. She claims that unlike emotional and dependent women who routinely avoid their domestic duties and indulge their desires, rational and independent women will tend to be “observant daughter”, “affectionate sisters,” “faithful wives”, and “reasonable mothers. (Wollstonecraft, 61) That is very true because educated women will be a major contributor to society’s welfare. Through the pages of her previous book, Wollstonecraft urged women to become autonomous decision makers, but often beyond insisting that the path to autonomy goes through the academy, she praised women with little in the way of concrete guidance. Wollstonecraft presented a vision of a woman strong in mind and body, who is not a slave to her passions, her husband, or her children. For her, the ideal woman is less interested in fulfilling herself. In order to liberate herself from oppressive rules of emotional cripple, petty shrew, and narcissistic sex objects, a woman must obey the commands of reasons discharge her wifely and motherly duties faithfully. Wollstonecraft asserted that women who are “toy of men, his rattle,” which “must jingle in his ears whenever, dismissing reason, he chooses to be amused.” Rather, woman is an “end” a rational agent whose dignity consists in having the capacity for self– determination and to treat her as a mere means is to treat her as less than a person (61).

A round 1960 a new generation of feminists proclaimed as the fact what the suffragists Stanton and Anthony always alleged that in order to be fully liberated; women need economic opportunities as well as civil liberties. In the mid of 1960 liberal feminists assembled in one of several groups for the purpose of improving women’s status by applying legal, social and other

pressures upon institutions ranging from the Bell Telephone Company to television networks to the major political parties.

Betty Friedan accepted both the radical feminist critique that liberal feminists are prone to co-optation by a male establishment and the conservative feminist critique that liberal feminists are out of touch with bulk of family in high regard. Friedan concluded that contemporary women wives' and mothers' part-time absence from home would enable husband and children to become more self-sufficient people capable of doing their own work. Friedan used women's choices of motherhood and wives over careers by convincing 1980s feminists to move from what termed first stage feminism to what she labeled second stage feminism. She noted that this new form of feminism would require women to work with men in order to escape the excesses of feminist mystique which "denied the core of women's personhood that is fulfilled through love, nature, home" as well as the excesses of the feminine mystique, "defined women solely in terms of their relation to men as wives, mothers, and homemakers" (Friedan, 2001). After seven years of publishing her book *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan changed her message to women when she described as culturally feminine some thinking and acting which emphasizes fluidity, flexibility and interpersonal sensitivity and she described as culturally masculine the styles of thinking and acting which stress hierarchical, authoritarian, strictly task oriented leadership based on instrumental technological rationality (Rosemarie, 1998).

Liberal Feminism goal is to free women from oppressive gender roles that is from those roles used as justifications for giving women a lesser place, or not place at all especially in the academy, the forum, and the marketplace. Liberal Feminism stresses that patriarchal society controls sex and gender, considering appropriate for women only jobs that are associated with the feminine personality. However, the meaningful feminist approaches to combating gender

discrimination are the classical and welfare approaches both of which rely heavily on legal remedies, but liberal feminists like Friedan offered another approach that used the ideal of androgyny to counteract society's traditional tendency to value masculine traits. Discussions of sex differences, gender roles and androgyny have indeed helped focus liberal feminists' drive toward liberal, equality and justice of all.

One of the most severe critics of liberal feminism is Jean Bethke Elshtain, a political theorist, she claimed that liberal feminists are wrong to emphasize individual rights over the common good and choice over commitment since "there is no way to create real communities out of an aggregate of freely choosing adults". Elshtain also claimed that liberal feminists are wrong to put a high premium on so called male values. She accused the Friedan of 1960s and to a lesser extent Wollstonecraft, Mill, and Taylor of equating male being with human being "manly" virtue with human virtue (Elshtain, 244). In her critique she identified what she considered liberal feminism's three major flaws:

- a. Its claim that women can become like men if they set their minds to it.
- b. Its claim that most women want to become like men.
- c. Its claim that all women should want to become like men to aspire to masculine values.

Like Elshtain, Alison Jagger criticized liberal feminists for being too eager to adopt "male" values, but she targeted primarily what she perceived of the self as a rational, autonomous agent, that is as a "male" self. She also criticized political solipsism on empirical grounds noting it makes little sense to think of individuals as somehow existing prior to formation of community through some sort of contract. However, Jagger observed that liberal political thought holds a conception of human nature that locates our uniqueness as human persons in our capacity for rationality. Some other critics claim that Liberal feminism serves only or mainly the interests of

white, heterosexual, middle – class women. May be this assumption came from the point where Friedan addressed a largely white, middle class, and well educated group of women in her book *The Feminist Mystique*.

Finally, Liberal Feminism increased stress on issues of race has prompted an increasing number of minority women to join and become active members of liberal feminists' organizations. In addition to racism, class has been an issue within liberal feminism because women who initially led the women's rights movement were found from the upper middle class. Nowadays, liberal feminism has moved away from their traditional belief that any woman who wants to can liberate herself individually and regardless of her conditions. Their new belief now is to achieve a modest goal and that is creating equal employment opportunities for women, which will require not only the effort of the individual woman, but the effort of a whole society.

### **Postmodern feminism:**

Postmodern feminism began in the early 1980s. It also overlaps with the third-wave feminism which began in the early 1990s. Postmodern feminist thought challenges and avoids the essentialist definitions of femininity that was spread during the period of modern feminism. Modern feminism worked with the existentialist view on women which establishes the argument that “one is not born a woman, but becomes one” (De Beauvoir, 32) and thus they focus is on the social and cultural construction of women by the system.

Postmodern Feminists have built on the ideas of Foucault, de Beauvoir, as well as Derrida and Lacan. While there is much difference in postmodern feminism, there is some common ground. Postmodern Feminists accept the male/female binary as a main categorizing force in our society. Following Simone de Beauvoir, they see female as having being cast into the role of the Other (32). They criticize the structure of society and the dominant order,

especially in its patriarchal aspects. Many postmodern feminists, however, reject the feminist label, because anything that ends with an "ism" reflects an essentialist conception. Postmodern Feminism is the ultimate acceptor of diversity. Multiple truths, multiple roles, multiple realities are part of its focus. There is a rejection of an essential nature of women, of one-way to be a woman. Poststructural feminism offers a useful philosophy for diversity in feminism because of its acceptance of multiple truths and rejection of essentialism.

Three writers have been influential in the establishment of postmodern feminism as a philosophy: Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva. Hélène Cixous is a writer of prose who built on Derrida's works to criticize the very nature of writing. According to Cixous, man's writing is filled with binary oppositions but woman's writing is scribbling, jotting down, interrupted by life's demands (Rosemarie, 199). She also relates feminine writing to female sexuality and women's body concepts (200, 01). Her idea is that development of this kind of writing will change the rules that currently govern language and ultimately the thinking processes and the structure of society. Luce Irigaray is a psychoanalyst whose primary focus is to liberate women from men's philosophies, including the ones of Derrida and Lacan, on which she's building. Irigaray takes on Freudian and Lacanian conceptions of child development, and is one of the thousands who criticize the Oedipal complex (202, 05). However, Irigaray has three strategies for woman to "experience herself as something other than 'waste' or 'excess' in the little structured margins of a dominant ideology.: 1. create a gender neutral language, 2. "engage in lesbian and autoerotic practice, for by virtue of exploring the multifaceted terrain of the female body, women will learn to speak words and think thoughts that will blow the phallus over; mime the mimes men have imposed on women (202, 05). If women exist only in men's eyes, as images, women should take those images and reflect them back to men in magnified

proportions.” This means wear red high heels. Julia Kristeva rejects the idea that the biological man and the biological woman are identified with the “masculine” and “feminine” (205, 06) respectively. To insist that people are different because of their anatomy is to force both men and women into a repressive structure. Kristeva openly accepts the label of feminist, but refuses to say there is a “woman's perspective”: Kristeva sees the problems of women as Other similar to the problems of other groups excluded from the dominant: Jews, homosexuals, racial and ethnic minorities. Like other postmodern feminists, she viewed the use of language as crucial. In her view, linear, logical "normal" writing was repressed, and writing that emphasized rhythm and sound and was syntactically illogical was unrepressed.

A major critique of Postmodern Feminism is its seeming identification of women with the feminine and the biological body. Many view Postmodern Feminists as valorizing women and the feminine over male and the masculine. To many feminists the idea that they should embrace the feminine, or “mime the mimes men have imposed on women” (Hoeveler, 12) feels awfully similar to the pressure to be feminine from the dominant society. Some of us didn't want to wear feminine looking dresses when our mothers tried to make us to go to the patriarchal church and we don't want to wear them in graduate school either (Rosemarie, 206). However, most of the criticism simplifies Postmodern Feminism. As we have seen, there are widely varying viewpoints within this theoretical framework. While this diversity is seen as empowering by some feminists, many others are concerned with the potential loss of feminist community. With no essential philosophy accepted by all feminists, it is difficult to make political action.

One of the most common criticisms of Postmodern Feminism is its apparently irrational writing. Much of the writing of Postmodernists rejects linear construction in their writing. And so accusations of elitism have been leveled at the Postmodern Feminism as a whole. Critics contend that only few academics can participate because the jargon is so thick, and that "true" feminists address issues of political import. Considering that Postmodernist reject essentialist, there is an obvious lack of conceptual understanding of Postmodern Feminism reflected in these criticisms. Also, because linear, normal speech and writing are viewed as part of the propaganda of the dominant order, breaking them down the linguistic power structure is, in their philosophies, an important part of undermining that power. So in fact, being obtuse and chaotic is their way of introducing change and therefore offering new meanings.

Postmodern Feminism has resulted in some of the most ground breaking research in the last twenty years. Its major technique, discourse analysis has been used in many different fields to ask many different questions. A logical progression of postmodern theory has refreshed feminism by questioning many assumptions that were previously unexamined. While as of yet it has not been a major presence in the field of library and information studies, the number of studies utilizing it is steadily increasing.

## **Radical Feminism**

Radical feminism goes back to the 1960s but some of its philosophy might be seen in the American cultural feminist tradition of the nineteenth and twentieth century. Radical feminism symbolizes the rage of women against male's power and this is stemmed from the second – wave feminism (Collins, 67). Their political structure is built on a male orient philosophy. Their radical work attempts to create a space for women to write, think, and speak their feelings and



their personal experiences (68). They investigate the spheres of female sexuality and socialization. Radical feminism has broad influence in tackling issues that are closely affect women's personal lives, physical and mental well – being.

Although radical feminist conceit themselves on being difficult to define, Bonnie Kreps, a radical feminist, provides a significant characterization of radical feminism as “a tendency: which chooses to concentrate exclusively on the oppression of women as women (and not as workers, students, etc.). This segment therefore concentrates its analysis on institutions like love, marriage, sex, masculinity and femininity. It would be opposed specifically and centrally to sexism, rather than capitalism” (Koedit et all in Collins, 70). Other anthologies such as *Sisterhood is Global* (1970) by Robin Morgan, *Radical Feminism* (1973) by Koedt, Levine and Rapone do justice to the sheer range and heterogeneity of radical feminist perspectives (69).

Radical feminist thought focuses on gender as a social construct from which all other forms of “material and ideological female oppression” is stemmed (70). Contrary to social feminists and Marxist feminists who believe that Capitalism is the source of women's oppression, radical feminists believe that the source of women's oppression. To explore female oppression, radical feminism focuses on the experiences of individual women in society and considers sexism an important part of their oppression. Another important side of radical feminist thought is that they treat men with suspicion on the bases that they are possible oppressors for women. The most popular slogan that radical feminist held is “the personal is political” which sought to address issues like marriage, childcare, sexuality, health and work to a matter of urgent political concern (Rosemarie2).

Reproduction issue is a diverse issue in the radical feminist thought. Radical feminists claim that biological motherhood drains women physically and psychologically. They believe

that women must have access to “reproductive – controlling technologies” and to prevent or terminate their unwanted pregnancies (3, 4). Moving to the modern feminisms movement, I attempt to present the most modern feminist’s movements that share a lot with the transnational feminist theory. The following are some examples.

### **Postcolonial, Multicultural, Global Feminisms, and Third Wave Feminism**

Postcolonial, Multicultural, and Global feminists aim to show how the “contextual factors shape women’s self-understanding as being oppressed or not oppressed. They want women to reject the idea that they are all alike and to refuse the claim that privileged women could speak on behalf of all women (Rosemarie, 8). Postcolonial, Multicultural, and Global feminists focus on the reasons and causes of women’s subordination worldwide. These feminists’ contribution to feminist thought is clear in their efforts to highlight the differences that exist among women. These differences might present challenges to women’s alleged solidarity (7).

In particular, Multicultural feminism focuses on the differences among women who live within the boundaries of one geographical space. On the other hand, Postcolonial feminism focuses on women’s status in developing countries. However, countries of the Third World still feel the harmful effects of the nineteenth and twentieth century (8).

Third – wave feminism represents the generation that benefited from the achievements of the second – wave feminism and it emerged in 1990s. Third – wave feminism started when a young generation of women sought to debate the meanings and relevance of feminism for their late twentieth century lives. Some of these women published works that provide personal accounts of their awakening and show guidance to feminism from a mainstream audience. Some of these publications are: *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation* (1995) by Barbara Findlen, *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism* (1995)

by Rebecca Walker, and *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* (2000) by Jennifer Bangardner and Amy Richards (Genz, 157).

The new young generation feminists of Third – wave feminism believe that there should be a kind of reconcile between the theoretical frameworks which are built on the foundation of universality, sameness, and scientific methodology and the feminists that had led them to identify and difference. Third – wave feminism embraces the diversity and differences in perspectives among “women” (Arneil, 186). Also, differences between men and women represent an important shift from second to third – feminism.

Third – wave feminists such as bell hooks encourage first world feminism not to be disappointed if they could not achieve friendship with women of color and Third World women. Rather, they should be seeking for political relationships with them (Sterba, 186). Third – wave feminists main focus is women seek new identities for themselves in a world full of conflict and self contradiction and this is where political relations between women would work best. The “woman question” – who is she and what does she want is the main question that Third – wave feminism is seeking to have be answered (Rosemarie, 9).

Bell hooks insists that there are major differences between “bourgeois – women’s liberation,” sisterhood and third – wave feminists since the first one focuses on women supporting each other where the second rejects this support system and offers another type of sisterhood where women acknowledge each others’ differences and at the same time use these differences to “accelerate their positive advance” toward the goals they have in common (Sterba, 186).

### ***Woman in Western Feminists' Discourse***

Western feminists' perspectives on issues related to women vary. Some of them agree on one or more and many debate over the same perceptions due to the different approaches they follow and the various feminisms' schools they came from. Monique Wittig believes that the notion of "women" is a myth that has originated from the patriarchal system viewing women as difference from men based on their ability to give birth. Wittig asserts that "not only is this conception still imprisoned in the categories of sex (women and men), but it holds onto the idea that the capacity to give birth (biology) is what defines a woman" (Wittig, 10). So, women in a non – patriarchal sense are not born women but called so by a male – oriented society. Simone de Beauvoir agreed with Wittig when she declares that "One is not born, but comes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society. it is civilization as a whole that produce this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine" (Leighton, 34).

The idea tackled by Wittig and de Beauvoir that women are only set apart from men on the basis of childbirth not only presents a good for feminists and lesbians, but ignored other women's cultures and religions. These two Western feminists excluded the needs of Third world women who value motherhood in a culture where childbirth is a positive sign for womanhood and adds a lot of appreciation and care for women who breed children.

To clarify more, the concept of performativity by Judith Butler is performed by certain genders to define their internal structures of female and male being different. Butler asserts that grouping people as "women" or "men" in only taking into account the physical nature of both body types when she says that "the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality" (Butler & Salih, 115). Western feminists like Wittig believe that males "the oppressors" have created the term

“women” and this is a main goal for females to erase such a degrading term from the existence. Some Western feminists’ ideas, and here Wittig is the perfect example, exceeds the notion of women as socially constructed to acknowledge lesbianism as the only concept as Witting states:

Lesbian is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man), because the designated subject (lesbian) is not a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically. For what makes a woman is a specific social relation to a man, a relation that we have previously called servitude, a relation which implies personal and physical obligation as well as economic obligation (‘forced residence,’ domestic corvee, conjugal duties, unlimited production of children, etc.), a relation which lesbians escape by refusing to become or to stay heterosexual” (Wittig, 20).

Such assertion by Witting is beyond the categories of sex (woman and a man) alleging that lesbian is not a woman, either economically, politically, or ideologically (Duchen, 98).

Western feminists emphasize that the society attributes to be male or female which they consider is just a myth based upon patriarchal ideologies. In doing so, they discard biological and religious explanation of that defines and reasons sex, sexuality, and gender. All the previous discussion ignore Third world women’s experiences, culture, and religion and affirms that Western feminists speak from their ivory tower as elites raising the notion of lesbianism and neglecting much more important needs of Third world women such as basic human rights like: right to life, equal treatment, and access to education.

According to Wittig, nature has nothing to do with gender roles rather it is the economic and political power of men. For her, the economic and political power of man means woman's servitude to men – the oppression of women by men. So, to win women's liberation means destroying the heterosexist social system. For both Wittig and Butler, a female is born into a social that has constructed the ideal "woman". Both of them also question the concept of the body itself as a natural entity and that its functions may be socially constructed exactly as the concepts of men and women.

Another articulation of the female body is drawn by French feminist Helene Cixous who asks women to step out of the darkness and write. She states "a woman without a body, dumb, blind can't possibly be a good fighter. She is reduced to being the servant of the militant male, his shadow. We must kill the false woman who is preventing the live one from breathing" (Warhol & Herndle, 351). Addressing women directly, showing men as militant, and resembling women as the servants of the "militant male" depict the thought that she carries as Western feminist which Third world women refutes. This thought implies that male is the enemy, the oppressor, and the one that women in compete with. Cixous believes that by writing woman can defuse the female image of suppression and helps them to form a new image that celebrates what the male dominated society has deemed feminine and submissive.

In terms of oppression, Cixous also claims that unconscious process of men's control leads to female suppression and the reason why we as women should write is that "We have been turned away from our bodies, shamefully thought to ignore them, to strike them with that stupid sexually modesty, we've been made victims of the old fools fames each one will love the other sex" (Warhol & Herndle, 359). Again, Cixous as a Western feminist totally ignores the Third world women's culture, experience, and religion. It is obvious that Cixous, as all Western

feminists that I am tackling in this chapter, universalizes her discourse as if all women in the world have the culture and experience that Western women have. Moreover, she implies the promotion of homosexuality and a woman's right to explore and celebrate her female body. Such address and claim of Cixous especially the one regarding the women and lesbianism, in particular, might be acceptable in open societies like the Western societies, but even currently in the twenty one century such discourse is still considered a taboo and no one dares to open at least in public. One of the few female activists who dare to answer a related is the Egyptian feminist and scholar Nawal el Saadawi in a TV show interview. However, when the TV reporter asked her if she would reveal or accept the idea of being a lesbian, she hesitated, trembled, and ended up saying that she is not a lesbian and never was.

Cixous reflects Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own" when Woolf talks about "the four great women novelists Jane Austin, Emily Bronte, Charlotte Bronte, and George Eliot. She noted that none of these four writers had a child. On the other hand, Cixous, in particular, sees motherhood as a major catalyst for writing because for her there is a deep connection between the body and writing and being a mother is uniquely feminine. While Cixous asks women not to identify themselves in relation to men as a "signifier" that has always referred back to the opposite "signifier" Woolf critiqued the patriarchal language structure.

The previous random Western feminists I chose to analyze some of their arguments shows that Western feminists in general talk about women as a one singular unit. They consider women as a one monolithic group who has same historical background, same culture, same religion, same environment, and same experience. They talk to women Western and non Western in the same voice and the same language presume that Third world women have the same problems and needs that Western women have and need. Western feminists even assume

that all women in the globe have the same power and strength to resist the implicit patriarchal society and the male dominant societies they live in. A more analytical reading of non Western women by Western feminists would give them a much clearer image of women in the other part of the world and allow them to speak to women of other cultures in a different language that might enhance women's rights in a more efficient way.

### ***Transnational Feminism Perspectives on Third World Women (Arab Women are Third World women)***

Recently, Third World women and their writing granted more space within first world contexts. However, this inclusion did not challenge the “discursive landscape” that has been assigned to Third World women and their writings as Umea Nyrayan terms “preoccupation” in the dual sense of “concern” and “pregiven locations” (Amireh et. al, 2). However, Mohanty asserts that Third World women's narratives' inclusion within First World context is not evidence of “decentering hegemonic historic and subjectivities”. Rather it is how Third World women's work is read, understood, and located institutionally (34). Transnational feminists challenge the universal claim of the Western feminists to speak on behalf and for all women. Postcolonial thinkers and transnational feminists like Mohanty, Rejeswari Sunder Rajan, Nawal El Saadawi, Andluaze, Kumar, and Spivak have generated an important rethinking of feminists' thought (Morton, 71).

The most important idea that transnational feminists have challenged is the Western feminists' assumption that all women are the same. Transnational feminists emphasized the necessity of difference in race, class, religion, citizenship and culture of women. Gayatri Spivak, in particular, refutes the Western feminists' assumption of universalism because neither a universalism nor a representation of all women can be achieved since the Western feminists interests are in conflict with the Third World women's needs (Lemmerich, 9). For Spivak, many



Western feminists ignore women's specific cultural, social, and political conditions and this is why Western feminists' universalism is just a failure. Spivak's essay "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," demands a stop of the universalizing "Sisterhood". She further rebukes "this matronizing and sororizing of women in development countries is also a way of silencing the subaltern" (Spivak 2003a, 386). Spivak contends that "if in contest of the colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (Spivak 1999, 274). Here she specifically looks at the situation of British occupation in India as an example of white European ideology taking over the other cultures. Writings about a subaltern group, and Third world women is a good example of this, from an outsider's perspective (the Western feminists) are not taken seriously by the people they write about because such writings are written without experiencing the culture as an insider. How can an outsider correctly write about or accurately express a culture they do not directly experience?

Another transnational feminist, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, has views similar to Spivak's when tackling the feminists' assumption of women's universalism. Mohanty also argues against universalism that Western feminism has advanced. Mohanty contends that Western feminists assume that all women are a coherent group with identical interests and desires without taking into consideration their class, ethnicity, racial formation, or different circumstances (Mohanty 1984, 337).

The experiences of Third World women are diverse and unique especially in the Arab Muslim countries due to the Arabic culture and Islamic religion. Gloria Anzaldua recounts some of the experiences of Third World women trying to show Western feminists that their assumed universalism is not working and they should stop speaking for third world women and on behalf of them. Anzaldua recounts Third World women experiences asserting:

Because white eyes do not want to know us,  
 they do not bother to learn our language, the  
 language which reflects us, our culture, our  
 spirit. The schools we attended or didn't attend  
 did not give us the skill for writing nor the  
 confidence that we were correct in using our  
 class and ethnic language (Keating, 26, 27).

The second crucial idea that transnational feminists challenge Western feminists on and through which they show their perspectives on Third World women is the Western feminists' claim of being privileged holding the power to lead the world's feminism and speak for Third World women and not to them. According to Spivak Western feminists should learn to stop feeling and acting as privileged feminists so as to understand the situation of other women in the other side of the globe (Lemmerich, 9, 10). Spivak addresses the problem of representation "Other women" by focusing on the relationships between Third World women and Western feminists (Nubile, 34). Mohanty declares that non Western feminists do not like being categorized as Third World women because they are aware that they are not a "singular" monolithic and paradigmatically victimized subject (Mohanty in Jackie, 106) Considering Third world women a singular monolithic eliminates the differences which are essential in the notion of other women. In a similar debate, Marina Lazerg (2000) asserts that Western feminists' hegemony is based on their assumption that they belong to "perfectible societies" whereas other women belong to traditional or patriarchal societies and these are imperious to change from within (7, 205). However, we cannot hide the fact that Arab Muslim women themselves look at Western feminists and Western women in general as being privileged

thinking that Western women enjoy all their rights as humans and as women. Arab World feminists portray Western women as models in understanding and teaching women's rights and this is why many local women's rights organizations seek the support of international women's organization not only in funding, but also in policies of how to conduct workshops and training courses on women's rights.

Western feminists' claim that Third World women are victims of men and the patriarchal system that ruled them is another problematic issue that transnational feminists tackle. Western feminists look at women of the Third world as a singular unit who as a group are victims of men as a group. This monolith assumption has been challenged by transnational feminists. Caren Kaplan and Inderpal Grewal (1999) contend that transnational feminism criticizes not only forms of patriarchal oppression as analyzed by Western feminism, but also of feminists' culture hegemony. They give the example of a hegemonic approach that demonizes non – Western, Middle Eastern and Arab Muslim women in particular, and describe them as more oppressive than their First World counterparts (358). Mohanty, on the other hand, criticizes the assumptions made by Western feminists of Third world women's oppression and she notes that this assumption implies Third world women's powerlessness mistakenly "the discursively consensual homogeneity of women as a group... for the historical specific material reality of groups of women". She also states that:

For in the in the context of a first/third world balance of power, feminist analyses which perpetrate and sustain the hegemony of the idea of the superiority of the West produce a corresponding set of universal images of the 'third – world woman'. Images like the veiled woman, the powerful

mother, the chaste virgin, the obedient wife, etc. These images exist in universal historical splendor, setting in motion a colonialist discourse which exercises a very specific power in defining, coding and maintaining existing first/third – world connections (Mohanty, 1988, 22).

Spivak is another transnational feminist who defends Third world women claiming that they are not victims of their patriarchal system and not oppressed by their husbands and own men. Spivak accuses a victimizing, and compassion of the “benvolt” First world. She studied the French feminist Julia Kristeva’s novel *About Chinese Women* published in 1977 and draws attention to stereotypes of the nature of the Chinese life regarding gender and showed how Kristeva ignored to point out anything regarding the white female colonizers in her novel (Spivak 2010, 9). For Spivak herself, Western feminists perpetrate their role of colonizer toward Third world women who serve as a category to these dominant Western feminists. Mama, an African feminist and scholar, challenges the domination of the feminism scene by white Western feminists in international forums. She claims that women from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean think that the domination of Western feminism looks imperialistic. She adds women of these countries see the notion of feminism as something more advanced than Western women had and could import to them (Mama, 12).

However, it is important to be honest and mention the fact that many Western feminists try to find a common denominator to reconcile the different experiences of women worldwide. bell hooks is a significant example of Western feminists who understands that Western feminists, White Western feminists in particular, have done little to work on the idea of the diversity of women’s lived experiences. She also argues that “the political interrogation of the

personal is enabling for all women because it challenges each of us to alter our person, our personal engagement (either as victims or perpetrators or both)” (hooks 1989, 22). Also, Amina Mama acknowledged the fact that some Western feminists have responded recently to the Critique of non – Western feminists by advocating the idea that feminist thought should emanated from the least powerful groups of women and not just to keep speaking from the place of the feminist elite position (Mama 12).

## CHAPTER # 2

**ARAB MUSLIM WOMEN WRITERS**

“O mankind, fear your Lord, who created you from one soul and created from it its mate and dispersed from both of them many men and women. And fear Allah, through whom you ask one another, and the wombs. Indeed Allah is ever, over you, an Observer” (Qur’an, Surah 4:1).

In order to understand Arab Muslim women’s status in the Arab Muslim world it is crucial to study and understand the Arab Muslim society in terms of geography, history of occupation, culture, and religion. These specific terms have influenced Arab Women’s status all over the past years until now. The specificity of the Arabic Muslim world lies not only on its geographical space and historical background, but also on the sever influence of religion and culture on people regardless of their class, age, and education. In this chapter, I explore basic but important information about the Arabic world which allows the reader to have a better insight about that piece of the world in regards of its basic constitution that invents the mentality of its people and have shaped the status of its women. This quick reading of the Arab Muslim world shows the fact that Arab Muslim world is not a one monolithic unit as it is depicted by Western people in general and Western feminists in particular. This non - monolithicality has formed the different situations that Arab Muslim women live in thought the Arab Muslim world. So, women from Saudi Arabia are totally different from women in Lebanon in regards of human rights, social status, economical status, educational rights, and political rights.

## ***The Arab Muslim world***

Western feminists assume that the Arab Muslim world is monolithic and has the same structure, culture, and religious beliefs. This section of my chapter refutes Western feminists' assumptions of Arab Muslim world monolithicity. Initially, it is important to clarify that the Arab Muslim stretches around 5.25 million square miles between the Gulf and the Atlantic (Barakat, 12). The Arab world has served as the gateway to Europe and links Asia to Africa. The Arab world constitutes of twenty two Arab countries which extends between the Middle East and North Africa. The Arab world population reached around 300 million people in 2007 which constitutes %5 of the world population (Department of Middle Eastern Studies, the University of Texas at Austin, 2007). What is special about the Arab world is that it is considered the birth of the most important civilizations like the Egyptian Kingdom of the Pharaohs which established in 3100 B.C. E. It is also the land of the three major religions in the world Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and all these religions believe in one God (Arab American National Museum, Arab Civilization: Our Heritage, 2011).

The twenty two Arab countries are geographically located as the following:

- Arab Countries in the Middle East (Asia) are: Jordan, Syria, Palestinian authority, Lebanon, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia.
- Arab Gulf Countries: Bahrain, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Qatar.
- Arab African Countries: Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, morocco, Algeria, Somalia, Sudan, Yemen, Djibouti, and Comoros.

All Arab countries are constitutionally Muslim countries which mean the religion of state is Islam except Lebanon where the religion of the state is Christian. However, religion authority in Lebanon is divided between Muslims and Christians. The president of Lebanon must be a

Maroni Christian where the prime minister must be a Sunni Muslim and the president of the common house is a Shi'at Muslim.

Since colonization has its impacts on the Arab Muslim women's status as, as I show later in this dissertation, It is significant to mention that most Arab countries were colonized by European countries. Iraq, Egypt, Jordan, and Palestine were occupied by Britain. Algeria and Lebanon were occupied by France. Tunisia, Libya, Morocco, and Algeria were occupied by Italy. However, the French also stayed in Morocco and Tunisia for almost forty years between 1912 and 1952. French remained in Algeria from 1830 until 1962 which means 132 years of occupation. The French ruled North Africa and their influence was seen not only on the buildings and roads, but also was clear on the impact of culture like the French language and literature (Ferro.244). In 1916, Sykes – Picot agreement gave Syria and Lebanon to France where Jordan, Iraq, and Palestine were given to Britain.

However, some Arab countries were occupied by more than one European country due to their richness regarding the geographical space and the natural resources. Such countries are like Egypt which was not only occupied by the British from 1882 until 1922 but also was occupied before that by the French who occupied it from 1798 until 1801. Algeria was occupied by both France in the year 1830 and Italy in 1911. This kind of occupation left these countries with much more influence regarding language and culture of the Colonizers' countries been used a lot in the occupied countries. The Culture of the French was apparent until today in some of these countries like the legal system in Morocco and Tunisia which were impacted a lot by the French one. In Algeria and Morocco majority of people still use the French language in their daily lives as a prominent over the Arabic language.



After years of occupation that left its positive and negative impact on the occupied countries and people, Arab countries were liberated from the European colonization. Morocco and Tunisia are liberated in 1956, Algeria in 1962, Libya in 1951, Syria and Lebanon in 1945, Jordan in 1946, and in 1948 mandate on Palestine initiated the Israeli occupation.

Moving to Culture and religion of the Arab Muslim World, it is crucial to mention that culture and religion are not a singular unit and Islam is not a monolithic as depicted by Western feminists. Western feminists' writing shows a lot of misconceptions about Islam as a religion. Their writings carry stereotypical concepts of status of Muslim women, veiled women, and the homogeneity of Islam. Many Western feminists address Islam as a monolithic unit and confuse the fact that the majority of Muslims in the world are not Arabs and Arabs are not all Muslims. Arab world includes diverse religious beliefs such as Islam in its sectors Shiite, Sunna, Wahabi, and Alawite. Another religious belief in the Arab world is the Christianity in its different sectors such as Catholics, Maronite, Armenian Orthodox, and Coptic. Also, there are other non – religious beliefs of people who live within the Arab culture like the belief of Druze in Syria and Lebanon and the belief of Kurds in Iraq. Despite all this enormous religious diversity, Arab Muslim world is connected mostly to Islam by its linguistic history. Also, most Arab countries use the Sharia law as family law to regulate family life according to Islam. Shari'a law is based on Qur'an and Prophet Mohammad's *Hadith*. Family laws or personal status laws in most of Arab Muslim countries are derived solely from Shari'a. However, there are a lot of differences in interpreting the Islamic laws between these countries also these laws depend on Shari'a. Shari'a

*\* Hadith: is a compilation of the Prophet Mohammad's deeds and sayings. Recorded and written after his death, the Hadith is considered one of the primary sources of Islam, the first being the Koran, the book revealed by Allah to his Prophet (Mernissi 1994, 59).*

law tackles issues such as marriage, children's custody, divorce, polygamy, inheritance, treatments and contracts between people, worships, and other related public and private issues in the Muslim's daily life.

In particular, Muslims in the Arab Muslim world are not monolithic in their Islamic belief. They are strongly differentiated from one Arab country to another in terms of their beliefs. The most significant difference is the one between Sunni Muslims and Shiite Muslims. Findlay contends that the Sunni – Shiite groups' split goes back to their dispute over the political succession to Prophet Mohammad. The previous dispute resulted in the divisions of the Islamic faith into two sects. The first one is the tolerant Orthodox 'well trodden path' Sunni group and the second one is the less tolerant group the Shiite group (17). Geographically, Sunni Muslims are located in North Africa, the Western Levant, and Saudi Arabia where the Shiite Muslims are in the majority in eastern Iraq, Yemen, and Southern Lebanon. Majority of Muslims are Sunnis.

Sunni and Shiite are two different schools of thought in Islam. However, there is no difference between these two schools when it comes to belief in Allah as the only God of people, the five pillars of Islam, and the belief that Qur'an and *Hadith* of the Prophet Mohammad are the only two ways to know Islam. Nonetheless, Sunni and Shiite differ in their interpreting of some of the verses of the Qur'an and in believing or not believing of the *Hadith* as genuine (Findlay 1994). Sunni and Shiite women dress differently especially in the way they wear their veils. Some scholars do not agree over covering the face of the Muslim woman. Some tolerate the revealing of the veil from the woman's face and others include the face in Muslim women's veiling. On the other hand, Shiites scholars believe that Muslim women must reach the border of the face and up to the chin.

## ***Status of Arab Muslim Women in Islam***

Before the dawn of Islam, many people denied their women humanity. They were looked at as something just created to serve men and live to their willing. Further, they used to hate girls and kill female children by burying alive to avoid scandals that they believe girls bring with them and accompany them until they die. Islam has commanded that men and women share in equal humanity with same duties and responsibilities as creatures of God. Qur'an stipulates that "O mankind, fear your Lord, who created you from one soul and created from it its mate and dispersed from both of them many men and women. And fear Allah, through whom you ask one another, and the wombs. Indeed Allah is ever, over you, an Observer" (Surah 4:1). In another verse God says that "It is He who created you from one soul and created from it its mate that he might dwell in security with her. And when he covers her, she carries a light burden and continues therein. And when it becomes heavy, they both invoke Allah, their Lord, "If You should give us a good [child], we will surely be among the grateful" (Surah 7: 189). These two Surahs from Qur'an show with no doubts the way Islam look at both men and women equally. God created them from the same soul and assigned them the same responsibilities and duties.

On the other hand, God blames both of Adam and Eve in the incident of eating the forbidden fruit and trespassing from paradise. In fact God puts blame first on Adam when he says "And We had already taken a promise from Adam before, but he forgot; and we found not in him determination" (Surah 20:115), and "Then Satan whispered to him; he said, 'O Adam, shall I direct you to the tree of eternity and possession that will not deteriorate?' " (Surah 20: 121). God is blaming Adam mostly because he is the one who God assigned him responsibility on not touching that fruit and he could not keep what God asked him to keep. However, it is Adam who puts the blame on Eve and not God for eating from that fruit.

Although Islam is clear in defending women's rights and Qur'an has a lot of evidence that show the respectful image of women in Islam, there are still few issues that critics of Islam try to use as weapons when the issue of women's rights raises. These issues are like: legal testimonies in Islam, inheritance in Islam, *Qewama* or Guardianship in Islam, and the issue of Polygamy in Islam. I will discuss each one of these problematic issues in Islam briefly with the goal of giving the reader a clear depiction of the reality of legalizing these issues in Islam and the position of women in regards to each of them. Legal testimony in Islam is tackled in depth in Quran and the following Surah explains the issue of testimony when it asserts that "And if there are not two men [available], then a man and two women from those whom you accept as witnesses - so that if one of the women errs, then the other can remind her" (Surah 2: 282). So, this Surah clearly makes the testimony of one man equals the testimony of two women which is something that not only Western feminists criticize but also Arab Muslim feminists attack in different places and Nawal el Saadawi, the Egyptian Muslim feminist, is an example of feminists in the Arab Muslim world who critique this Surah in particular and has considered it a decline in the issue of women's rights and equality with men. However, Muslim scholars interpret this Qur'anic Surah by saying this has nothing to do with any Islamic belief in a deficiency of women's humanity and integrity. Rather, the distinction made between men's and women's testimony is only due to women's natural disposition and her special tendency which sometimes required to exclude her from public life while focusing on kids and household which may distract her of being involve in legal testimonies for example. God makes the points clear and unambiguous when he asserts "so that if one errs, the other can remind her" (Surah 2: 282).

The second problematic issue in Islam and usually is utilized as a weapon to point out that Islam is not fair to women and treats them unequally with men is the issue of inheritance.

Also, the respective shares of men and women and the amount of these shares are established in the following Surah of Qur'an:

Allah instructs you concerning your children: for the male, what is equal to the share of two females. But if there are [only] daughters, two or more, for them is two thirds of one's estate. And if there is only one, for her is half. And for one's parents, to each one of them is a sixth of his estate if he left children. But if he had no children and the parents [alone] inherit from him, then for his mother is one third. And if he had brothers [or sisters], for his mother is a sixth, after any bequest he [may have] made or debt. Your parents or your children - you know not which of them are nearest to you in benefit. [These shares are] an obligation [imposed] by Allah.

Indeed, Allah is ever Knowing and Wise (Surah 4: 11)

This Surah details the shares of both men and women in cases of inheritances in Islam. The Surah means if a man dies leaving a son and a daughter, the son gets as two shares of what his sister gets. However, the Islamic wisdom behind this is when the son gets married he is the one who is obliged as a man to pay the bridal dower and he is also obliged by Islam to provide and pay the life expenses of his family while the sister or the female who inherits only half of what he gets has no obligation what so ever to pay anything to her husband and rather gets her dower.

Islamic scholars contend that not always a woman takes half the male's share. The woman's share sometimes equals the man's in cases like where two parents inherit from their children. Male and female also inherit a six share equally if they inherit a brother who has no

parents neither a child. Moreover, there is an interesting case where a woman inherits more than what the man gets. This case is where a woman dies and her husband inherits half whereas her father gets a six and her mother gets a third.

Another problematic issue that attracts a lot of attention and become the center of hot debates in the Arab Muslim world especially by women's movements in the Arab Muslim world and that is the issue of men's guardianship or *Qewamah* over women in Islam. According to Islam, God assigns guardianship to the man by virtue of his natural qualities, physical strength and to what he acquires to make of him the responsible man who must bear any possible family collapses. The Surah in Qur'an that assigns this guardianship to the man says "Men are in charge of women by [right of] what Allah has given one over the other and what they spend [for maintenance] from their wealth" (Surah 4: 34). So, my understanding of *Qewamah* or guardianship of men over women in Islam is changed due to the changing that is taking place all around the world. Now, women work and they do spend themselves on their families and household. Some men do not spend and do not have any wealth even. According to the previous Surah how such men have guardianship over women if they do not spend money on them? The Surah is clear and explains the fact that men who do not spend have no guardianship over women. This *Qewamah* issue should be understood in depth by Arab Muslim feminists and Western feminists because interpreting it the right way could convince Islamists in particular that controlling women in no more valid in an age where women work and provide for themselves and their kids.

Finally, the issue of polygamy in Islam is always a controversial subject and a hot topic for debate. It is critical to refine that polygamy is existed hundreds of years before Islam appeared. Many nations before Islam allowed marrying of unlimited numbers of wives. Islam

limited and regulated the number of marriages and did not want to limit it only for one wife because that was hard on people to receive and turn in one jump from many wives to only one. So, Islam limited the number of wives to maximum four. However, polygamy in Islam has its own specific conditions like fairness, the uncured sickness of the wife, and in cases of wives who do not bred kids and the man wanted kids. Significantly, the most important condition for polygamy is the fairness of treatment to the wives in food, clothing, housing, and sustenance. It is forbidden to marry more than one if the Muslim knows that cannot fulfill the condition of fairness financially or emotionally. God has made this obvious and clear in the Qur'an when he says "And you will never be able to be equal [in feeling] between wives, even if you should strive [to do so]. So do not incline completely [toward one] and leave another hanging. And if you amend [your affairs] and fear Allah - then indeed, Allah is ever Forgiving and Merciful" (Surah 4: 129).

The status of women in Islam is unique because Islam granted women equality, integrity, and individuality. Women in Islam are recognized as equal partners of men who bear personal and common responsibilities and duties. Also, women in Islam are entitled to freedom of expression exactly as men. Women are entitled to public life in Islam. They used to accompany the Islamic armies engaged in battles to work either as fighters or as nurses. Finally, Islam guaranteed women the right of contract, earn, enterprise, and posses independently.

Although Islamic movements focused on the issue of holding women responsibility of most of the social corruption in society, contemporary Islam witnessed a shift in Islamist gender position in 1990 and after. In 1990, the Egyptian Islamic leader and scholar Yusuf Al Qaraddawi declared his fatwa regarding women. He contended that women could seek parliamentary offices and can be judged same as men (Najib 28). Currently, the controversy of women can

hold office is no longer a matter of dispute among different stream Islamist's thoughts. On one hand, the previous arguments by Muslim Extremists like the Sulfites were based on attacks of the idea that women should have roles in public life. Sulfites believe that the natural place for a woman is her place and the only job she has to take is raising kids, caring for husbands, and being loyal housewives. On the other hand, contemporary Islam adopts a fixed position in supporting the issue of women's political rights and endorses their inclusion of public life. However, contemporary Islam still walking slowly towards the reforms of the personal status Shari'a law which tackles family life such as polygamy, marriage, inheritance, divorce, and custody of children. Saying that, it is vital to note that most Arab countries demanded independent religion thinking and opened the door to *Ijtihad* to enlighten readings of the regulatory Qur'anic verses that establish a more civilized discourse on women's rights.

### ***Women's Movement in the Arab World***

Arab Women's Movement has come to arise in a specific environment and within social and economic connects, locally, regionally, and internationally (UN Report, 10). Colonization and struggle for liberation might be the most influential factors in the evolving of Women's movements in the Arab Muslim world. Struggle for liberation from imperialism, in particular, has encouraged the emergence of many women's organizations that called initially for the liberation of the nation and continued to call for the liberation of women from all kinds of manipulation and segregation. Women's movement in the Arab Muslim world always connected to other social, national, and political movements in the Arab Muslim World. Women's movements in Egypt, Lebanon, and Tunisia for example were parts of the national and liberation movements. Some other women's movements were part of the religious movement like the one in Egypt. Importantly, Buthaina Shaaban, an Arab feminist and scholar, contends that Arab



Muslim women contributed extensively to the efforts made at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in respect of the cause of women's liberation in the world.

Shaaban also asserts that before World War I there were 25 magazines on the subject of women's liberation and all these magazines published and circulated by women (Sabbagh 89).

Tracing the history of Arab Women's Liberation Movement, we will find that it went through three phases. The first phase is the early phase before the World War II. The second phase is the Post World War II phase. The third phase is the contemporary phase which started after the liberation of the Arab world from the Western Colonization until current moment. The first phase started with men's voices calling for women's liberation and these voices started with brave young men like Qasim Amin and Shaik Mohammad Abdo. Qasim Amin, an Egyptian lawyer and scholar who was educated in France, wrote his first book in 1899 entitled *The Liberation of Women* immediately after he returned back from France to Egypt. In his book, Amin stimulated enormous public debates on women's status in Arab world. Amin always believed that the road to liberate Egypt should start with its women's emancipation. In order to convince people that his debate on women's liberation was not brought with him from France, he used portions of the Qur'an to support what he argued. Amin used arguments from Qur'an to convince people of the importance of improving the status of Arab women. He criticized the social isolation of women, the veil, the arranged marriages, the divorce practices, and polygamy. He called for educating women as the main path for them to be involved public life. Qasim Amin's books and thought continue to be controversial in the Arab Muslim World and the accusation of being Westernized and against Islam still follow him until today.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the first generation of women activists emerged to establish welfare organization as they were coming from the upper – class and ruling families.

They started creating these welfare organizations as they were witnessing the inferior social and economical status of their societies (UN Report 2004, 10- 12). However, distinguished women initiated the first women's educational society in 1881 in Egypt aiming to raise public awareness towards the importance of education to women in particular. In 1908, Huda Shaarawi, and Egyptian feminist, founded the Mohammad Ali Charitable Association and then, in Egypt also, the Instructive Women's Union was formed in 1910 to study issues related to women's inferior status and re-exam the Personal Status Law which is stemmed from Shari'a law.

In 1923, Huda Shaarawi, Ceza Nabrawi, and Nabawiya Mousa are three Egyptian women participated in an international women's conference in Rome, Italy. When they returned back they took off their veils in the Cairo train station showing their resistance against women's constrain and symbolizing liberation. Shaarawi is considered the mother of Arab Women's liberation movement. She is the one who lead the first women's national liberation demonstration in Cairo. She also established the first women's liberation organizations. Shaarawi's women's organization called for women's equality with men, the right of education, the right of vote, reforming laws that regulate marriage, divorce, alimony, and child custody (Shaarawi 1986).

In 1936, Zaynab Al Ghazali in Egypt established the first independent Muslim organization that made important breaks with traditional Islamists. Al Ghazali's organization was a women's liberation model in the 190s and 1960s. Although this modal was a defensive reaction against the colonial culture, it was more liberating than the traditionalism model which was mostly controlled by patriarchal values (Najib 23).

The second phase of Arab Women's Liberation Movement is marked by the end of the World War II particularly in the 1940s. During this phase, the communist parties stated to create

a number of women's associations. Examples of these associations are the Tunisian Women and the Union of Moroccan Women both established in 1944. They also established the Algerian Women's Union in 1945 and the Association of Lebanese Women in 1947. Therefore, women's movements started to gain its fruits and attain its maturity since this was the period which witnessed the resistance of Arab societies to the Western colonialism and imperialism. In this period, women concentrated on issues more related to women's status beside their struggle to defeat the invaders. Some of the issues that Arab feminists worked on are like polygamy, age at the time of marriage, divorce, and rights of education (UN Report 2004, 11). More women's associations were present in almost all Arab countries to raise issues related to empowering women's rights. Egypt was the pioneer country in the number and efficiency of its women's association. The Egyptian women's Party was formed in 1942 followed by the establishment of the Daughters of Nile Association in 1984. In other Arab countries like Tunisia, the Union of Tunisian Women emerged in 1944 while in Morocco the Union of Moroccan Women was founded in 1944 and also in Morocco the Association of the Sisters of Purity was created in 1946 and the Association of Moroccan Women in 1947 (UN Report, 10 -12).

Other Arab countries were benefited from the intervention of the Western imperialism which enhanced people's national consciousness and assisted the emergence of women's liberation as well. Lebanon is an example where more women's associations established such as the Lebanese Women's Council which came into existence in 1943, the Association of Lebanese Women's in 1947, and the Committee of Lebanese Women's Rights in 1947 (UN Report, 10 - 12). Iraq, Sudan, and Jordan are other examples where Arab Women's Liberation Movement's organizations and associations have appeared. The Iraqi Women's Union in 1945, while in Sudan the Cultural Girl's Syndicate was created in 1945 as was the Association of Women's

Enhancement in 1945. Also in Jordan, the Society of the Jordanian Women's Union was founded in 1945.

During the Colonialism era, Arab Women's Liberation Movement tends to pay greater attention to the need of prioritizing women's issues and raise the political awareness around them. For example, Duriya Shafiq established the Daughter of Nile Association to demand equality of political rights between men and women (UN Report, 11). Arab Women's Liberation Movement showed success during the colonialism era and that was linked to the liberation from colonization which backed up women's liberation in the Arab world. Based on this assertion, all Arab Women's Movements' argument, in this period, was affected by political consciousness which was in the same degree by both men and women. Women's discourse of the time was to initiate women's issues to national liberation. However, feminist consciousness of gender issues took place immediately after independence and as a result of social and economical transformations. Arab Muslim society started to witness the involvement of females in higher education, higher professions, and some higher political and leadership positions in government.

The third phase of Arab Women's Liberation movement is the Contemporary phase which extends from the independence of most Arab countries in the 1950s and the 1960s until now. This phase is marked by the public awareness of most of women's organizations in the Arab Muslim world that they should adopt programs that respond to social and political conditions. In 1970s, in Tunisia Islamists started encouraging women to enroll in no more than the minimal education and not to have any relations with men outside marriage or kinship. Islamists in Tunisia overcame their defensive stands against feminism and started to expand their outlook on gender roles (Najib 25). On the other hand, the Islamic liberation movement in Sudan included women since 1949. Fatimah Talib, Su'ad al Fatih, and other women rose to

prominence among Islamists (Najib 30). The latter half of the 1970s, for example, women's organizations which are independent from the official and political organization started to appear. One of these organizations is the Tunisian Al – Tahir Al – Haddad Club which was established in 1978 by a group of female students to fight against the unequal treatment of women and the monopolization of women's issue by the Tunisian state. In the 1980s, the Arab Muslim world witnessed the establishment of many women's associations especially in the Maghreb (Western Arab Countries) due to the transformation of the Arab women's movement. In Tunisia, the Tunisian Women's Association for Research on Development was created by a group of female academics in 1987 to encourage women's research. Also in Tunisia in 1989, the Association of Democratic Women was founded aiming to abolish all types of discrimination against women.

Although these entire Women's Associations were authentic and based on Arab women's struggle and need, it is crucial to mention that the new generation of Arab women's associations benefited from the international and global discourses on women's issues and such discourses left significant influence on Arab Women's movement on how to reform its struggle and prioritize its goals. Further, the global discourse has assisted Arab feminists to bring laws and national legislations into live with universal objectives (UN Report). Thus, it is important to clarify that these organizations, which increased to 225,000 organizations in 2004 (12), did not copy the Western example blindly. Rather they followed the Arab Islamic culture in implementing women's rights in the Arab Muslim society. For example, the Arab women's movements have not integrate themes like gay and lesbians rights in their calls for women's rights neither they have talked about the right to choose one's religious belief because these issues clearly contradicts the Arab Islamic culture. So, generally, women's liberation

movements in the Arab Muslim culture have avoided any subjects that might risk their mission of liberating women in they are accused of being Westernized. Despite all their efforts to be within the Arab Islamic culture, they are still accused of being Westernized.

Notably, the pressure of the UN came as a result of their research in the Arab Muslim World. According to UN data, the proportion of women's representation in Arab parliaments is only 3.4% (as opposed to 11.4% in the rest of the world). In addition, 55% of Arab women are illiterate (al Qudus al arabi, 1999). So, the United Nations (UN) constantly put pressure on Arab regimes to improve the status of women in Arab Muslim countries. Arab regimes vary in their responses to the UN organizations in improving women's rights. Some of these regimes initiated mild improvements in women's status rather than enacting radical reforms which they believe might contradict the ideology of their conservative countries like the Gulf countries example in promoting women's rights. However, two groups in the Arab Muslim world form the question of women's rights. The first group of these two is the religious fundamentalists who try to impose certain concept on the role of women in society that is considered backward. The second group is the Non Governmental organizations (NGO's) who have been trying to impose an alternative concept for women's liberation. Their concept was not welcomed in the Arab Muslim world because it has been seen as a Western alien to the Arab Muslim society by the West. Despite of all the argument that was resulted from the debate between the two previous groups regarding women's liberation, women's movements in the Arab world emerged strong and determinant.

Emerging determinant and promising is a fact since most of women's rights that were initiated by Saharawi's organization have continued to be claimed by contemporary Arab women movements. Nawal El-Saadawi, a contemporary leader of the Arab women's liberation

movement, followed Shaarawi's steps. El Saadawi founded an Arab feminist organization entitled the Arab Women's Solidarity Association (AWSA) in 1982 which was banned in 1992 and El-Saadawi put to exile after political pressure and Islamists death threats for her. El-Saadawi was exiled between 1992 and 1996. During the times of her exile in U.S.A she clarified her cultural identity as an Arab Muslim woman who lived in an Arab Muslim conservative society. Also, she clarified her position from the Islamist fundamentalists and how they interpret Qur'an and Hadith in a way that serves their purposes of isolating women socially, politically, and even mentally. In particular, she criticized the continuous discrimination inflicted on Arab Muslim women's scholars like her. El-Saadawi is known as being vigorous in her struggle as a women's rights activist.

Recently Syria and Tunisia improved women's status for their benefits as countries need the international support financially and politically especially during the postcolonial era. These regimes made progressive reforms that help in changing the women's status in their countries such as raising the literacy rates and legally enfranchising women. However, Arab women activists still accuse these countries of having no serious reforms and all the changes are just on the surface to please the UN organization and to receive the Western funds. Some Arab women activists refer to incidents like what happened in Syria in 1982 when the Asad's regime attacked *muhajjabat* veiled women in Damascus and forced them to take off their Islamic garbs (Najib 22).

Despite all the debates between the Islamic fundamentalists and women's activists on whether Arab Women's movements are Westernized or are stemmed from the Arabic Islamic culture, Arab women themselves have their own opinion about the liberation they need. Buthain Shaaban, a Syrian scholar and a feminist, claimed that all Arab women she interviewed in her

book *Both Right and Left Handed* have their own interpretation of their liberation they need. Shaaban asserts that all women she interviewed from Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Algeria were asked about their own opinions of the Western model of women's liberation. All of these women had the same answer "we do not want to imitate the Western women in their liberation" "we have our own way" (Shaaban 1999). In answering this way they were not only showing their specific and different expectations of liberation, but also showed their stereotypical image of Western women as being emancipated from all manners and ethics.

### ***Arab women writers***

Arab women writers have written novels, essays, poetry, and non – fiction for decades ago. They stemmed their subjects and enthusiasm to write from the rich heritage of literature that Arab Muslims have. Al Khansa' (575 – 664) for example was an Arab women poet and critic (Sabbagh 235). She used to stand in Okaz market which was the world's fair of Arabic poetry that time and criticize the work of her fellow poets showing them their merits and demerits.

Arab women's writing started as early as 1892, when a Lebanese girl, Zainab Fawaz Al Amilyia wrote a letter to American women who were gathering in a conference and passed a resolution stated that women's place is at home where they can raise their children. Her letter urged the American government to be fair to women and to give them equal political and social rights. She was the first Arab woman writer who published essays in the early 1890s while also publishing in women's journals and other periodicals. Her essays and poetry were published in *al-Ra sa 'il al -Zaynabiyya* (The Zaynab epistles, c. 1906). Further, she published two novels, *Husn al-awaqib aw Ghada al-zahira* (Good consequences, or Ghada the radiant, 1899) and *al-*



*Malik Kurush awwal muluk al-Fars* (King Kurush, first sovereign of the Persians, 1905), and one play, *al-Hawa wa al-wafa* (Passion and fidelity, 1893) (Booth 1990, 1991).

Miriam Cooke contends that Zainab Faawz refutes the belief that it was only upper – class women who had access to education and become writers. Cooke found out that Zainab Fawwaz went from Lebanon to work as a maid with an Egyptian family. Her mistress discovered her talent in writing and decided to send her to school where she managed to utilize her intelligence. She wrote poetry, short stories, and her most know collection of essays *al Rasa'il al Zaynabiyya* (The Zaynab epistles) (Cooke 445). .

Tracing the history of women's writing, Buthaina Shaaban claims that Arab women had started writing novels two decades before men did. She contends that Arabs believe that the first novel "Zainab" was written by a man, Mohammad Hasanain Haykal, in 1914. In 1891, Alice Butrus al – Bustani, a Lebanese woman writer, published her novel *Sa'iba* (Correct) (Ashour 5). Shaaban on the other hand, asserts that in 1914 there were more than twenty novels written by women like Zaynab Fawas (1850 – 1914) and Afifa Karam. Afifa Karam, a Lebanese woman, wrote the first novel in Arabic in 1906. Fawaz's novel was *Badi'a wa Fou'ad* published by Al Huda Newspaper in New York (Sabbagh 236). Mayy Ziyada (1886 – 1941) wrote biographies of three women writers: Warda al Yaziji, Aisha al – Taymouriya, and Malak Hifni Nasif (Cohen 3). Generally, in 1930s and 1940s, women writers from Iraq, Palestine, Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon emerged. These women wrote different forms of literary genres such as articles for newspapers and radio, poetry, novels, and short stories (Ashour 7). Huda Shaarawi the Arab Mulsim feminist appeared during this period and wrote some articles and her popular memoirs *Harem Years* which I am going to analyze in this dissertation.

Arab women writers tackled different topics in their writings. Until the 1950s, women expressed their inner feelings in literature. Arab women's literature during that time described women's habits and modes of thinking that men could not reach. Shaaban studied the history of Arab women's writing and found that the topics that Arab women handled in their writings differ according to the time period they lived in. Widad Sakkakini for example portrayed the social and Psychological environment in her first story collection "Mirrors". She later showed the grievances of women which turns to a form of rebellion when she wrote her novel *Arwa Bint Al – Khutub* (Arwa the daughter of upheavals). In her biography of Rabia Al Adwiya, Sakkakini addressed the injustices which are inflicted on women by men who are invented in the Arabic conservative society. Latifa Ziat, an Egyptian woman writer, is another Arab Muslim writer who showed in her story collections *Al Shaykhukha wa Kissas Ukhra* (Old Age and Other Stories) showed that women are obsessed with living up to the mothers precludes from any opportunities to realize or fulfill themselves. Ziat stories aimed to encourage women to prevail concepts of women's happiness and successful achievements in their lives (Sabbagh 236 – 38).

In 1950s, the Arab world witnessed the creative move of Arab women's writing in types of literary genres. Amina al-Said wrote her novel *Al-Jamiha* (the Defiant Woman). In 1958, Laial Ba'labakki published her novel *Ana Ahya* (I live). In 1959, Collette Khuri published her novel *Ayyam Ma'ah* (Days with Him). In 1960, Latifa al-Ziat in Egypt published her novel *al Bab al Maftuh* (the Open Door). In 1962, Laila Ussayran released her novel *Lan Namoot Ghadan* (We Will Not Die Tomorrow), and in 1963, Emilly Nasrallah published *Tuyur Aylul* (The Birds of September). In Poetry, many Arab women poets emerged during all the times that witnessed the appearance of women writing novels. Poets like Nazik el-Mala'ika in Iraq, Fadaw Tuqan, and Salma Khadra Jayyusi in Palestine (Cooke 445 – 458).

Since 1960s, the number of Arab women writers has increased dramatically and entered a more feminist phase. During this new feminist phase, feminists' visions and aspirations were expressed in their being Palestinians in one hand and sometimes forced into exile on the other hand. Palestinian women like Naomi Shihab Nye, Elmaz Abinader, Diana Abu Jaber are Palestinian Americans seek their personal identity as Arab Muslim women who live in the West. Some of the topics they choose to write on take the reader back to their homes. Poetry which was written by Nye is a valuable example of her missing her home land and sometimes reveals the fact that she is torn between two cultures. Fadwa Tuqan, Nawal El Saadawi, and Fatima Mernissi started establishing their writings during this era. However, El Saadawi and Mernissi continued to write until this moment.

In 1980s, new Arab women voices emerged in the Arab world. These women were highly educated. In 1982, Hanan al-Shaykh, a Lebanese writer, published her well known novel especially in Western academia *Hikayet Zahra* (The Story of Zahra). This novel addresses the civil war in Lebanon and the suffering of Zahra the woman who ended up as a victim of an honor crime. After *Hikayet Zahra*, al-Shaykh published her short stories collections *Wardat al-Sahra* (Desert Rose) in which she portrayed Arab women as victims but not passive. In 1983, Laila Abu Zaid published *Am al-Fil* (The Year of the Elephant) in which she tackled the issue of divorce in the Arab Muslim world and the suffering the divorcee women face due to Arabs attitudes towards the divorcee women (Cooke 457). During the last decade, many young Arab female writers emerged especially in the Gulf States. Amazingly, these women's writings break all the taboos and tackles issues which were forbidden before such as sexuality and societies defiances. Examples of these women writers are Rajaa Abdallah Al-Sana'e, Laila Othman, Samar Al Mogren, Hissa Hilal, and Fatima Al-Ali. The most recent controversial work was a

novel by Raja Al-ASanea who was born in 1981 and graduated from the University of King Saud, Riyadh. Her novel, *Banat Al-Riyadh* (Daughters of Riyadh) was published in 2005. The novel presents a social critique of the Saudi upper class from the point of view of a young woman, the narrator, who reveals her friends' mostly unfortunate experiences with the opposite sex. She openly tackles the subject of lesbianism in the Saudi upper – class in particular. Her book is not permitted in most Arab countries and she was attacked by Islamists in Saudi Arabia.

Arab women writers have not written only in fiction and non – fiction, but also in journalism. In journalism, they did not tackle only issues related to women's status and demands, but also handled different social, economical, and political topics. Some of these writers started writing under their own names such as Warda al Yaziji (1838 – 1924) and Aisha al – Taymouriya (1840 – 1902). Other Arab women writers chose to write in anonymous names. Zaynab Fawwaz published her first novel under the anonymous name “an Egyptian woman”. Another woman writer, Malak Hifni Nasif (1886 – 1918) published her work under the anonymous name “Bahithat al – Badiya” which means in English seeker in the desert (Ashour 5). Nasif's book entitled *Nisa'iyat* (women's things) was published in 1910 and carried her anonymous name Bahithat el Badiya (Shaaban 5).

The custom of writing under anonymous names or using the initials is still practiced until recently. *Baghdad Burning* was written in 2004 by a young Iraqi woman who chose to write her book under the anonymous name Riverbend fearing many politician or militias in Iraq. There are different reasons that force Arab women, in particular, to write under anonymous names and not to reveal their real names. Some of these reasons are like fear or threat such as the case of Riverbend writing *Baghdad Burning* expressing her fear in the first few pages of the book. She

chose to hide her real identity and name because of her fear of the different conflicted parties who are fighting in Iraq. Riverbend is a Sunni Muslim woman who criticized some of the Shi'ite's practices in Iraq and that could put her and her family in real risk.

Another reason for writing under anonymous names by Arab Muslim women is their desire to express themselves freely especially when they are tackling issues that are forbidden by society or considered shameful to be revealed by women such as Sexual topics. Some Arab women hide their real names because they write on issues such as religion and politics which are not welcomed by most Arab regimes especially before the recent Arab revolutions that are spread all over the Arab world. Some individual societies still do not welcome women's writing in particular and this is why women of these societies have chosen to write under anonymous names regardless of the topics they tackle (Cohen 4, Zaidan 6). These societies are like the Saudi Arabia society which is in its way of enlightenment since the number of Saudi women writers is really increasing tackling courageous topics.

In the modern age, Radwa Ashour, an Arab scholar, researched with other Arab scholars 1200 entries of Arab women writers who wrote during the period of the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until 1990 (Ashour 2008). This number shows the richness of Arab women writing. Later in this modern age, Arab women writers work has been translated into English especially towards the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Examples of Arab women who translated their work into English are: Fatima Mernissi, Nawal El Saadawi, Amal Faqir, Leila Ahmed, Leila Abu Zaid, Ahdaf Swief, Asia Djebbar, and many other Arab women writers. The translation of Arab women's work enriches the English library of Arabic literature that is written by Arab women in particular. It also opens the gate in front of non Arabic speakers to investigate the Arabic culture and women's status through the lenses of Arab women. Further, the translation of Arab

women's writings breaks the stereotypical images that were taken about Arab women as being ignorant and constrained in harem. The translation of Arab women's writings shows the West that Arab Muslim women are capable of participating in making the history of the Arab world through their pens.

It is crucial and fair to mention the fact that Christian women writers in the Arab Muslim world have been always well represented among the successful Arab women writers. Zaidan, and Arab scholar, contends that comparing to their Muslim counterparts, Christian women writers were likely to read more and to enjoy more freedom in life which reflected on their writing. Zaidan relates their high level of education and success to their enrollment in Western missionary schools which enabled them to widen their insights (Zaidan 5). Arab Christian writers who left their spirit on the Arabic literature are like Collette Khuri (Syrian), Asma Tubi (Palestinian), Suha Sabbagh (Palestinian), Laila abu Saif (Egyptian), Mona Mikhail (Egypt), and many other Christian Arab women writers who enrich the Arabic library with all genres of literary they have tackled. However, Arab women writers, in general, have added significant contribution to modern Arabic literature which changed a lot in the topics and in the spirit of the Arabic literature (Schipper 73).

### ***Arab Women Writing their Autobiography***

Robert F. Sayre asserts in his book *American Lives: An Anthology of Autobiographies Writing*, that autobiography reveals not only the personal account of its author but it also reveals a lot about his assumed audience. For Sayre, the previous analysis constitutes a main reason for autobiographies to be read as cultural documents and not only as personal accounts (Sayre 13). Arab women's autobiographies reveal not only their own personal and private lives, but also record the social, national, and political history of their countries and this supports what Sayre's

assert. Arab women have always had their own goals behind writing autobiographies and this is clear in Golley's reference to Cooke's argument about Arab women writing their own life stories. Golley claims that Cooke contends that Arab women write autobiography because they are looking for means to prove their sense of empowerment either socially or politically. They write their autobiographies to find themselves a place in the male – oriented narratives world. Fadia Faqir studied the problems and reasons that were cited in the Arab women autobiographies (Golley 2007, 184). Golley asserts that autobiography in the Arab world is not considered “literature” and it is considered indecent in the Arab society especially when it is written by women (185). Golley concludes that Arab Muslim women's autobiographies could be placed within the framework of the global ethics of tolerance and truthfulness for life (199). Arab women's autobiographies share a lot with Western autobiographies especially in the topics they handled. Smith claims that Western women write based on their life experiences to demonstrate that the personal is political. They added that they write about their self consciousness and about issues similar to those the Arab women handle like their lives cycle – childhood, adolescence, marriage, career, and aging (Smith 10). Similarly, Arab women writers tackle issues like life cycle in their autobiographies, but they also tackle topics like prison, exile, war, Harem life, discrimination between males and females in the Arab Muslim society, religion, and topics related to public life.

The art of writing Autobiography emerged as a genre in Arabic literature just recently in the Arab Muslim world. However, the first Arab autobiography is believed to be written by the Arabic writer Ahmad Shudiyag in 1855. Currently, Autobiography is treated as an independent literature body and as one of the many chains of the Arabic literature. Arab writers took the responsibility to improve this literary genre. Some of these writers are Dr. Taha Hussein who

wrote his autobiography *al ayyam* the Days in 1926 preceded by Abed el Rahman Shukri who wrote his autobiography in 1916. Taha Hussein's *al ayyam* is considered by many critiques the first Arabic autobiography because it is constituted of all literary elements that make a autobiography (Rooke 191 – 215).

Many other autobiographies were written by Arab men writers like Hasannein Haykal, Sayed Qutub, Najib Mahfuz, Louis Awad, Suhail Idris, Edward Said, and Michail Nu'aimah. The most prominent autobiographies from those which were written after Taha Hussein published his autobiography are the ones which received numerous circulations and are still taught in Arabic academia until today. After the success that Taha Hussein's autobiography has received, many Arab writers started to involve in this genre of writing. Some of the most known autobiographies in the Arab world are the following autobiographies which were written by well known Arab male writers. For example, Ahmad Amin, a famous Arab writer, wrote his autobiography *Hayati* (My Life) in 1950. Ibrahim El Mazini, an Arab poet and writer, wrote his autobiography *Geset Hayati* (The Story of My Life) in 1961. Abbas Mahmoud El Aggad wrote his autobiography in two volumes *Ana* (Me) in 1964 and the second volume under the title *Hayat Galam* (The Life of a Pen) in 1965. Tawfiq al Hakim, another famous Arabic writer, wrote his autobiography in two volumes *Sejen el Omer* (Prison of Life) and *Zahret el Omer* (Rose of Life) in 1967 (Abbas 1996).

Recalling the history of Arab women writing their autobiographies, goes back to the beginning of the twentieth century and specifically in the last two decades. The last two decades showed the increase number in autobiographies which were written by women (Golley 2001, xxvi). Comparing to men's autobiographies, women's autobiographies are dramatically less in number. Arab scholar Mohammad el-Bahri refer to the low number of Arab women's



autobiographies to the fact that women's autobiographies deals with body language and its history and this language is forbidden to women. It took women years after men to start writing autobiographies because men monopolized talking in the name of the woman's body. They have considered women as a forbidden zone that no one is allowed to come near, see, know, or even talk about. Arab women are required by men to walk invisible. This expectation of women by Arab men explained the reality of the low number of Arab women's autobiographies since they keep women surrounded by a forbidden fence.

Despite all the previous constrains on Arab women which did not allow them to reveal their private lives in forms of autobiographies, Arab women's autobiographies emerged towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Many factors encouraged Arab women to write their autobiographies. First of these factors is the civilization change that occurred in the Arab world in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The second factor is the education and awareness of Arab Muslim women themselves and their belief of the importance of their existence in the literature field side by side with men. The third factor is that Arab women wanted to face the Arab dominant system which supports men's achievements and marginalizes women's achievements.

In the 1980s, the number of Arab women's autobiographies increased. These Arab women's autobiographies constituted of all the elements and themes of the rich literary genre and deserved to be called autobiographies. Although Huda Shaarawi wrote her memoirs under the name *Harem Years* early in the forties and were published by Margot Badran later in the 1980s, Nawal El Saadawi still considered the first Arab women to write her autobiography when she wrote *Memoirs of a Woman's Doctor* in 1965. After El-Saadawi's autobiography many Arab women writers encouraged to release their own autobiographies. For example, Fadwa Tuqan, a Palestinian poet, wrote her autobiography *A Mountainous Journey, a Difficult Journey in 1985*.

In this autobiography Tuqan detailed her childhood and adulthood's experiences as an Arab Muslim female living in the Arab Muslim world and within a conservative Muslim family. Tuqan revealed many sides of her private life with no fear or timidity. In her autobiography she could express her personal identity broadly in a way that would not be possible if she used any other literary genre.

After Fadwa Tuqan's autobiography some other Arab women writers wrote their autobiographies. Latifa al-Ziat wrote her autobiography in two volumes. Also, Bint el-Shati' wrote her autobiography titled *On the Bridge*. Nawal el-Saadawi wrote her autobiography more than once following different stages of her life each time she writes. The first autobiography she wrote was *Memoirs of A Woman's Doctor* in 1965, then *A Daughter of Isis* in 1999, and Finally, *Walking through Fire: a Life of Nawal El Saadawi* in 2002. Fatima Mernissi, a Morocco feminist and writer, wrote her autobiography *Dreams of Trespass Tales of a Harem Girlhood* in 1994. Then Leila abouzeid, also a Moroccan writer, wrote her autobiography *Return to Childhood: The Memoir of a Modern Moroccan Woman* in 1998.

Despite the increase number of Arab women who are writing their own autobiographies, the number is still below the expectation comparing to what Arab men's write. Studying the construction of the Arab Islamic society and culture might reveal some of the reasons behind the low number of women writing their autobiographies. The Arab Islamic culture requires keeping the private as an intact privacy. Revealing personal life is something not welcomed from both women and men although women are, in particular, are responsible to keep their own private lives and exposing this privacy might put women's honor and reputation in question. The number of men telling their own stories is low comparing to other developing countries. However, topics that have been tackled by Arab men in their autobiographies show the

difference between women and men not only in real life, but also when they put this life on paper. Women's topics are usually about family issues, national and political issues, and more about their experiences of oppression or struggle in an unjust society. Men's topics on the other hand are much bold and blunt. Sex, love relations, politics, and personal sex orientation hardly tackled in Arab women's autobiographies where they are sometimes tackled by men writers.

## CHAPTER # 3

## **HUDA SHAARAWI'S HAREM YEARS: THE MEMOIRS OF AN EGYPTIAN FEMINIST,**

“Sayyida Khadija impressed me because she used to sit with the men and discuss literary and cultural matters. Meanwhile, I observed how women without learning would tremble with embarrassment and fight if called upon to speak a few words to a man from behind a screen. Observing Sayyida Khadija convinced me that, with learning, women could be the equals of men if not surpass them” (Shaarawi 1981, 42).

### **Introduction**

Huda Shaarawi is an Arab Muslim feminist. She was the first woman in the Arab world who established and led the first Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU) in 1923. After that, women movements in other Arab countries started to emerge taking advantage of Shaarawi's success. Shaarawi is well known in the Arab Muslim world and may be in the West of taking off her veil on the running board of the train station in Cairo after returning from an international feminist meeting in Rome in 1923. Some of the women on the station imitated her act and took off their veils such as Saiza Nabarawi who accompanied her in Roma's feminist meeting (5).

*Harem Years*, the memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist is the only published book that was written by Shaarawi. These memoirs were written by Shaarawi in Arabic language under the title *Mudhakirrat* [my memoirs] and stayed in a cabinet for twenty years. In 1967 and while Margo Badran, a British writer married to an Egyptian Arab, in Egypt doing a research on the feminist movement and its leader, Badran met a cousin of Huda Shaarawi named Hawa Idris

who kept the Arabic copy of the memoirs at her home. Idris agreed to give the memoirs to Badran to translate and publish (1). Huda Shaarawi considered these as her memoirs so called them Margot Badran, but I tend to link Shaarawi's memoirs to the genre of autobiographies following the steps of the Arab American scholar and writer Leila Ahmed who in her pioneering study of this Arabic text, also links Shaarawi's memoirs to the genre of autobiography in Arabic classical literature. (Ahmed 154-5).

Shaarawi's memoirs are a personal account that I read in Arabic same as I did with the other three autobiographies I am tackling in this dissertation. But, for the sake of my dissertation, I will follow and analyze the English translation by Margot Badran. The Arabic version of Shaarawi's memoirs was published in the year 1981 and dedicated to Shaarawi's secretary Abd al-Hamid Fahmi Mursi with no explanation by Shaarawi to why she did so and why to this person in particular (1). The Arabic version of the memoirs called *Mudhakirrat* and focused on her national, political, and feminism's activities rather than her own personal life. It was clear that Margot Badran translated the parts of the memoirs that serve her interest and could attract the Western audience attention. She left very important parts of the memoirs which recorded the history of the Egyptian national struggle in details. The English translation of Shaarawi's memories came under the title *Harem Years* and is divided into four major parts and to smaller sections with particular headings. The first three chapters deal with her personal life, family, childhood in harem between 1884 and 1892, marriage, and separation. After part four, Shaarawi turned to record her national and feminist activities.

Shaarawi died on August 1947 after an active life which is full of achievements and good deeds to help people and support women achieve their rights of justice and equality. After her death the Egyptian government named a street after her name "Hoda Shaarawi St". Also, it is

important to mention that the Liberation Square in the Middle of Cairo which witnessed the February 25 Egyptian youth revolution and changed Husni Mubarak regime is named after the women's demonstration she lead in 1919 to free Egypt from the British colonization the time which was started from that square to be called later the liberation square after Shaarawi's liberation demonstration there.

## Who is Huda Shaarawi?

Huda Shaarawi (Nur al-Huda Sultan before marriage) is an Arab Muslim feminist who was born in 1879 in a town called Menya in Upper Egypt and died in 1947. She, as most of the writers this dissertation handles, came from an upper – class, wealthy, and elite family. She rather came from a family that had its own political and financial influence in Egypt at the time. There was contact and receptions between Shaarawi's family and the royal family that ruled at the time like Khedive Ismail's family. Her family did not only have contacts with the royal family, but also used to have a similar life style like traveling as them to Europe and summering there as well.

Shaarawi's father was a wealthy Egyptian noble and aristocratic man whose background founded the circumstances in which Huda, his daughter, born in. Although Huda Shaarawi's aristocratic life afforded her certain privileges, it at the same time constrained her since women from privileged classes used to be put under many restrictions one of these restrictions is confining women of high class in harem (Hunwick, 113). This reminds us of Fadwa Tuqan's claim about her friends and other women who came from lower classes and did not struggle with the harem system as she used to struggle as a female who belongs to an upper – class. Tuqan asserts that her friend Alya who came belongs to a lower class enjoyed much freedom of movement than her. Tuqan also mentioned the women in *hammad* is being much more free and

walk around half naked without any constraints since they came from a lower class while her mother and her cousin were always conservative since they are from an upper – class background.

To clarify the issue of harem in Egypt at Huda Shaarawi's time which ended by her rebel against it when she surprised the Arab world and her society in particular taking off her veil in Cairo Train Station, it is crucial to refine that the veil was used to be linked to Upper – Class women only (Sherifa, 41). In regards to this upper – class veiling, Delamotte asserts that veiling in Egypt during the period of Huda Shaarawi's life was not universal. He also declares that social status and class were used to be the determiners of putting women of Egypt as subjects of veiling system. So, not only Muslim women were veiled that time, but also Christians and Jewish women were veiled in Egypt if they came from an upper – class family (301). Veiling at that time included the covering of the face which we call today *negab* and that veil is the one which Shaarawi took off her face leaving the scarf on her head at Cairo train station.

Shaarawi's father died when she was five years old leaving her and her brother with massive fortune. Before his death, the father assigned his nephew, Ali Shaarawi, as a guardian on Huda Shaarawi family's fortune. Ali Shaarawi was forty years older than Huda Shaarawi and already had a wife. Contrary to all other writer's mothers in this dissertation, Huda Shaarawi's mother who had a Turko – Circassian origin and was expected to act differently, decided to agree of marrying her daughter Huda who was only thirteen years old the time to Ali Shaarawi justifying that Ali Shaarawi is an honest man who will take care of the family's business as a person who gained Huda's father's trust all his life. Although Shaarawi's mother Madam Igbal was not an educated women, she stood for her daughter most of the time. However, as most of Arab Muslim that time she had no choice but to concur with the tradition and culture of her

society. Shaarawi showed in more than one place in her memoirs that her mother used to discriminate between her and her brother. Although this discrimination in treatment was due to the sick body of the brother and his poor health as Huda Shaarawi herself indicates in her memoirs, many critics took that treatment far to widen its dimensions and consider it as an experience of a female being neglected for the sake of a boy. This interpretation of the mother's treatment to the boy in his special circumstances problematizes the way Western feminists in particular look at the discrimination between males and females in the Arab Muslim world without reading deeply the context of such discrimination or special treatment of the boy in some cases.

According to the memoirs of Huda Shaarawi, the most important reason that forced Huda's mother to welcome the marriage of her thirteen years old daughter to a forty years old man is her wish of keeping Huda's money within the family at the time where such marriages were not up normal and many young women used to get married to older women. Although she was only thirteen and out of her earlier feminist's consciousness, Huda Shaarawi refused this marriage in the beginning but it was impossible for her to refuse under the mother's wish and the logic of this marriage that the mother presented. Huda Shaarawi agreed to get married to her cousin Ali Shaarawi under one condition that he divorces his wife (Hughes, 195). So, Ali Shaarawi did divorce his first wife and got married to Huda who after fifteen months found out that her husband had returned to his first wife without the knowledge or permission from her and that his first wife is expecting a baby. Out of her awareness and feminist consciousness although she was around fifteen she decided to leave him to his wife and new baby refusing being a second wife. However, later in her life she fought to end up polygamy from the Egyptian and



Arab personal and family laws. She also worked hard on the woman's right in getting knowledge of the man's previous or intended marriages.

After her husband's return to his wife, she took the step of separation and left him for seven years. In her memoirs she mentions that these seven years were full of experience and education. In these separation years she returned to her education and started her feminism activities. She continued her education that she started before marriage. Her education was by tutors who came to the house to teach her reading and writing, but not Arabic. She taught in French and although she memorized the Qur'an she could not write or read other than it in Arabic language which she always loved because her father loved Arabic language and poetry despite the fact that he was illiterate as many noble and landowners that time. However, Lewis contends that Huda Shaarawi pursued learning Arabic on her own out of her love to poetry (189). Shaarawi was lucky to get her education on the hands of a diversity of teachers who came to her home to educate her as a very wealthy person who can afford that at the time were women would not be able to get any education.

After all the advantages of the seven years of separation from her husband, Huda Shaarawi returned to her husband. She returned to him under the kind wish of her brother who insisted that he would never get married until Huda, his sister, return to her husband and settle in her marital house again (83). She also mentioned in her memoirs that if Ali Shaarwi was not a kind and a wise man she would never consider returning back to him. To prove his love and dedication to her, he divorced his first wife. Huda Shaarawi then bore him a son named Mohammad and a daughter named Buthaina.

Although she learned a lot in these separations years and became one of the national and feminism activists, her choice of returning back to her husband who is older and already had a

wife was justified in her memoir by the fact that her husband allows her to practice all her feminism and nationalism activities. Her travels, conferences, and the support of her husband Ali Shaarawi were evident in the later stages of her life as being encouraged by her husband to pursue her activism, feminism, and being the leader of the feminist movement in Egypt and the Arab world. Despite all the advantages of her returning to her husband, the condition she put to return back to him which is to divorce his first wife could not be fair for the other woman and could be used as a critique on her of how she deprived a woman of her right to keep her husband and family life at the time Huda herself was an advocate of women's rights. Shaarawi's life's account introduces history, personal, social, political, and national struggle of Shaarawi and her country in the period that extends between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century.

## **Men in Shaarawi's life**

Western feminists' assumption of Arab Muslim women being domestic and oppressed is unfair and unrealistic. Domestic life for Arab Muslim women constitutes stability and spiritual intimacy. The specificity of the composition of the family and the family's role in the Arab Muslim woman's life and its significant role in combating most of what hinder their women's progress prove that Western feminist do not accurately read what domestic life means or could change in Arab Muslim women's lives. Arab Muslim family in its ideal frame supports women emotionally, financially, socially, and sometimes politically.

Arab Muslim women without family's, especially men's backing, impact, or influence rarely achieve anything and if they achieve something without the consent and welcome of the family, society might never receive what they achieve and will always be blamed of being failure regardless of their success in other paths of life. An example of this, a social and feminist

activist in Jordan who holds a Master's degree went against her family's will and married to a man from another Arab country. After three years of marriage which resulted in having a daughter she sought divorce. Every time this woman talks in a conference or conduct an awareness lecture in a forum she is attacked and even women participants argue what the point of taking her words and advice at the time she herself did not benefited from them and failed in her private life when she went against her family's wish, ended up in divorce, and did not appreciate her domestic life or value it. Such women attached a lot when they work for women's liberation movement or participate in any feminist activity because people portray them as bad examples who do not reflect stable family life and say what do not mean or do.

The previous real case shows that Arab Muslim society looks at women in the bigger frame that includes their families. So, if a woman fails in her domestic life and could not manage to gain her family's trust in the first place, she is hardly going to win the trust of her society. To clarify my claim I refer to some of the women's who are tackled in this dissertation as examples of the influential role of their families on their perception in the Arab Muslim world. All four autobiographies' authors in this dissertation are female Arab Muslims who are not veiled. Mainly, most of the critique I read on El Saadawi targeted the fact that she is a lady who hit her eighty year of her old and still not veiled. On the other hand, Fadwa Tuqan who died at the age of eighty six was also not veiled, but I did not find one critique that touches on her unveiling issue. Shaarwi is rarely critiqued based on her unveiling and even when such a thing happens, the issue that is criticized is only the incident of casting her veil at the train station in Cairo in 1923 as a point to show the launching point of the end of harem age in Egypt. Similar to Tuqan and Shaarawi, Mernissi is never critiqued on grounds that she is a Muslim woman in her Seventy's and still not veiled.

Tuqan's family, Mernissi's family, and Shaarawi's family backed them with their wealth, high reputation, and by not turning off them while El Saadawi was not privileged as the other three authors especially socially and financially. She is from a middle class family and the other three authors are from upper class families. Moreover, El Saadawi failed twice in her marital life which is usually used as a sword to attack her of being failure herself who want to fail other women's lives. Critics show that El Saadawi has many social and familial obstacles that problematized her perception in the Arab Muslim world at least. On contrast, Tuqan stayed single all her life. But never has been accused or criticized on the ground of being a single woman despite the fact that marriage is always an important issue in women's life in the Arab Muslim world.

Not only have the authors of the four autobiographies worked as examples to demonstrate the importance of the family presence in the Arab woman life, but also other women's lives as presented in their autobiographies. In Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass* without the backing and presence of the family and men in particular many women in harem could not even survive. The paternal grandmother, the divorced aunt, and the maids are examples of these women who are advantaged from their domestic life and without it they might end up homeless. In Tuqan's *A Mountainous Journey*, the maternal Aunt Al Shaykha would never have a voice or authority without the existence of her brother and his sons. These men afford her financial support, shelter, and dignity as an old and divorced lady with no children of her own. So, for many women in harem and women who are privileged from domestic life Western feminism does not work and does not serve their interests or expectations. If Western feminism is applied to such women, they would be victims, marginalized, and submissive for other masters. These women

might end up in streets or seeking any worthless jobs for living and that would be excluded of the respect and dignity that domestic life provide for them.

All what is explained above contain the Western feminist's assumptions about Arab Muslim women's images as confined to domestic life against their well. Gordon asserts that Middle class women in the Third World, Arab Muslim women included, are false symbols of progress because they are trained to be housewives who are isolated in the home and victims of the patriarchal domination of women (34). This claim by Gordon demonstrates that women are dependent on men financially, physically, and even mentally by staying at home as wives waiting their men to do everything for them. This allegation also illustrates that Arab Muslim women and women of the Third World in general have only one job and that is to be housewives who bore kids, clean up the house, wear full make up, and wait for her master, the husband. Depicting Arab Muslim in such a harsh image misrepresents them and at the same time rebuts reality.

The Western feminist's assumption of Arab Muslim women as confine in the house as wives and mothers excludes women who choose to be housewives and mothers enjoying the domestic life's privileges. Western feminist's assumption argues that all women go to the work field, compete with men, and work for women's liberation as if they are enslaved before leaving the household (Howe 159). Many educated women in the Arab Muslim world choose to settle at home raising their kids, taking care of themselves and their houses, and prefer that their men provide for them.

Paradoxically, women who go out and work sometimes complain and envy those who are at home playing one role 'a house wife'. They complain of being tired of their two jobs the one outside and the unpaid one at home, complain about the shortage of time for any social activity,

and the feel of guilt they hold towards their children due to the time they spend far from them. However, Western feminist's voice echoes the fact that they are voicing only women who already enjoy most of their rights or work even for women who have already achieved some of their rights like talking about equality at the work place, equal wages, education, and help at home. Western feminists do not voice women who are already passed the age of education and not educated, not working, bored at home, and are not developing while at the same time they are being used by Western feminists to reflect on all Arab Muslim women.

Linking the many faces of women I showed in this section with Shaarawi's own life demonstrates the positive impact of domestic life especially men in the Arab Muslim women's life. As stated before, Huda Shaarawi was born in a wealthy, elite, and upper – class family. Her domestic life afforded her with the financial support which exhibits her power in supporting her national, feminist, and charitable activities. Her family also advantaged her through their connections with the elites and the royal family the time. Finally, their trust and confidence in her abilities to do what she is in regardless of the fact that she is a woman resulted in involving her in the political work they do like being a member in the Egyptian Wafdist Party and then as the president of the Wafdist Women's Central Committee (WWCC). Men in Huda Shaarawi's life impacted her life positively. Her father Sultan Pasha, her husband Ali Shaarawi, her brother Omar Sultan, and her male colleagues in the Wafdist Political Party all participated in amplified her a feminist voice to grow as a political figure and a feminist who deserved to be named the mother of the Arab Women's Liberation Movement.

The first man who influential her life is her father Sultan Pasha. Her father's position as a high rank person in the government and his rebellious political stances affected positively her relationship with the Egyptian society. The wealthy elite father did not only inherited her his

name, reputation, well perception among people, and political privileges as being himself a man of a high rank in the Egyptian government and a close person to the royal family, but also social status and massive fortune (Botman, 38). All the above inherited advantages opened the door for Huda Shaarawi's activities and charitable work.

Shaarawi dedicated six pages of her memoirs talking about her father Sultan Pasha although she did not live long with him since he died when she was five years old. Even in the Arabic version of her memoirs she dedicated most of what she started in her memoirs as to mention the privileges of her father as a national man who loves his country so much. She wrote about the details of his national activities and gave much evidence to show those who critique her father of being loyal to the British that her father was doing all what he did for the sake of his country and his people. She depicts that she inherited her love for Arabic poetry from him and she asserts that she used to go to his room when he is out, and search in his library, and borrow some of the poetry books he has. Although Shaarawi mentioned in her memoirs that she had only few memories of her father, the ones she remembers show her father as a kind and passionate father (27 – 32).

The impact of the privileges that Sultan Pasha left to his daughter Huda started with him when he got married to her Turkish – Circassian origin mother because her mother's culture helped her to have culture blended with her Egyptian father's culture. The mother's Turkish culture allowed her to produce the strong independent woman she was all her life. The inherited advantages from her father extend to benefit her with her education at home in both traditional and modern subjects (Russel, 82). Even after the death of her father Sultan Pasha when she was five years old, he assigned her a guardian who took care of her, her family, her money, and stood for her later in her maternal life and advocacy activities.

The male figure is important in the Arab Muslim life and he is never the enemy neither he is the one she competes to defeat as most Western feminists believe. This specific relation between male and female relatives is noticeable in most of the autobiographies that this dissertation handles. The male's presence in his female relative's life is crucial and could do all the miracles in the world. For example, Tuqan shows the importance of her brother Ibrahim in her life whom without she would be ended either on committing suicide or marginalization. Ibrahim taught her how to write poetry and acted as her teacher and mentor all his life and after his death. Similar to Tuqan, El Saadawi mentions the impact of her father in her life and the supportive and encouraging role he played in the process of all her life. El Saadawi claims that if her father stopped her from pursuing her education or did not support her not only emotionally, but also financially she would never get high education or do any national or feminist activities since she came from a middle – class family and her family was in need for money, but the father chose to sacrifice many family needs to afford her tuition fees as mentioned in her autobiography. Similarly, the support of Mernissi's father and uncles was vivid in her pursuing her high education in the Western world and put their confidence in her despite the conservative society she lived in that time.

Due to the importance of the male figure in female's life and his role of protection, support, and empowering her among people and society, Shaarawi's father's eunuchs continued working for her family upon the request of the extended family and the guardian Ali Shaarawi. However, it is vital to state that although in the Arabic patriarchal society any strange man regardless of whom he is , is not allowed to come near women, these eunuchs were allowed at Shaarawi's house and even harem due to the fact that society has looked at them as lacking their full sexuality as men. The eunuchs working at Shaarawi's house constituted ideal examples for



her and some other times they are shown as funny and naïve. She mentioned some of their involvement in her life in many places in her memoirs. These eunuchs like Bashir Agha and Said Agha used to supervise Huda Shaarawi and her brother even while they were receiving their education at home. Bashir Agha, the eldest of her late father's eunuchs, is described by Shaarawi as being "a merry man with a deep laugh" and as an "awesome and venerable personage" (39). She states that all her family, friends, and others who know Bashir Agha hold high esteem for him. She claims that Bashir Agha had numerous friends and a big network that includes people from all classes and ranks and because of his light heartedness his people called him 'Abu al Bashir' the Father of the Mankind. Shaarawi illustrates the effort paid by Bashir Agha to interest her and her brother especially through horse races and ram and cock fights since her owned a number of animals.

However, among all the eunuchs her family had, Shaarawi focused on the eunuch Said Agha as a man who left his impact on some parts of her life and this is why she mentioned him a lot in her memoirs. The first patriarchal constrain practiced on her by him is when she requested to learn Arabic language as he did not feel it was appropriate for a young girl from the upper – class to learn grammar "as she will not become a judge!" (40). She also asserts that eunuchs have their words on girls and young children. Said Agha was the one who used to punish the children if someone complains about them by taking them to a place called Jabalaiyya in Jazira area and he commands each of them to fetch a branch and would strike the palm of their hands until they cried. Then she describes his kindness taking a handkerchief and start wiping their tears. After that he would start running like a child while the kids trailing after him. This image of eunuch Said Agha is an image of a father whose role is to discipline his kids but without inflecting any psychological abuse on them. Shaarawi put Said Agha in a frame that shows the real Arab

Muslim man whose intention is behaving his kids, does not hurt them physically, and does not discriminate between males and females in punishment or rewarding.

Shaarawi expresses her love and respect to Said Agha despite his severity because of his affection and self devotion. She illustrates the incident when she and her brother were in a ride with him in a carriage and suddenly the carriage was about to head street for the Nile River. Said Agha was terrified so he held the kids in his arms and cries. Despite his kindness and caring, Said Agha's mentality which was occupied by the Arab culture was demonstrated by Shaarawi as being a man who sees Huda Shaarawi as his daughter and he does not want her to scandal the name of the family. She depicts his vivid role in convincing her to get married to Ali Shaarawi using words that could not fail convincing the little girl Huda Shaarawi when he came close to her and whispered in her ears when she hesitated to sign the marriage contract "Do you wish to disgrace the name of your father and destroy your poor mother who is weeping in her sick bed and might not survive the shock of your refusal?" (54).

For Huda Shaarawi, Said Agha represents the manhood and the ideal male personality that she needed in her early stages of her life. He played the role of the absent father in her and her brother's life. Said Agha resembled the male figure in Shaarawi's life because he was in charge to watch over her and her brother. He is the one who used to accompany them wherever they go and even during their lessons. Shaarawi express her attachment to Said Agha despite his severity. She justifies her love to him of his affection and selfless, devotion, and his sincere willingness to sacrifice his life for her and her brother as she demonstrates via the incident of the Nile River.

Said Agha is a symbol of the man safe guardian in women's life in the Arab Muslim world. Shaarawi portrayed him as a guardian who holds the father, brother, and the males'

cousins' image. She showed him as a real Arab Muslim man whose main role in women's life is to protect, secure, guide, and provide for them. So, Said Agha is not only the man of love, affection, and devotion, but he is also the male figure who interferes in the woman's life out of his belief of the duty and responsibility towards her. This manhood mentality pushed Said Agha to interfere and convince Huda Shaarawi to accept the marriage agreement assuming that he knows what in her best interests much more than she does. He does not only interfere in big decisions like the marriage decision, but also in smaller issues that relates to her life such as the incident when he refused to allow her studying Arabic grammar because he believed that she does not need Arabic language lessons as a little girl who belongs to an upper – class family who speaks French and rarely uses Arabic. This interference in her small life details is a sign of the Arab Muslim man belief that the woman is ignorant and might choose something against the wish of her family and class. This feeling of the man towards women whom they guard accompanies the man all his life. The male character in the Arab Muslim culture carries the belief that women are in need for their men's guidance, planning, and presence regardless of these women's age, class, or education.

Based on Arab Muslim man's mentality and culture, Said Agha's position although was just an eunuch at Shaarawi's family's home he leads the place as a male safe guard due to the need of a male figure at Shaarawi's household and that need pushed him to act like a family member man. His position as a male safeguard was welcomed and supported by the Shaarawi's mother and cousins since they lived without the presence of a man after the death of Shaarawi's father. The male figure position gave Said Agha the right to return Shaarawi back to the harem place whenever she tries to trespass and break the rules of her class and family. Shaarawi asserts that Said Agha forced her and her female friend once to go back home when he appeared

suddenly in a promenade while Shaarawi was showing her friend some charming scenes. Said Agha frowned at her as if he is a real and close member of her family saying “Where are you going?”, “Return to the house at once” (54). Shaarawi had no choice but to submit to Said Agha’s command and go back home. In Shaarawi’s obedience she showed the reaction of any Arab Muslim woman to a protective and loving close family member reading such behavior by man as being caring and does not want a female to go through all the hazards of having any kind of trouble while she is out with a male safeguard. In her submission to Said Agha Shaarawi expresses her understanding of the nature of her society’s culture that offer her protection and strength whenever she encounters danger baring in mind the nature of young men rounding everywhere and some of them might take advantages of women especially those who are rounding without a male safeguard. According to the Arabic culture, these men usually manipulate women without safeguards and endanger their reputation.

When women try to violate the norms and the traditional rules of society that are not even derived from religion men who have authority over women show up to remind women of the cultural barriers that they as women should not exceed. Shaarawi broke the upper – class norms when she had her first shopping trip by her own. She claims that this shopping trip put the entire household into “an uproar” (68). She asserts that to shop for herself was a hot topic that had been debated for days among family members and friends as if she committed a crime. The rule of the family was to ensure that she was accompanied by Said Agha who on the day of outing made her completely hidden with wraps and veil. At the shopping store Said Agha was in the lead “stared into the surrounding faces, silently warning them to look the other way....The eunuch [Said Agha] proceeded straight to the store manager and brusquely demanded the place for the harem” (69). Said Agha played the role that many Arab Muslim males practice even

currently whenever they go out with their female relatives or female family members so as to protect them from the eyes of strangers which are annoying. These male relatives do that out of protection, jealous, and fear that their women might face any harassment from strangers. This protective behavior is not interpreted by both men and women of the Arab Muslim world as an action of controlling women or humiliating them, but out of rebel against any act that might harm their feelings and reputations.

Another kind of protection, emotional, and professional support was afford to Huda Shaarawi by her brother Umar Sultan Pasha who is two years younger than her. Shaarawi's started expressing her jealousy form her brother Umar early in her memoirs because her mother and everyone else treated him different. Despite the fact that she was jealous of him being favored as a boy, Badran contends in her introduction to the memoirs that Huda expresses hr love to her brother later in her Memoirs. Badran adds girls the time used to gain advantages of having a male brother so they could enjoy the freedom of movement in their brother's company. However, I believe that the jealous feelings that Huda Shaarawi carried for her brother in their childhood could be just a naive feeling toward a younger brother who enjoys the mother's affection especially due to the fact that he was always week and sick which is justified in any other culture if this treatment is not accompanied with discrimination. Shaarawi regrets her jealous feelings towards her brother immediately after she talked about it with Umm Kabira, her step mother (36).

Umm Kabira justifications for the preference of the male reflects the Arab Islamic culture and the welcome of mainly women to such preference of the male figure in their lives based on some justifiable grounds that Umm Kabira initiated. The justifications of the male preference over female as demonstrated by Umm Kabira to Shaarawi are that "One day the support of the

family fall upon him. When you marry you will leave the house and honour your husband's name but he will perpetuate the name of his father and take over his house" (36). This illustration of the brother as a male who is not only going to inherit his father's properties and name, but also his responsibilities towards the family makes Shaarawi love her brother more since he will occupy the place of her father whom also she loved and admired although she had only few memories about him due to his death when she was a little child. Expressing her feelings towards the death of her brother shows the deep emotions that Shaarawi held for her brother. I found the part that handles her brother's death the most painful and sincere touching part in the whole memoirs. Huda Shaarawi's painful expressions demonstrates the place she held in her life and heart for her brother especially when she asserts that "If it were not for my children I would not have lived a single moment after my brother's death" (110,111). These assertions of Shaarawi's clarifies the place of the male, the brother in particular, in the Arab female life.

The stimulation and support Huda Shaarawi received from male figures in her life were not limited to her father, brother, and eunuchs, but exceeds to her husband Ali Shaarawi. Although Shaarawi the husband was forty years older than Huda, he showed his understanding and appreciation of her interest in active life and her aspiration to advocate political and voluntary work for people in her country. Regardless of the fact that Huda Shaarawi lived seven years of separation from her husband and married life, she returned back to him believing that he is a kind husband, a political figure, and supportive husband who is not going to prison her in harem and stop her from pursuing her national and feminist activities. The support she had from her husband Ali Shaarawi was due to his position in the government and his high level of consideration to the abilities of his young wife Huda Shaarawi. He believed in her and discovers

her real wish and sincere enthusiasm to have a passive role in combating the British Colonization of Egypt and in advocating women's rights. The belief of Shaarawi the husband in his wife Huda Shaarawi refutes the Western feminists' assumptions that Arab Muslim women are victims of their patriarchal societies and they do not have the ability to combat the restraints of male domination (Chatty, 884).

The most important task that Ali Shaarawi gave to his wife Huda was due to his position in the Egyptian government as a high rank man who played an authoritative role in the Egyptian political life and has the will to assign positions some times. Ali Shaarawi was one of the three men who constitute the delegation committee and went to the British High Commission in London in 1918 to present the demand of the Egyptian Government for independence. After the delegation failed, Ali Shaarawi came back to Egypt and created the Wafdist Political Party to speak for the nation. Ali Shaarawi's trust and confidence in his wife Huda Shaarawi endorsed him to form the Wafdist Women's Central Committee and assign his wife Huda Shaarawi as its president. It is crucial to mention that "it was the Wafdist women and men who led the fight for national independence" (20). Shaarawi the husband allowed his wife to lead the Wafdist women and to participate in nationalists administration that paved the road to Egypt's liberation.

As a leading figure in the Egyptian nationalist movement, Shaarawi the husband prepared his wife to play an active role to capitalize his role as a leader. His support to his wife Huda Shaarawi demonstrates her advocacy role that she played in all her life in stimulating other women to be effective figures in their societies and to raise up their voices against all forms of discrimination and injustice. On the other hand, even after her husband's relations with the Wafdist Political leaders deteriorated, she "displayed political skill in managing to act independently as a Wafdist yet showing her loyalty to her husband" (122). She held loyalty to

her husband who encouraged her to take part in demonstrations that aimed to combat the British occupation and women's liberation.

Shaarawi's husband positioned all her national feminist activities to prepare her practically and ideologically to be free of the patriarchal society's constraints (22). Even after the Egyptian independence, when the call went for women to go back to harem, Huda Shaarawi continued her role in the independence and feminism struggle backed by her husband who never asked her to go back and live in harem as many other men did that time. He tolerated all the accusations during his life which are extended until today that have accused him of being a corrupted man who did not follow the instruction of his God and religion allowing his wife to take off her veil and to start a veil revolution. He is also criticized of allowing his wife to travel around the world attending conferences that called for women's liberation.

Arab Muslim critics of Huda Shaarawi believed that attending Western conferences assisted her to form the first Arab Egyptian Feminist Union in the Arab Muslim World which they think would never have existed if her husband stood against her activities. However, reading Huda Shaarawi's memoirs showed how much these critics are mistaken. Shaarawi's consistency, determination, and belief in women's empowerment were behind her battle to liberate Arab Muslim women from harem life and encourage them to take part in their country's national, political, and social life. Huda Shaarawi was not the woman who would give up under her husband's pressure to leave her advocacy work and live in harem despite the fact that she held respect for her society's traditions and culture. She is a woman who worked all her life to raise women's rights and believed in their equality with men, but never violated her culture's barriers as shown in her memoirs that reveal her respect for the separation between men and women in meetings for example (78).



Shaarawi's dedication of her memoirs to her secretary who is a man and revealing the impact of all these men on her personal and public life demonstrate the importance of men in the Arab Muslim female life. This importance and positive impact of men on Shaarawi's life prove that there is no universal patriarchal or international male conspiracy as most of the Western feminists assert (Howe, 159). Men's images in these memoirs refute the Western feminists' understanding of the male figure in the Third World as being dominant of females in his society. Rather, Shaarawi's memoirs illustrate that Arab men are not monolithic. Sometime they are supportive and open minded although there are many who are abusive and oppressors. Finally, in order to emphasize the place of women even in a patriarchal society and the need to acknowledge the value of women as women, it is crucial to borrow Jagodzinski words when she points out that "under patriarchy even equal rights feminist has to assert the value of women as women, since it is the only way efficiently to counter the systematic devaluation of women and women's work under patriarchy" (Jagodzinski, 84).

Not only acknowledging the place of women in patriarchal societies is a need to appreciate the actual value of women, but also there is a crucial need to break the binary positioning of local/global" (McCann, 5). Western feminists recently started to recognize the need of such a break taking into consideration the need to make a comparison between different contexts and through historical investigation of issues like women and gender in different social and political backgrounds. Western feminists' recognition started by building on what Mohanty terms "comparative feminist analysis" (5). An example of such recognition is in Suzan Moller Okin's assertion. Okin, a Western feminist who was born in New Zealand, taught at Stanford University, and died in Massachusetts in 2004, although she faults Mohanty for being too focused on women's differences as if each woman is an entire separate one from every other

woman, she insists that First world feminists should work with women from the Third World to achieve freedom and well being for all women (Okin, 44). Amrita Basu is another Western feminist who recognized the difference between Western feminism and Third World feminism and calls for rethink the bumper sticker “Think Globally, Act Locally , and replace it with “Think Locally, Act Globally” (Basu, 68). A clear example of Western women’ recognition is what Elly Bulkin states as a Western woman as cited by Golley who argued that “Western feminists have described Arab women’s lives as being so different from theirs that they cannot possibly develop any kind of feminism” (Golley 2004a, 522). Golley gave an evidence to refute this of what Bulkin states when she argues that even when Arab women speak for themselves they are accused of being ‘paws of Arab men’ (522). Bulkin’s statement shows the high level of understanding that some Western feminists hold about Arab Muslim women’s lives and status which denies some assumptions of Third world women themselves who assume that Western feminism is naïve and know nothing about women of the other side of the world. . This recognition of Western feminists shortens the distance between Western women and Third World women. It allows for understanding, bridging gabs between feminism in the world, and assisting women’s all over the world to achieve the rights and freedom they all need.

## CHAPTER # 4

## FADWA TUQAN: FROM PHYSICALLY AND MENTALLY ISOLATED TO A PIONEER ARAB FEMALE POET

“When I emerged into life, I was defenceless, vulnerable, without experience or an understanding of people. So the confrontation was tedious, difficult and one – sided. Books alone are not sufficient for understanding life and the complications of clashes that arise in human relationships. We must experience life itself; our own personal experiences are the fountainhead of this knowledge” (Fadwa Tuqan 1980, 130).

### ***Introduction***

In her forward to the English version of Fadwa Tuqan’s autobiography *A Mountainous Journey*, Salma Khadra Jayyusi, a Palestinian poet, declares that she chose Tuqan’s autobiography to be translated under PROTO (Project of Translation from Arabic Literature), which Jayyusi established in 1980, for two reasons. The first one is that Tuqan’s autobiography is a testimony to Palestinian identity and history. The second reason is that Tuqan’s autobiography is considered by many Arab scholars as being of great pathos as a piece of literature (viii). Jayyusi goes further to contend that when Palestinians, in particular, write and record their own accounts of their personal lives; they in fact assert their country’s identity and not only their personal identity and life experience (vii). Fadwa Tuqan as a Palestinian Arab Muslim woman recorded her own life story which was not expected at the time. She was a pioneer poet and a conservative woman who was not used to revealing her personal affairs

before of the public. To Salma Jayussi she was “a mistress of two gifts: love and pain” (vii); a woman who undeniably preserved her people’s memories and expressed their aspirations and was able to reach a place where no other female poet reached at the time to be one of the pioneers who left their fingerprints on poetry and literature until today.

When she started writing poetry, Tuqan chose to write under an anonymous name and that is Dananeer. In her autobiography she explained the reason behind that choice. She also explained why she had to write under an anonymous name. Some of these reasons are that writing poetry by women at that time was not acceptable in the Arabic society when it comes from a woman especially the poetry that expresses emotions and love. Another reason she mentioned was due to her early years; in the beginning of writing poetry so she wanted to make sure that what she writes is meaningful and acceptable. Typically, Tuqan is known as a poet, but her autobiography *A Mountainous Journey* and in other translations takes the title *A Mountainous Journey, A Difficult Journey* comes as a shock to the reader who had associated her with politics and poetry only. Her autobiography was published in 1985 and was translated into English in 1990.

Jumping from poetry to writing her own autobiography *A Mountainous Journey* in the year 1978 was considered by many as an account of Tuqan as an Arab female poet who is representing the political resistance that female takes part in. However, her autobiography may still be seen as an honest and brave account of Arab women’s lives and suffering in the Arab Muslim world since she handled tons of issues that Arab women still fear and suffer from. *A Mountainous Journey* reflects the life as it has been lived by an intellectual and a poet who dedicated her life to poetry and chose not to get married, even though she hints at some love relationships in her life, which is another courageous thing that usually Arab women try their

best to keep it out of their narratives. To sum up, Tuqan not only was brave in revealing her own story, but she was also honest and pure when she tells the reader many facts that people usually tend to cover like her conflict with her mother, her neutral feelings toward her father, her relationship with God, and her own love relationships.

### ***Who is Fadwa Tuqan?***

Fadwa Tuqan is an Arab Muslim poet who was born in March 1917 in Nablus, Palestine and died in Nablus in December in 2003. She did not get married and did not have any children. Tuqan was privileged to live among educated brothers, educated mother and father who were fond of reading as she asserts in her autobiography, and a rich family. At the same time she suffered a strictly circumscribed life by her society's traditions and social norms. She was the fifth child in her family which consisted of five brothers and four sisters.

As a poet, Tuqan came to the Arab cultural scene in the late forties chanting poetry full of emotional liberation which was badly needed during the times of wars and the British occupation of Palestine. She expressed her nation's loss through her poetry and that was effective on young people during the crime of war and occupation to the degree that Moshe Dayan, the Israeli general at the time, linked reading one of her poems to the force of ten fighters who are capable of facing twenty enemy commanders. Also, the Egyptian President Jamal Abd Al-Nasser at the time met with her for an hour and forty minutes which was a dream of every intellectual (xi).

Fadwa Tuqan's work is mostly poetry. Some of her collections are: *My Brother Ibrahim* (1946), *Alone With The Days* (1952), *Give Us Love* (1960), and *Before The Closed Door* (1960). Her poetry traces Palestinian political consciousness development and tackles despair, resistance, and pride. Occupation of Palestine inspired Fadwa Tuqan and enriches her poetry which turned to be merely nationalistic after the Israeli occupation of Nablus in 1967. She wrote about new

topics that were inspired by the Israeli occupation such as: waiting at the crossing points of the borders, the humiliation of houses' demolition and the Palestinian children's uprising. Her poetry gained international audience reception and was translated into English in 1980s. She was awarded and won many prizes like the Palestinians' Jerusalem Award for culture and Art in 1990.

Between the years 1962 – 1964 she travelled to England and studied English Language and Literature at Oxford University where she claimed in her autobiography that she spent the most beautiful time of her life comparing the freedom there with the lack of women's freedom in particular in the Arab world. However, she mentioned clearly some examples of what was published in the British newspapers at the time and was shocked to realize that women in Britain also suffer discrimination especially in the labor field. It is important to mention that her political analyses and her attacks on Arab society are seen by some Palestinians as purely reconfirmation of the "orientalist" biases of the West. Despite this, there are many examples in her autobiography that illustrate the fact that although she criticized the Arab society, she presented herself as a positive female who although lived in constraints of harem managed to be a pioneering poet. Also, she portrayed women in her society as being assertive, attentive, and powerful. Those women are presented in her autobiography when she portrayed the Palestinian struggle against the Israeli aggressive acts towards people of Palestine. She presented some women not only as nationalist who fight using their pens, but also as women who assist fighters and hiding Palestinian men from the Israeli's soldiers. Further, she presented some of the men who influenced positively her life such as her brother Ibrahim and some Palestinian nationalists and scholars. All the examples she presented in her autobiography men and women do not resemble the Western perception about Arab Muslim society.

Tuqan lived her earlier life in an extended family and among ten brothers and sisters. In her autobiography she mentioned how many times she did sneak into her brother's room to read his poems and to write some of her own. Her brother Ibrahim Tuqan stamped her life with many positive signs and he was her tutor on writing poetry. He is a poet, a playwright, and was the Palestinian Radio director. He died in 1941 and she wrote most of her emotional poetry expressing her sadness and big loss of him. She dedicated most of her other non-national poetry to him after his death. Although her family was rich Tuqan also has no money of her own and that was part of the culture at the time. Women were not supposed to own properties or to own money and men only are considered responsible of all of what women need which contradicts Qur'an that allows women to own properties. For example, inheritance law in Qur'an is detailed and fair in giving women their portions of properties in cases of inheritance as I detailed in chapter two of this dissertation. However, patriarchal reading of the Qur'an, which contradicts other passages in the Qur'an that are more progressive, allows men to act against justice and deprive their women from inheritance. The first time Fadwa Tuqan had money was from her cousin before she went to London a place where she found herself. These money were given to her by cousin as a gift and as being a female relative and not because she has a right to own this money. When speaking about freedom, she expresses in more than one place in her autobiography that she did not ever enjoy her freedom while she was in Nablus the city where she lived and died in Palestine. She tells the reader that the first time she enjoys her freedom and felt that she is responsible for herself and independent is when she left Nablus for London.

### **Fadwa Tuqan's Representation of the self**

Mohanty points out that feminist discourse picked up on this trend in its "production of the "third world woman" as a singular monolithic subject" (51). In such a representation, "third

world women are portrayed as “sexually constrained... ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc” (56). Fadwa Tuqan’s representation of herself as an Arab Muslim woman differs from Western feminist claims. She represents herself as an independent woman who despite all the hard circumstances she lived was capable of resisting all the obstacles to achieve her better place as not only a pioneer Arab woman poet, but also as a national figure who participated in making her country’s resistant spirit.

Tuqan represents her subjectivity and the construction of her identity as an Arab Muslim, poet, and national woman in her autobiography *A Mountainous Journey*. Although she demonstrates that she had few rights in her life and despite the suffering she faced while she was confined at home, Fadwa Tuqan proved to be a strong personality who has highly representation of herself that contradict all what Western feminist claim about Arab Muslim women living in a Patriarchal society like the Arab Muslim world

Tuqan bravely published her first chapter of her autobiography in a Palestinian newspaper *al-jaded* on the tenth anniversary of the sex [funny typo] day’s war breakout. The editor of the newspaper wrote an introduction for Tuqan’s autobiography and he stressed the fact that this autobiography “is not an inquisitive peep into a private life of Tuqan, but rather an encapsulated history that exemplifies the life of a Palestinian woman” (Shoshan 57). On the other hand, Tuqan herself maintained, in an interview with Yosef Alqazi from the Israeli daily newspaper *Ha’aretz*, the main thing that was led her to reveal her own life story is to show the side of herself as a Palestinian woman whose life represent many Arab women’s lives in Palestine before and after the Israeli occupation (57). The newspaper editor’s comment on Tuqan’s autobiography that it is not about Tuqan’s private life and rather it rather tells the history of a Palestinian woman intends to decrease the valuable messages that the autobiography includes. *A*



*Mountainous Journey* is not only about a Palestinian woman who is resisting the Israeli occupation further it is about the representation of her own life and other women's lives, her own suffering as a female, and marginalization that Arab women encounter in their own homes and among their own family members. The political message in this autobiography is crucial although previous reviewers missed it. Accordingly, Arab Muslim women's struggles are misrepresented because of such misreading of women's texts in particular. Moreover, it is critical to assert that other nonreligious patriarchal framings misrepresent Arab Muslim women based on misreading women's texts. So, not only Western feminists' account lack accurate representation of Arab Muslim women's status and lives, but also some accounts of religious and nonreligious readings.

The representation of Tuqan's suffering first seen in her autobiography when she tells the reader that her mother was trying to get rid of her even before getting to life and that when she was in a fetus. She describes her mother's attempt to abort her when she was a fetus from the first month of pregnancy. Tuqan claims that "my mother tried to get rid of me but despite repeated attempts she failed" (Tuqan 12). She continues "merged from the darkness of the womb into a world unprepared to accept me... Mother had ten pregnancies... She did not try to abort herself until my turn comes" (12). She mentions this twice in her autobiography and this is because of how much that incident distracted her. Telling us that incident indicates how much the birth of a female child does not bring any equal social recognition or maternal affection. Later in her autobiography she tries to give excuses to her mother by mentioning that the mother had many children before her and this is why she was trying to get rid of her. Here Tuqan's mother is an example of why women need to be free to choose their own life course and perhaps this is why Fadwa becomes an activist of sorts. In particular, the abortion incident attempts

could mean the hidden fear of the mother to her daughter to live the same life that the mother herself lived. She did not want her daughter to experience what the mother herself experienced and she does not want her to violate the society's sexual traditions and bring shame that dishonor the family. The fear continues to support the men of the family when they decided not to allow Fadwa to go to school any more after a boy gave her a flower in her back home from a visit to her aunt's house. Unlike El Saadawi's mother, Fadwa's mother, who is different of El Saadawi's mother of being educated and fond of reading, could stand in front of the men of the family to support the daughter pursuing her education and went farther when Fadwa's father asked why Fadwa does not go to school by taking the burden of Fadwa's denial from school on her shoulders and claiming that she hear many stories about girls who go to school when they reach Fadwa's age and it is better if Fadwa stays at home. For the father, the story of Fadwa's schooling ended up at this end. However, this mother's fear accelerates the tough relationship between Tuqan and her mother to continue as unpleasant and loveless.

Representing herself as an unwanted child did not only take the rhythm of what happened during the mother's pregnancy but continued to reach the memories about the birth and in exact the date of Fadwa's birth. After the experience of the not wanted pregnancy, Tuqan tells the reader about her birth "The date of my birth vanished from their memories....Wherever I asked Mother, But Mother, at least in what season was it? What year? She would reply, laughing: The day I was cooking akkub (globe thistle). That's the only birth certificate I have for you" (Tuqan 13). When Tuqan tried more to refresh her mother's memory, the mother would associate Tuqan's birth with the death in battle of a favorite cousin, Kamil. In her mother's memory, Tuqan was always tied to loss and mourning, but for Tuqan herself, she makes an association between death of Kamil and her own birth as if it is a fact that indicates a female only born when

a male dies or maybe a woman can only breathe the life after a man disappears from the scene. However, it might indicate the fact that a female born to life is a value that deserves looking at to compensate the existence of a male.

Tuqan representation of herself as an oppressed person is seen as a harsh representation, especially when she was forbidden to go to school because one of the neighbors saw a boy handed in a flower to her while she was in her way to visit her aunt. Her family decided to confine her at home without even discussing the issue with her. That even was not only a clear indication of the fact that her society condemn relationships between the sexes even at an early age, but it was an unjust decision because what was going between the boy and herself never exceeded they exchange of eyes' looking. After that event, Tuqan clarifies that she never felt good about herself and she always felt guilty for something she should not be made to feel bad about if she was born in another society: "The seeds of low self – esteem were planted in my tender young soul. I developed a habit of walling with my head bowed, not daring to raise my eyes to the faces that met me morning and evening with scowling aversion, they debased me in my own eyes" (49). The cause of repression according this event which includes her family forbidden her from going to school and confining her at home shows that the Western feminists assumptions about reasons behind the repression of Arab Muslim women being based on sex is not accurate. The reason here is the fear of the family that Fadwa Tuqan might have a love relationship with the boy and that extends to a family threat of their reputation and honor. They stopped her from going to school not because she is a female and a female in the Arab Muslim world should not get education and must stay in harem, but because they wanted to protect their daughters' reputation in a society where reputation is very important. Also, in doing so they thought they are protecting the family's reputation of not being exposed to men who might

influence her emotions and dirt her reputation. So, studying social and cultural norms of the Palestinian society, in particular Nablus where she lived, gives a clear understanding of the specificity of the Arab Muslim society and the real reasons behind what Western feminist consider repression or oppression. This of course does not justify confine the female at home, but that is the mentality of people who live in that part of the Third World and Western women should be aware of. Studying social, economical, cultural circumstances that surround the oppression of Third World women is the aim of the transnational feminist and they way they read women in the world.

Tuqan representation of her life and other women's lives is as being in the sealed jar. She describes the oppression and depression that women, in the Arab world in particular, suffer when she introduces herself from the very beginning of her autobiography as "I emerged from the darkness of the womb into a world unprepared to accept me. My mother had tried to get rid of me during the first months of her pregnancy. Despite repeated attempts she failed" (12). In the Arab world the world is not prepared for women, but it is very prepared to welcome a man. She goes to present her mother as her main cause of oppression, especially after she left her for a woman who serves in the family household to take care of her. Tuqan tells the reader that she does not remember any affection or care from her father either and that her maternal aunt and her paternal uncle were closer to her than to her than them.

Tuqan's representation of herself and her suffering signifies the fact that she is aware that although problems of discrimination, women marginalization, and men's domination lie within the boundaries of her own family they still exist within other families but in less severity in most of the time. By declaring this difference between family's domination of women she actually declares that the problem of controlling, marginalizing, and discriminating against women is not

a mere patriarchal problem, but it is rather a cultural issue. Tuqan in particular is aware that her aunt and her husband for example were not as rich as her own family and that richer are more strict. . She asserts “I used to wish I were the daughter of Auntie and her husband. I hated belonging to the family to which bad lick has assigned me. I wished I could belong to a family with less money but more freedom” (22). Another example of class, economic, and social factors on women’s status is her friend Alya who had more freedom of movement than her because Alya’s family were not rich or upper – class as Tuqan’s. She depicts that women of lower class enjoyed their freedom and were much more liberated than women of upper class. Alya her friend is an example because she enjoyed her freedom of movement without being controlled in a harem like Fadwa Tuqan. Women from lower class in the *hammam* were clearly enjoying more freedom and less confined by the rules of their men. The harem for Fadwa Tuqan was the separation between women and men and this is a similar understanding of harem in Mernissi’s autobiography as I am going to detail in chapter six. However, harem in general means constraining women in a place where they are sealed and enclosed so no strange men can see them.

Not surprisingly, Tuqan represents herself as an anti class bias person although she came from an upper – class and a wealthy family. In *A Mountainous Journey*, she shows her admiration for women from the lower class because they used to move around the bath naked “The poorer women thought nothing of moving around the bath rooms with naked breasts and buttocks. I was delighted with the spontaneity of these women, who lived in a much freer and more down – to – earth atmosphere than that of the bourgeoisie, which was characterized by falsehood and hypocrisy (23, 24). Fadwa Tuqan goes further to criticize her fundamentalist old aunt, al Shaykha for being an advocate of class supremacy. Tuqan hated the fact that rich

women used to receive special care from the staff when they go to the public baths. It is important to mention here that Western feminist analysis of the Third World women portray them as single and monolithic. Western feminists' analysis does not pay attention to class differences when they talk about Third World women's oppression. Mernissi's autobiography, Shaarawi's autobiography, and Tuqan's autobiography show that women of upper – class are the ones who were subjects to harem life and they were more confined than women of lower classes. Western feminist do not usually make this distinction.

Talking about herself does not only reflect the repression she witnessed as a child and as an adolescent but also expresses her awareness of the gender bias that regulates people's lives where she lived. Tuqan believes that men have a different life from women and they enjoy much more freedom in their lives and she explains in her autobiography how boys and men are not restricted as girls and women are. Similar to women in Mernissi's harem, Tuqan's women were not equal to men. Even men are practicing the same behaviors in both Mernissi's autobiography and Tuqan's autobiography especially during and after the occupation. Men in the two Arab countries were allowed to dress, talk, and eat like the West but at the same time such behaviors were not allowed to women "the men dressed in European style; they spoke Turkish, French and English; they ate with knives and forks; they fell in love. Then they lay jealously in wait whenever one of us girls aspired to better things or tried to assert herself in quire natural ways. They represented, in the most flagrant manner possible, the rigidity of the Arab male and his absolute inability to maintain a personality that was healthy and whole. They represented, now as ever, the dual personality of the Arab: one half going along with development, conforming to the spirit of the times and adjusting to the rhythm on contemporary life; the other half paralysed, informed by an age – old egoism rooted in the Arab man's soul, with all the eastern haughtiness

that has dictated how the male should treat his female relatives” (78, 79). In examining the Arab man representation Tuqan is showing her understanding of him and why he behaves as he does. However, Tuqan seems to hop that many aspects of Arab culture will change especially treatment of women on hands of men. So, because Arab men themselves suffer the double standards while they were growing up in conservative societies and raised up by traditional families on one hand. On the other hand, they are confronting a new open and a global world which offers them the freedom to explore whatever they want despite the incomplete freedom and justice. These two worlds force them to live openly for themselves but when it comes to their female relatives they play the role of the family police who safeguard the females so as not to allow them the freedom that they themselves enjoy which is considered a threat to their other half which is paralyzed and informed by egoism that is rooted in the Arab man’s soul (79). On the other hand, she rather wonders whether we as human beings included men are “... [t]he prisoners of our environment, circumstances, time, and psychological and physical make up?” (127). This last quote reveals the well understanding of the Arab Muslim woman of the suffering that both men and women confront in the Arab Muslim world and this rebuts the Western feminist assumption that man is the enemy of the woman and she has not sympathy with him. Tuqan’s representation of Arab men refutes Western feminists’ assumption of men pitting women, and that men are women’s enemies. Tuqan does not talk about men as the enemies here but rather as the victim of the same enemies which are social, economical, cultural, and global openness factors.

Proud of herself, but not arrogant is how Fadwa Tuqan represents herself all through her autobiography. She tells the reader about her achievement in a way that depicts how much she is proud of that, but at the same time she owes some of what she achieves to others like her brother

Ibrahim, friends and what she learned from going out with them like what she learned from her friend Alya, and from her staying in England. She portrayed herself as a real woman who although she resists much of what family tries to impose on her as a female, but at the same time she is a respectful woman who reads her culture well and do not make any steps to break the rules of her culture what so ever. A crucial example of her well reading and respecting of her culture is when she decided to publish her work under anonymous name to protect her family's reputation because writing and publishing poetry about love in particular was not an acceptable business by a woman that time. Also, in her many times attempting to commit suicide she put first her family's reputation and her mother's grief on her so she stops every time she attempts to do so. Although she mentioned in her autobiography that she tried to commit suicide more than once, she points out only two times and gave reasons for these attempts. The first attempt was when her family decided to withdraw her from school. The second one when her brother Ibrahim left to Beirut leaving her without his support, poetry teaching, and love. The two reasons behind these attempts of suicide show the reader the feminist's consciousness Tuqan has since early age. In the two attempts she was struggling and refusing constrains of harem, the deprivation of education, and living with no purpose after her teacher of poetry left her in the middle of the way.

Another strong representation of herself was when she chose the name Dananeer which she attaches to her earliest poetry. Her representation of herself through the name Dananeer implies the reality that she wished she becomes like Dananeer who was famous because of her ability in reciting Arab literature the time. Tuqan explains that Dananeer was a slave girl of one of the famous eight – century viziers of the Barmakid family. “Slave girls in the Islamic Middle Ages were trained to compose and recite poetry as well as to entertain at social occasions where men



were present (Tuqan, 7). This importance of identifying across class boundaries with the slave girl stemmed from the fact that the slave girl was the best woman of her generation in reciting poetry which is important for Tuqan as well. Poetry is the main theme for Tuqan's life and it is the thing that put her in the leader of fame even though she is a female in a patriarchal society.

Tuqan talks about the freedom that women lack and should enjoy in order to be capable of writing good fiction as their male counterparts. Tuqan maintains that a right to speak means control over discourse. (Tuqan, .8) She resorts to travelers accounts to describe Nablus and its inhabitants. She claimed that all these travelers were men and here she manages to tie up a lot of issues regarding men versus the female voice. Also, in her autobiography freedom of movement was represented as attached to her and caused her a lot of isolation. She asserts that during her life with her family in Nablus, she could not leave the house unless she is accompanied by another family member such as her mother or aunt or sister or cousin. She described how it was impossible even for her to breathe freely during these visits. She told the reader how she was forced even to join her family members on their visits occasionally, although the atmosphere there was hostile. She explains that at the time, women were usually illiterate or had the most basic skills of literacy and their insufficient education could be furthered only at the government high school in Jerusalem where they receive a secondary school education.

In *A Mountainous Journey*, Tuqan keeps talking about how she found herself lost in the middle of an extended family. Her aunt Al Shaykha, the old woman who controlled both men and women in the household, was akin to the guard of the gates of hell as Tuqan calls her. The women were damned and condemned to death in life. They were not even able to choose between good and bad. Fadwa Tuqan was living in that family of her as a shadow among other

shadows as she described it. Whereas in London, the shadow that lived in Nablus among other shadows was transformed into a human being, who was very much alive.

However, later in her autobiography Tuqan tells the reader about her trip to England in the year 1962 when she was forty five years old. She reveals her great experience there as she left Nablus for England for the first time on her own. She adds that was the first time in her life she was independent. She wrote some of most of her poetry there in London in which she expresses the freedom and democracy people enjoy in England and how much she felt she is independent and liberal. However, she did not show the reader that the West is a piece of paradise with no problems. She also read the English society as a model of the West and claims that even there where freedom is taken for granted “A woman performs the same work as proficiently as a man, but she receives a smaller pay cheque, simply because she is a woman” (158).

Without being aware of it may be Fadwa Tuqan was reflecting Edward Said’s views in his book *Orientalism*. When talking about her experience in London, she mentioned that two little kids of a family who were having her over a dinner asked her strange questions about Arabs. Some of these are like do you drink water in glasses? Do Arabs sleep on mattresses? and so on. Here Tuqan asserts that “The word Arab reflects nothing in the mind of Westerners but the image of the tent, the desert, and the camel...The girl asked me to draw something for her in her drawing book, so I drew a house with the front steps surrounded by a garden. When the mother saw the drawing she asked me if we knew about stairs in our country...It is indeed strange that the image of the tent and desert sticks in the British mind in this fashion, as if they had not colonized our countries for several decades. The one thing they knew about us is polygamy, something I could not in any way.” (Tuqan, 157, 8) These stereotype images about

Arabs by the West are similar to those Western feminists claim about Arab Muslim women when they stereotype them as dependent, submissive, and have no voice to express. However, it is only in London is where Tuqan discovered her happiness and found her freedom. Being a lone with no men guards watching her slightest movements had helped her make the journey to the depth of the soul as she mentions that in one of her poems.

***Fadwa Tuqan's testimony: a man is not an enemy of women; Ibrahim Tuqan a progressive brother in a patriarchal society***

Similar to Mohanty, Spivak criticized some Western feminists for their ignorance of the social, cultural, and historical circumstances of not – Western women's lives (Morton, 124). She moreover criticized their Universalists claims to represent all women as being repressed by men (11). Additionally, some non – Western feminists have also criticized Western feminist bias against family and treating men as the enemy of women (Leeuwen, 79). To refute the Western feminists' assumptions on the universality of the hatred of men towards all women and to defeat the non – Western claim, evidence from Arab Muslim women's autobiographies in this dissertation is presented. This evidence shows the fact that although in some cases family plays the role of the safeguard on women to control their movements; these women were benefited from the family members, especially men, in particular. In her autobiography, El Saadawi depicts her father as a modal figure who always stood there for her, believed in her, and supports her financially and emotionally. Mernissi also show the impact of her family on her. She describes men of her family as protecting, loving, and caring for all women in harem. She did not illustrate any incident of beating women or insulting them by the men of the family although she demonstrated that they control women of the family by confining them to harem and explaining the reasons for that in concepts like protection, providing, and reserving the identity and culture rather than aiming to marginalize women. Mernissi implied that without her family's

wealth, their communal support, their beliefs in women's role in developing Morocco especially in the post colonial era, she would not be able to pursue her education, travelled to the West, and reached where she is now.

According to the particularity of Arab Muslim culture, family plays a huge role in building the personality of both men and women and is considered a space for security. It affords for them what they need emotionally, financially, spiritually, and ethically. For women, in particular the familial love, warm, and support is a value and a privilege. Men of the family specifically mean a lot to a woman all through her life. Most of Arab Islamic countries are tribal societies where the name and reputation of the family is important. Usually, men of the family take on their shoulders the burden of providing for their families not only money, shelter, and food but also protection and safeguarding. For example, a man is ashamed and out of honor if he puts one of his elderly in an elderly home. An elderly woman should be cared of by her men of the family whether they are fathers, brothers, sons, male cousins, or husbands. Protection and providing that are afford by men of the family are some of the reasons behind some women's of harem refusing to be out of harem. These women would revolt against the Western feminism and liberation because ending harem's life means their end. These women support harem because it provides living, security, and company for them. Without harem, some women will be homeless, hungry, or objects of foreigners' physical, sexual, and other kinds of threats. Sometimes women refute the Western liberation because their life within the family and in harem offers authority that they would not enjoy out of harem. Aunt al Shaykha in Tuqan's autobiography, the maids, the divorced aunt, the grandmother Lalla mani in Merniss's autobiography are examples of these kind of women who will not be happy because they will not be benefited if Western feminism is applied to the Arab Muslim case.

Women of big families and large numbers of brothers and male cousins can not stop showing their pride of that in front of others especially the in-laws. Women need men of the family deeply through the process of marriage and after moving to their husband's homes. A woman with many brothers and male cousins are respected and well treated in her new family and her husband thinks twice before any attempt to abuse her. Men's role in their daughters', sisters', and female cousins' lives after marriage is crucial. They are the ones who a woman calls, and not the Police, if the husband or any one of his family abuses her. Men of the family rush to her despite all their busyness to protect her and take revenge of the abuser right away. Women's humiliation on the hands of men regardless of being husbands or foreigners is considered shame and an act against manhood according to the codes of the tribal laws and the Arabic Islamic culture. The Arab history is rich of stories that tell about battles that went for years because of women's issues. Example of this is "Harb El – Basous" El Basous War which extends for forty years when the conflict started over a female camel that belongs to a woman called Basous when a man from Taghlib tribe killed it. The war between Taghlib and the woman's tribe Baker went for forty years.

To emphasize, Western feminists universalizing the experiences of women is binary position of men is unreal and unfair (Vkagba, 344). Moreover, the Western feminists' thought is part of the Western thought which reflects the dominance of the West due to their power and the spreading of knowledge in all over the world (344). Furthermore, Chandra Mohanty as I stated before demonstrates that Western feminists' analysis points out that Third World women counter oppressions based on patriarchy plus other things like race and imperialism (Tickner, 88). On the other hand, Third World feminists themselves claim that Western feminists' analysis on the division of labor according to sex, for example, underestimates Third World women's interests

in economic survival because the Western feminists' analysis creates an artificial competition between women and men (88). This artificial competition due to the division between sexes extends to other fields where the Western feminists assumes that men are the enemies of women and should be always beaten and stood against. May be it is vital in this place to point out that fact that counter arguments also made by U.S. women of color feminism, gay/lesbian critiques, class analysis which show clear resistance to hegemonic Western feminist discourses that reinforce inequality, imperialist dominance, and injustice.

Mohanty points out the fact that Western feminists judge Third World women by their own standards and assume that there is a universal patriarchy system under which all men oppress women (Mwangi, 248). This emphasizes what Transnational feminist theory focuses on through emphasizing the role of gender, race, class, and sexuality and on "the organization of resistance to hegemonies in the making and un-making of the nation state" (Mohanty, 9). [Again, clarify your terms here] So, rather than focusing on generalizations of oppression that are assumed of all women by all men, transnational feminism examines the specific nature of oppression as it occurs within a particular local context.

To support Mohanty's and other non – Western feminists' arguments, facts from Arab Muslim world is given through contemporary Arab Muslim women who tell us these facts in their own autobiographies writers in this dissertation. These women demonstrate that the universal patriarchy system where men oppress all women is not true. Arab Muslim world as part of the Third World is not single and relationships between men and women are not monolithic. However, it is necessary to say that Western feminists themselves indicate that Western feminism itself is not monolithic.

In *A Mountainous Journey*, Fadwa Tuqan presents her mature and considerate relationship with some men not only within her family, but also among male poets, thinkers, and

nationalists. One of the unique relationships in her life if not the best is her relation with her brother Ibrahim. In a society where Western feminists depict Third World as patriarchy, repressive, and male dominant, Ibrahim Tuqan would never lead his sister through the path of success and fame after she left school at age of thirteen to teach her how to write poetry to the degree where she becomes the prominent Arab woman poet and the symbol of the national poem. Such a brother in the Western feminists' lens would ignore his sister, underestimate her abilities, and killed her talent out of his envious being a poet himself.

In this autobiography and as described by Tuqan herself, her brother Ibrahim has managed to change the stereotypical images about Arab Muslim men when he encouraged his sister and became her teacher to write and read until she inherited his talent and became one of the Arab Muslim pioneers poets in the Arab world. Tuqan's brother was an educated man who was teaching in the American University in Beirut and also a well know Arab Poet. Ibrahim who was very well known in the Arab world as a poet years before his sister Fadwa, took care of her and taught her how to write poetry and what to read in order to improve her mastery of the classical Arabic language. After her brother Ibrahim died she wrote very painful poetry to express the great loss she had after his pass away. In her autobiography, she stressed the fact that her brother the Arab poet and a big name as well was different from any other man especially other men of the family. He was educated and open minded. The minute he felt that his sister Fadwa has a talent and is really gifted to write poetry he started teaching her how to write it and how to work on herself to improve what she was writing.

The first time Tuqan shows the manhood attitude of her brother is after her family issues their "compulsory confinement" (48) of her when a sixteen years old boy handed her a flower in her way back home. The family forced her to stay at home and never leave it without permission

and a company. Ibrahim learned from his mother about the reason behind Fadwa Tuqan's confine at home and hid this fact from the father. As a man of "broad vision" (57) he did not interfere in the family decision knowing he will change nothing by trying to return her back to school for example, but instead he showered his sister with love, kindness, and sympathy after he saw family members especially her uncle's family were looking down at her as if she committed a crime. Ibrahim's treatment to Fadwa Tuqan allowed her to exceed the tough time she had after her family confined her at home and the many times she thought of committing suicide. He believed in her and helped her in all means. Ibrahim revolts the family's decision to confine her by letting her accompany him in his trips (52). Tuqan maintains that she opened a new chapter of her life when Ibrahim stayed home in his vacation from his teaching job in Beirut. Tuqan portrays her brother Ibrahim as the psychological heal for her and the air she breaths. According to the Western feminists' assumptions about the men oppression to women especially in the Third World, Ibrahim is supposed to kill his sister in the name of honor instead of ignoring the story of the boy who handed her a flower.

Ibrahim Tuqan is a man not only saved his sister from deconstruction and committing suicide by his love and affection, but also he is the one who put her on the first step of the ladder of fame, caught her hand carefully, and assisted her to climb it proudly when he decided to teach her to write poetry. She describes his enthusiasm looking in his bookshelves and handed to her Abu – Tammam's\* poetry collection *al – Hamasa* to read. From the whole collection he chose her a poem to read, explain verse by verse, to copy it in a copybook, to memorize, and to recite in front of him the same evening of that day. Ibrahim's choice of the poem implement the fact that he is a man who believes in women and this fact [more repetition] refutes the Western feminists' assumption that men oppress all women and they are the enemies of women. The



poem was “A Woman Laments Her Brother” written by the Arab female poet Al – Khansa’\*.

After Ibrahim finished explaining the poem to his sister, Tuqan’s asserts that he told her that he chose her this poem in particular and said “So you see how Arab women write beautiful poems” (58). This sentence by Ibrahim indicates his pride of Arab women specifically. Even after Ibrahim decided to go back to his academic career in Beirut, he continued sending her encouraging letters, choosing collections of books for her to read, and revising what she writes. He was consistent in supporting her and never got bored of teaching her.

In a patriarchal society where Western feminist believes that Third World women are confined in harem, Ibrahim broke this rule and assumption. Fadwa Tuqan presents him as a delightful person when he hears her “playing the lute and singing” (67). Not only she presented him delighted with her music, but he would sometimes reward her with a present or some money. As she claims, the brother’s encouragement and persistence support developed her “natural inclination to realize my latent abilities” (67) by his sincere concern of her psychological rebirth.

On the hands of her brother Ibrahim, Fadwa Tuqan learned how to be independent and self responsible. Tuqan contends that her life took another positive turn due to her brother Ibrahim offer to move and live with him and his wife at their home in Jerusalem. In Jerusalem the brother opened all opportunities to his sister to get involved in social life and with people. She took all advantages of her brother’s opportunities and started her English classes at the Jarusalem WMCA. Her living with Ibrahim and his family allowed her to participate in

\* *Abu Tammam*: his name is Habib ibn Aws Al-Ta'i. He was born in 788 and died 845. He was an Abbasid era Arab poet  
 \* *Al-Khansa'*: an early Islamic woman poet in Arabia

presenting some broadcast interviews and to participate in dramas and songs that were performed by the radio vocal troupe (48). She has these opportunities in the radio because Ibrahim was working in the Palestine Broadcasting Station that time and helped her to utilize her talent there.

Not only the brother Ibrahim taught her how to write poetry, encourage her to play music and sing, and to present some of the activities in the Palestine Broadcasting Station, but also offered her psychological sheltering. Tuqan claims that “Sheltering under Ibrahim’s wings afforded me a sort of protection...” (77). Describing Ibrahim as a shelter for her where she seeks protection under his wings is a depiction that Western feminists would deny since they universalize the issue of men pitting and repress all women. In all times when Ibrahim leaves his sister for any reason she would express her feeling of lacking protection and the threat of being confine again in harem. She asserts “I was weighed down by feelings of oppression and servitude, especially after Ibrahim moved to work in Radio Palestine in Jerusalem” (77). This quote by Tuqan shows the reader and explains to Western feminist that the source of repression for Tuqan as for the most Arab Muslim women is not necessarily the man. On the contrary, man here is portrayed as a savior and a shelter. Women in the Arab Muslim world are rather repressed by cultural sustains and false values and not be men. In some cases, men, same as women, are confined by some cultural values and social norms like the family honor issue where men carry the burden of protecting family reputation and honor which in most cases jeopardizes their lives and futures if they kill a female family member under the pressure of society under the name of cleansing family honor.

The status and place of the man in the woman’s life is noticeable in all contemporary Arab Muslim women’s autobiographies in this dissertation. Not only a man’s life leaves its impact on the woman, but also his death. Like Al – Khansa’ the Arab female poet who dedicated

her poetry to the soul of her brother Sakher, Fadwa Tuqan shocked to receive the death of her loving and caring brother Ibrahim at an early age. The brother's death put Tuqan in her confine, physical and mental isolation again, and psychological sickness. Tuqan wrote many poems expressing her big loss after her brother and mentor Ibrahim died. Her brother's death caused her "estrangement" and "inner exile" (105). She claims that "...grief became the chief element in my life" (105). She depicts her feelings after the loss of Ibrahim as being "orphan" (112) despite the fact that her father was alive that time. Ibrahim for her was the "overflowing compassion and love" (112) and she considered him the replacement of the father who never showed her love, affection, or emotions.

## CHAPTER # 5

## **NAWAL EL SAADAWI'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY A DAUGHTER OF ISIS: WALKING THROUGH FIRE TO ARISE WOMEN'S VOICES**

*“I raise my head bent over the paper, put down my pen for a moment. Why am I writing this autobiography? Is it a longing for my past life? Is my life over, or is there something of it left? Are words the last resort when one wants to hold on to what has passed by in life before it is gone over? To fix images in one's memory before they vanish and can no longer be replaced? To struggle against death, to exist now, or even forever?”*  
(*A Daughter of Isis 15*).

### ***Introduction***

Born in 1931, Nawal El Saadawi is a popular Egyptian feminist and writer. She has walked through fire to reach her goals of liberating women in the Arab Muslim world. She wrote books banned in the Arab world, established a feminist organization, and was imprisoned, received death threats by Islamists, and was exiled. All these difficulties and challenges have not stopped her from continuing to write on many “taboo” issues like female mutilation, prostitution, women’s sexual and physical abuse, and domestic violence.

There are people all over the world who support El Saadawi’s views, but at the same time, there are many, especially in the Arab Muslim world, who refute what she says, writes, and does. Her life, work, and experience have been received in the West more positively than in the Arab Muslim world because her writing meets what the West expects about Arab Muslim women’s subordination. Her work is united by “feminism” and thus some often discuss her work as resistance literature of third world women’s texts. In the Arab world El Saadawi’s writing is looked at as a material only written to put her herself on spot light so as to gain fame and at the

same time to please the West. Arab scholars, Islamic leaders, and politicians accuse her of exposing Arab's dirty laundry.

Her work has often been criticized for not reflecting the real status of women in the Arab Muslim world. We cannot hide the fact that El Saadawi has added so much to the Arabic culture field by the rich literature and scholarship she has provided to the Arabic library and history. In my opinion, El Saadawi's voice could reach much more clearer if she writes utilizing the Arab Islamic culture to convince people of the necessity of changes she aim to in the Arab Muslim societies. Also, she is unfortunate because critics always read her negatively although some of her writing; *A Daughter of Isis* is an example, presents empowered female figures from the Arab Muslim world.

### ***Who is Nawal El Saadawi?***

Nawal El Saadawi was born on October 27, 1931, in a village called Kaft Tahla in Qalubiyya in the Egyptian Delta. Her father came from Egyptian peasant origins whose social and economical status was poor. However, his mother supported him to pursue his education which allowed him to become an inspector in the Ministry of Education in Egypt. On the other hand, El Saadawi's mother, Zaynab, came from a Turkish background, but she did not enjoy the class privileges typically related to people from Turkish origins during the ruling times of the Ottoman Empire.

El Saadawi was a fortunate girl who lived between a mother, who although not educated, encouraged her daughter to pursue her education and a father who supported his daughter and paid her school fees regardless of the family need for money. El Saadawi was a successful student in all her education levels. As a result, she entered the College of Medicine in the University of Cairo, one of the best Colleges in the world.

In 1951, she began to study psychiatry at the Medical School of Cairo University. In 1955 and after graduation she worked as Psychiatry and this job informed her writing a great deal. She went on to eventually become Egypt's Director of Public Health at a time when women's leadership roles were few and far between. She was the first Arab Muslim feminist to publicly confront sexual issues like virginity, sexual abuse, prostitution, incest, and female circumcision. These experiences informed her first book, *Woman and Sex*, in which she raised "taboo" and controversial issues. After publishing this book in 1972, the Egyptian government fired her from her post. She did not give up, but started a magazine called *Health* which addressed subjects in preventative medicine. She also continued to write about women's issues, particularly the oppression they experienced in the Arab world. Writing about women's freedom and women's status in Egypt and the Arab Muslim world not only led to her dismissal as the Director Health Department, but it also eventually led to the shutdown of her magazine. (El Saadawi 2002).

Although her books are banned in many Arab countries, she is still the Arab world's most prominent feminist. Her books have been translated into over twenty-eight languages worldwide and are taught in universities across the world. Because of what she wrote in some of these books, she was arrested and put in jail for many times. Some of what she wrote was related ideas and political activities such as her opposition of Camp David Agreement and her many books against the veil and some Islamic teachings (El Saadawi 1994). She was forced to exile by El Saadat regime based on her attitude that resisted the Camp David agreement that El Saadat signed with the Israeli government. Also, she put in prison and accused of being secular and infidel because she advocates the separation of religion and state (Tarabishi, 38).

In 1981, she was imprisoned under the Sadat regime, for alleged "crimes against the State". Even the bars of the prisons could not deter her from activism (El Saadawi 1994). El-Saadawi

formed the Arab Women's Solidarity Association (AWSA) – the first legal, independent feminist organization in Egypt. The objective of AWSA is “to liberate all Arab people especially women by freeing Arab land, economy, culture, and knowledge”\*. AWSA had grown to have some 500 members locally and more than 2,000 internationally until it was banned in 1991 following El-Saadawi's criticism of US involvement in the Gulf War. Despite this struggle she continued to write in prison, at times scribbling her words on toilet paper as it was the only thing available to her. Upon her release in 1983, those scraps of notes were published in *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*. (El Saadawi 1994)

The authorities' political pressure and the Islamist's death threats led to Al Saadawi's exile to the US in 1992. Nonetheless, she used her US exile experience from 1992 – 1996 to clarify her position on many issues like cultural identity and fundamentalism. Later, she began to criticize the persistent discrimination inflicted on female scholars. El Saadawi contends that the patriarchal construction of femininity is at the root of women's oppression in the Arab Islamic culture because it brought the colonization of women's bodies and its use as a space for patriarchal oppression and exploitation. This was her argument as a feminist leader known primarily for being vigorous all through her struggle as an activist within the Arab women's movement body.

Eight years after returning home from exile in 2004, then 74-year old activist announced that she would enter Egypt's historic multi-candidate election, joining other top contenders like Al-Gad party leader Ayman Nour and Al-Wafd leader Noaman Gomaa. At the time of her bid for presidency, Al-Saadawi told Forward Magazine: “I stood in the presidential election, not to

*\* For a detailed discussion of AWSA see El Saadawi (1986. Introduction, pp. 7-12).*

win but to get the Egyptian people moving in favor of a reform of the constitution and to oppose corruption and American colonialism” *Fw Magazine*. Nawal El Saadawi interview, *Forward guest*, January 2011).

Although El Saadawi is a popular figure in the West and a well know writer and feminist in the Arab Muslim world, her writings and ideas are not welcomed in the Arab Muslim world partly because her works touch on issues that are forbidden especially to women like religion, sex, and politics. For example, Al Tarabishi, an Arab scholar, believes that El Saadawi has played into Western intolerance and fulfills the Western’s assumptions of the subordination of Arab women and the situations they suffer (37-8). Nevertheless, I don't think this fact should be used to merely dismiss her achievements (the literature, books, essays, novels, and critiques) which are extraordinary and deserve to be regarded as such.

Eighty-years old today, Nawal El Saadawi is still a controversial figure herself and despite all the difficulties and challenges in her life, her persistent commitment to feminism and women has continued even stronger. She has written more than forty books and has talked about women’s rights in the Arab society and within the Islamic context. She is a psychiatrist, a writer of feminist stories, novels, and essays. Despite the fact that El Saadawi presented Arab Muslim women’s dark realities to the world, she attracted the world attention for her braveness to talk about taboo issues in Africa in general and in Egypt in particular.

### ***El Saadawi’s Work and Critics***

El Saadawi continues to write, despite the threats to her life; despite the physical assaults, circumcision, she endured as a child; and despite having grown. Following is some analysis of



her major work. *The Hidden Face of Eve, Women in the Arab World* is a book translated by her husband, Sherif Hetata. She writes this book as a narrator of twenty essays that address a range of topics addressing issues from sexual aggression against female children and the circumcision of young girls, to prostitution, sexual relationships, marriage and divorce showing ignorance, lack of education, and religion misinterpretation as factors behind all that. (El Saadawi 1981).

The book that created a huge controversy in Egypt for its frank discussion of the sexuality of women is *Women and Sex 1972*. In this book Bahiah Shaheen, the Protagonist, eighteen year-old struggles to fill her inner need for independence. Her father was unhappy with her stance that she is free to make these decisions, so he sold her into marriage. She fled and is eventually caught and imprisoned. (El Saadawi 1975) *A Woman at Point Zero* is a book that was inspired by meeting a female prisoner that El Saadawi met at Qanatir Prison, a prostitute named Firdaus, in 1974. Who even when she left the prison and worked to support herself financially, she found out that she is selling her body again. (El Saadawi 1994)

*God Dies by the Nile* is a novel where the exploitation and subjugation of women is the focus. This novel tells the story of two sisters who are molested at a young age by the local magistrate. (God Dies by the Nile 2007) *The Circling Song (1989)* is also portrays a girl who is repeatedly molested by neighbors and extended family members. When she is found to be pregnant, her mother sends her away in secret to protect her from being killed. However, her brother is sent by the men in the family to find her and kill her to regain the family honor *The Circling Song*. Another work by El Saadawi is the *Searching* which focuses on a woman striving for love and personal identity. This time the novel is about a high level governmental employee whose mission is to make a positive impact in the world around her. She falls in love

with a man who dumped her because he does not believe in women who have relationships with men (Searching 1965).

The limitations of women's roles in a repressive society are further explored in *The Fall of the Imam*, she presents the limitations of women's roles in society due to the oppressive society and she brings up examples that hinder women's progressive like abuse of power by male officials, rape, exploitation, and the unjust punishment of women for crimes committed by men (The Fall of Imam 2005).

Nawal El Saadawi has a gift of writing about difficult topics and issues in a very readable way. Despite the previous fact, some critics write against her work and all focus on three subjects in their criticism. These subjects take three categories. The first category is criticizing El Saadawi of being anti – Islam writer and feminist. The second category comes under the accusation of El Saadawi as being a Western voice who writes only to please the West and meets their expectations. The third criticism belongs to critiquing her of writing the same themes again and again without coming up with anything new plus the fact the most of her characters are invented and not real persons.

Unfortunately, some believes that she does not speak the whole truth and she speaks not from a place of honesty (Tarabishi 17). Example of this is what she mentioned in page 144 of *the Hidden Face of Eve* about the major ideas on which Islam has based itself on while dealing with the question of women. In this example she was talking about Islam from the perspective of Islam fundamentalists and extremists ignoring Muslim moderates and reformers who have different interpretation of Qur'anic versions that address women issues. She also talks about women subordinated under the Islamic law in all Arab countries and through this generalization she ignores the fact that women in Lebanon are still subordinated despite the Christian regime.

In spite of all of this, it is fair to mention that she inspires and moves you like very few writers can do. However, some themes in *The Hidden Face of Eve* in particular are repeated throughout El Saadawi's other works like the same themes in her work *Walking through fire A Life of Nawal El Saadawi* in 2002. Also, she still holds the same argument and the same pride of herself through repeating the same stories she experienced like the circumcision, the prison, and the threatening letters she always received.

Although Nawal El Saadawi is a highly visible, and has a strong presence in the American Academy and access to Western audience, Amireh believes that El Saadawi is not always in control of either her voice or her image (215 – 249). Amireh asserts that although the history of El Saadawi's reception in the West shows her struggling against misappropriation, she still shows her accommodating the West's reading of her (218). So, El Sadaawi is viewed by the West as an outstanding figure in the Arab feminist movement that has seriously defended the rights of Arab women. Ironically, many Arab feminists and scholars perceive Saadaawi as an activist who could have fought more aggressively for the Arab woman's cause, but has been somewhat influenced by Western discourses and thus her voice of resistance to hegemonic forces has been slightly tamed and weakened. Amal Amireh, an Arab feminist scholar, argues that “although she makes some efforts to resist the West's misrepresentation of her, El Saadawi, ..., also invites it in some ways, allowing her works to be used to confirm prevailing prejudices about Arab and Muslim culture” (Amireh 228).

Few Arab critics have questioned the important contribution that El Saadawi's theoretical / polemical writing has made to oppositional Arab thought. Some critics also surprised at the accolades heaped on El Saadawi's fiction in the West (Haviz 118 – 199). Other critics have

concluded that the popularity of her work in the West has less to do with their literary merit rather than with their fulfillment of Western readers' assumptions about Arab women and men.

George Tarabishi has devoted a whole book about Nawal El Saadawi's fiction and he says he did so because El Saadawi is "the principle exponent of the Arabic feminist novel" (9). Tarabishi criticizes her for abstracting her men and women in *Woman at Point Zero* and reducing them to "one dimensional characters" (17 – 18). This characterization in his opinion fails to illuminate complex human relations and therefore do not make for good literature. Tarabishi has questioned not only the form of her fiction but also her message. He targets what he calls her individualistic philosophy and elitist attitude. His view is that Firdaus's struggle for example in *Woman at Point Zero* is aimed at liberating not her female sisters but only herself. He said El Saadawi's characters always refuse reality but never try to change it.

Another critic came from Afif Faaraj who was more conservative criticized El Saadawi for shifting between the polemical essay and narrative and for presenting her opinion through self-evident statements rather than through layers of events (Afif 1985). Farraj concludes that character in El Saadawi's novel is almost an empty board except for the ideological statements written in large type. He adds "the Saadawian heroine remains a captive of the rigid ideological text, and this text controls the narrative, plot and the fate of the characters." (Amireh 235) In my opinion, El Saadawi's novels' strength lays in their commitment to the grounds of women's liberation. This also could be their weakness because this tends to over shadow many of El Saadawi's stories to such a degree that, at certain points the thoughts and statements of her characters seem forced and inappropriate.

From all El Saadawi's work, I chose her autobiography *A Daughter of Isis* to analyze for the purpose of my dissertation. *A Daughter of Isis* is El Saadawi's autobiography that speaks

about El Saadawi's life from infancy until adulthood and considered the first half of her life story or autobiography since she wrote the second half of her autobiography under the title *Walking through Fire, a Life of Nawal El Saadawi*.

### **Why A Daughter of Isis?**

El Saadawi clarifies in *A Daughter of Isis* that she writes it as her autobiography "the story of my life" at the age of over sixty and when she was in North California. (El Saadawi 2002, 13) Her autobiography covers her childhood and early adulthood back to 1940s. *A Daughter of Isis* reveals El Saadawi early signs of feminist consciousness and struggle to emancipate her sex through her power of words are evident in this autobiography. (El Saadawi 2002, 15) El Saadawi's autobiography was published in the Arabic language in 1995 and titled *awraqi...Hayati volume 1* which in English means *my papers... my life volume 1*. The second volume of her autobiography was published in Arabic in 1998 under the title *awraqi ...Hayati volume 11* to mean in English *my papers... my life volume 11*. The second volume was published in English in 2002 under the title *Walking Through Fire Nawal El Saadawi's Life*.

In *A Daughter of Isis*, El Saadawi reveals social and cultural practices among people in her society as an insider of that Arab Muslim society. She writes her autobiography reflecting her experiences and critical observations of hers and others' feelings and sufferings living in a patriarchal society that is dominated by misinterpretations of religion, colonization, and negligence. At the same time, she introduces positive figures for women who live, suffer, and were able to be national demonstrators who not only seek their countries liberation, but also theirs as part of the Nation's freedom.

Isis is the Egyptian Goddess of rebirth. She was called the mother of life and the Goddess of magic. She became the most powerful of the Gods and Goddess in Egypt and the

ancient world (Monaghan 34, 455). In her autobiography, El Saadawi positions herself as a “descendant of Isis and her mother Noot” (El Saadawi 2002, 14). El Saadawi chose to title her autobiography *A Daughter of Isis* symbolizing the power of the ancient Egyptian Goddess Isis which she desires. Moore-Gilbert asserts that El Saadawi’s positioning of herself as Isis indicates her aspiration to be Isis’s daughter whose mother Isis will be pleased to see her work for the well being of the people as a whole and for women in particular. (Moore-Gilbert 47) El Saadawi played the role of Isis in a school play when she was eleven. She affirmed the miracle of Isis when she touched the dead body of her beloved man Osiris and suddenly he came back to life “I sang and sobbed over the death of my beloved Osiris, and the audience sitting in the courtyard started to sob with me...Then the miracle happens the goddess Isis touches the deadly body and suddenly throbs into life”. (El Saadawi 2002, 101) After her role as Isis, she felt proud because wherever she went people kept calling her Isis.

In *A Daughter of Isis*, El Saadawi explores different topics in her society like gender inequalities, education, nationality, resisting imperialism, and religion. She examines all the previous constructions in accordance with the fact that all of these are factors that participate in shaping the meaning of being a woman in an Arab Muslim world. All through her autobiography El Saadawi shows a feminist agency through her capacity to act against all social constraints and obstacles. Fighting these constraints is what makes Arab Muslim women unique and empowered. El Saadawi walks her reader from the point where she was a poor female child within a large family of limited resources to a strong woman who leads a national campaign resisting the colonizer. She shows the reader how she carved in rocks to reach where she is now at the time Western women might take what they reach for granted walking on a paved street.

Transnational feminist theory allows viewing experiences of women broader than they are in local situations and at the same time it allows for the recognition of the limitations of global perspectives that tend to homogenize experiences of these women (Richards 13). In her autobiography, El Saadawi presents powerful images of women's lives showing that although these women live in poor conditions, hierarchical and patriarchal societies they not only survived, but also overcome extreme obstacles that should change the Western myths around them of being submissive and subordinated. Also, *A Daughter of Isis* clearly shows the challenges that face post colonial feminism in the Arab Muslim world, such as the elevation of class and race that represent power.

### ***El Saadawi's life in a patriarchal society***

El Saadawi's autobiography exposes her life in an intercultural background. Her mother and father came from oppositional classes. Her mother belongs to an upper class from a Turkish origin that identified as "white" and her father came from a rural village, Kafr Tahla, and a peasant family. He made himself with the support of his mother Mabrouka "Sittil Hajja"\*. El Saadawi's family represents the original extended and large family in the typical large Arab Muslim family. She is the second born child in her family which is constituted of six sisters and three brothers. El Saadawi declares that she inherited her father's skin color and his height.

Western feminists discourse assumes that Arab Muslim women are coherent as a group that is placed in familial, legal, economical, and other structures that put them in a category outside social relations (Mohanty 2004, 40). Western feminist hegemonic superiority produces a universal image of Arab Muslim women such as being veiled, obedient wives, and oppressed (41). El Saadawi, an insider, sends a message to inform outsiders about her life and other women's lives in an Arab Muslim society. Her views of Arab Muslim women's lives derived

from the social, religious, and cultural environment around her. El Saadawi's environment produced a woman fighter who is inspired by women like her mother and grandmother "Sittil Hajja\*" and inspires other women in her life and around the world.

El Saadawi was raised up in a family consists of eleven members, mother, father, three brothers, and five sisters. Although her family is considered a typical conservative Muslim family, her mother insisted on her education and her father continued to support her when he found out that she is sharp and serious. El Saadawi pursued her high education as a medical doctor at the time where Arab and Egyptian women, in general, and rural women, in particular, were suffering under corrupted traditional values and oppressive treatment which is resulted from social, political, and economical pressure.

After becoming an educated woman, El Saadawi does not only struggle for women's rights through writing, but also she practices cultural and organizational activities, conduct many field research on Egyptian women, and participated in many conferences locally, regionally, and internationally. However, her work on the three taboos in the Arab Muslim world which are sex, politics, and religion found many enemies and critics to her as a person and to her work. Her critics find in her work that she writes out of the Arabic culture and religious context.

Living in a patriarchal society El Saadawi points out her status as a female living in such society. In her autobiography, she indicates that she is the second child born in the family and

*\* Sittil: my grandmother in Arabic. Hajja: a term of respect for older women, although strictly applying to those who have made pilgrimage to Mecca.*

although the first child was a boy, Tala'at, she was preferred over him in many stages of her life despite the fact that he was a male. The reasons why she was preferred over him was due to the



fact that she was always much better than him in school and she was braver, studious and much more assertive. El Saadawi illustrates how she and her brother were friends sharing many games without being discriminated against. She also explains how her father used to take both of them to enjoy circus (111 – 114). El Saadawi demonstrates that her brother not only played with her the lute, allows her to dance, and make films with him, but he also makes her the only one to keep his secret when he told her about the girl who he is in love with.

However, the patriarchal society influence on her family is detectable and the patriarchal touch in the family as part of the Arab Muslim society as a whole was obvious when El Saadawi confirms that the preference of males over females cannot be hidden. She asserts that her brother Tala'at was the dream of her parents, but they were frustrated because of his continuous failure in school and this is why their hope transformed to her as a daughter “I had to have a brother who was a failure to become an object of interest” (El Saadawi 2002, 210). Her apparent rejection of principles and practices of the patriarchal society she lives in was noticeable when aunt Rokaya and Sittil Hajja pray to God that he turns her to a boy wishing “if only she had been born a boy!” (43). El Saadawi was afraid that God “might have really been able to transform me from a female into a male” (43).

As an indication of the patriarchal society where she lives and was raised, El Saadawi started her autobiography with the image of her father removing her mother's name from next to hers and wrote down his name instead (El Saadawi 2002, 1). The father, who was the first village man who graduated from Dar Al- Oloum (42), justified what he did by the “God's Will” (1) and that did not convince El Saadawi as she was always sensitive to gender bias.

Keeping females at home is in another component of patriarchal societies. El Saadawi remembers asking her parents to go out and play with the children and their answer was always

“you’re a grown up now” (130) which implies stay at home. Women not only have to stay at home when they grow up, but also they gather separately and do not mix with men. However, El Saadawi’s shows her father often enter the guests room and greet some women who visit her mother (103).

Being sensitive to gender inequality and discrimination between males and females are other signals of the Arab Muslim patriarchal society. El Saadawi was surprised to know that the stage of Secondary Schooling lasted six years for girls, but it was only five for the boys (241). She went to her father as an educated man who works for the Ministry of Education and asks him to clarify this clear discrimination between boys and girls. His answer was “the Ministry of Education seemed to consider the girls had less brain than boys and their “faith” was weaker” (242).

Although she and her family lived in a patriarchal society that must left its impact on their thinking and practices, El Saadawi’s father comes out of his society’s context in many different occasions. When El Saadawi reached the age of seven, he was the one who taught her how to pray and recite Qur’an, also told her the stories of the prophets and has a big role in educating her outside the curriculum (59, 76). Nawal El Saadawi seems assertive girl who asks and argues when she talks with her father and he would answer and clarify all her inquiries to break the rule where in a patriarchal society men talk and women’s listen. When El Saadawi needed to travel to the city to pursue her secondary schooling which was not available in her village that time, the father gave her money and trusted her to take travel in a train by herself although she was fourteen that time. Travel alone from the village to the city in the early 1950s was a clear signal that her father is an open minded man although he lives in a conservative, colonized, and patriarchal society.

Not only gender inequality and discrimination are signs of patriarchy, but also feelings and aspiration might constitute an element in shaping patriarchal societies. In Arab Muslim societies hugging and kissing sons and daughters is not common especially the era and place where El Saadawi lived her childhood and adulthood. She tells the reader that her father died without ever embrace her or her brothers and sisters. She adds that her mother also was never hugged or kissed her or her brothers and sisters (110). Culture of kissing and hugging kids is not common and this is part of the Arab Muslim middle class culture in particular.

El Saadawi raises three important issues that unify Arab Muslim conservative and patriarchal society and these are: first, reputation and honor which usually fell on the burden of women to protect and secure. Second, family name and the tribe name are important to protect their holder and to be protected by him due to class consideration and to the culture of not who you are, but who you know and what your family name which is spread in the Arab Muslim world. Thirdly, people who live in the same city or village usually know each other and this adds a burden to people to watch their behavior especially when it comes to women's behavior and movements which might threatens the honor and reputation of the whole tribe (132, 33).

In a patriarchal society a husband is the master at home, only gives orders, and expects only obedience from his wife. El Saadawi's father was portrayed by her as a positive father who plays with his children, and a constructive husband. Although he has a job as an inspector in the Ministry of Education and he is the only who provided for his family, he helps his wife with the children and in the kitchen (155).

El Saadawi's father, a positive figure in a patriarchal society, is a modal father in her eyes. He always stood their for her and encouraged her when she chose medicine as a field of study, when he did not force her to get an arranged marriage at early age, when she writes things

that did not please her teachers because of what these writings contain, and when she expelled from school after participating in a nationalist demonstration.

### ***Women's Agency in El Saadawi's Autobiography***

In her article that put her on the spot, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses", Mohanty claims that the relationship between women who are produced by hegemonic discourse and women as historical subjects is arbitrary relation which is set up by particular cultures (54).

El Saadawi opens her autobiography *A Daughter of Isis* by talking about her mother who taught her to read and to write (1). El Saadawi details how her mother taught her the alphabet and she even describes how her mother used to press her hand on hers to make her writes the four Arabic letter of her name. Her mother was the first to demonstrate the value of writing and reading for her. El Saadawi mentions the role of her mother, Zaynab Shoukri, not only in teaching her to read and write, but also in her struggle to stop El Saadawi's marriage at the age of ten. Although El Saadawi's mother herself not formally educated after the age of ten, she insisted that her daughter, Nawal El Saadawi, continues her education and become a medical doctor ignoring the father's advice of taking Nawal out of school to help her mother in the kitchen (El Saadawi 2002, 2). El Saadawi's father was an educated man and he believed in educating all his nine children, but under financial pressure he would sacrifice the girls' education for the sake of the three boys. The mother did not want for her daughter the same fate she had when she was taken from school at ten and got married. The mother answered him without any hesitation "My daughter will never be made to stay at home. I didn't need help" (3). El Saadawi's mother took care of her nine kids and all her six daughters pursued their education.

El Saadawi's mother, a woman who lived in the 1940s within an Arab Muslim conservative occupied society, is a positive female figure whose feminist consciousness insisted on her daughters' education. Not surprisingly then, El Saadawi depicts her mother as "a real mother ... her head held high, a woman full of pride, a goddess like Isis" (4). Moreover, El Saadawi shows her feminist consciousness toward in refusing gender oppression in the patriarchal society where she lives "I was proud of my dark skin... I never hid it under make – up or powder, or pastes of any kind, did not believe in femininity born with slave society and handed down to us with class and patriarchal" (7).

Hesford et al quoted Amrita Basu's observation that transnational feminist movements have focused on women's political and civil rights, especially sexual victimization, and just few have focused on economic and social rights. They also noted that Basu claimed that activism tends to be efficient when they are handling issues that relate to sexual victimization like female genital mutilation and women's stoning. (Hesford et al 167). Western texts that handle El Saadawi's works do not mention strong women or raise the problem that they are empowered but they are economically poor. The focus was never on their poor condition but on their subordination and victimization.

For most women, the mother is the most influential figure in their lives. Although, Zaynab El Saadawi's mother was a powerful figure in her life, her paternal Grandmother Sittil Hajja Mabrouka, in this autobiography most commonly called as Sittil Hajja the Arabic alternate for grandmother, is the most women mentioned in El Saadawi's autobiography. Nevertheless, her influence on Nawal is obvious. The first time El Saadawi mentions Sittil Hajja in her autobiography is when she talks about her day of birth a story told to El Saadawi by her grandmother Sittil Hajja Mabrouka (El Saadawi 2002, 19) who belonged to the poor class of

peasants. Sittil Hajja was the source of most of what El Saadawi needed to know about God, culture, and family. The grandmother personal tales of resistance push El Saadawi to conclude that “women have an unwritten history told really by one generation of the other” (57). El Saadawi recognizes this history and tries to make it visible. El Saadawi asked Sittil Hajja about El Saadawi’s grandfather who died before her dad even was born. An emotion taboo in most Arab Muslim countries, El Saadawi goes further in discussion with her illiterate grandmother to ask how it feels like to be in love, Sittil Hajja looked her in the eyes and smile responding yes she has experienced what it feels like to be in love. Putting the name in an order of love and privilege, Sittil Hajja explains the love she has for Almighty God, our Lord Muhammad, Imam Al-Shafei, our Lady Zaynab, our Lord Al-Badawi\*, her son Al-Sayed (El Saadawi’s father), and her five daughters combining them as one unit without mentioning the names of each one which demonstrates that Sittil Hajja is torn between her love to her daughters and the culture she lives in. El Saadawi, ten years at time, insisted to enter the forbidden zone and to know more about the “taboo” love “Sittil Hajja, I mean the other kind of love” (121). Sittil Hajja clarified to El Saadawi that women in the village have nothing called love and that girls get married as soon as they reach puberty.

Sittil Hajja life with her husband was one characterized by suffering after she got married at age ten before even she had her period. After three or four years she had her first pregnancy and that was El Saadawi’s father “Sayed”. Sittil Hajja lived with El Saadawi’s

- *Imam Al-Shafei: the leader of one of the four principal Sunni sects in Islam. Lady Zaynab: wife of Prophet Muhammad, Lord Al-Badawi: A Muslim saint whose memorial is located in the city of Tantah (Middle Delta).*

grandfather “Habash” eighteen years before he died when she was twenty eight years of old.

During these years of marriage she had fifteen pregnancies. Eight of them died leaving Sittil

Hajja with one boy who is El Saadawi's father and five girls Fatma, Baheya, Roukaya, Zaynab, and Neffisa (31). Sittil Hajja who was widowed at age of twenty eight and left with six kids, did not shed a tear for her husband rather she walked stronger, prayed, and thank God. Then she started working hard in the fields as a peasant to feed these six hungry mouths.

The independence demonstrated by Sittil Hajja at the age of twenty eight years when she was a widow was also demonstrated in her reflection of her childhood when she experienced circumcision at the age of six. Sittil Hajja told El Saadawi about the details of that horrific night when the *daya* tied her "like a chicken with the help of four other women" (32) and cutting her like a flame. Blood poured from Sittil Hajja like a tap.

Sittil Hajja shows her feminist consciousness not only when she talks about her hatred of the circumcision act that she experienced when she was only six, but also when she recalls her wedding night (, 30,1). The way she describes the *daya* pushing her long sharp finger into her vagina until the blood gushed between her thighs showing her apparent refusal of the corrupted norms and the unfair culture of her society. She remembered her bridegroom calling her in a rough voice to make him dinner at the time she was laying down still bleeding that night. She continued her wedding's night story telling El Saadawi that he beaten her that first night with the same cane he used to guide his donkey with. This feeling of humiliation and the refusal of these bad customs of the village is a big sign of Sittil Hajja's feminist consciousness and her belief in her rights to be dignified and respected as a woman.

Explains to El Saadawi her suffering, Sittil Hajja details how she raised six children by herself. She explains how she used to wake up, with her daughters, at dew, went off to the fields with the animals until sunset, and returning to their home carrying sacks on their backs. Sittil Hajja continued telling her life story to El Saadawi adding that she used to go to the market to

sell what she can sell from these sacks. She told El Saadawi in pride how she managed to save “one Piaster on top of the other” (33) until she saved three whole pounds and gave them to her only son “Sayed” to buy a train ticket from Banha to Cairo, to pay the school fees, and to buy books.

Determined and believed in the significance of education, although she herself is illiterate, Sittil Hajja saved her money and educated her only son, believing that if he has a good education he would benefit himself and his sisters. Sittil Hajja did not give the same chance of education to her daughters. Some may see this unequal treatment and discrimination. In that time even until today, males are expected to provide money for the whole family. Males are obliged to support their families financially (Uhlenberg 289, 290). However, still until today and all over the Arab Muslim countries families including mothers privilege males on females and if they are to choose between educating a male and a female they will choose a male and if the male is the only boy in the family he will take privileges above his sisters. The belief all over the Arab Muslim world is that the son must provide financially support for his family and by contrast the daughter will eventually get married and join her husband’s family and her education is considered a financial loss (Sabbagh 68).

Without Sittil Hajja El Saadawi’s father could be ended up “a peasant like his father, and die of bilharzias” (El Saadawi 2002, 33). The economical role is played by most women in the Arab Muslim world. Working women in the Arab Muslim world use their money to support family members, mainly men, to get education, get married, and start businesses (The Arab Human Development Report 191). West and women’s feminist in the Arab Muslim world should take advantage of this point when planning to change cultural or social strains in the Arab Muslim society. Since women constitute economical power they should have other social,



educational, and leading positions in society so as to be able to change starting from their power of spending their own money on their family members including men.

El Saadawi goes back to the time of Sittil Hajja's mother whom El Saadawi thinks Sittil Hajja inherited her strength braveness from. Sittil Hajja's mother described as "the woman of Gaza" and she was famous since she had humiliated and spanked the village's headman in front of his door and while surrounded by his men. One night the headman's men came to Sittil Hajja's mother's house, killed her dog, and then killed her. People of the village "dug a grave for her and lined it with the green husks of maize, and above it they build a monument of stone and cement" (El Saadawi 2002, 74). Sittil Haja is a strong woman who resisted injustice. As her mother, one day she stands in front of *Omda*, the village headman, and told him that she fears God much more than him. She defended her land and was responsible for her family (73).

Not only Sittil Hajja, but also her mother are the kind of women mostly respected and admired by Arab Muslim society. Men and women in the Arab world call such women "Sisters of Men" to indicate how dignified and strong they are. The way the villagers buried and celebrated Sittil Hajja's mother is an indication of the kind of women that Arab Muslim mentality admire. These women are free, ready to humiliate those who commit unjust behavior or deeds, empowered, and ready to empower their people. Sittil Hajja did not only have difficult life that she lived, but she also resisted death "Sittil Hajja had made up her mind that one or another she would not let *Azraen*\* come anywhere near her until she had seen her son" (240).

She resisted death and promised to stay alive until she sees the face of her son Sayed. She died minutes after he arrived and she saw him. The first time she changed to an old woman is when her beloved daughter Zaynab died (273).

El Saadawi's grandmother Sittil Hajja was a working woman who shared her income with her family and paid for her son's education. She was a woman who stood in the face of injustice and defended her rights of keeping her land. Moreover, she was a leader of her family and a well respected woman in her community who played a political role by arguing with the headman who represents the government.

Although an old woman, Sittil Hajja had her opinion in front of her family when they were discussing communism "those Pashas are just like the headman of Kafr Tahla. They'll never be content until the peasants die of hunger, but God is on the side of the poor" (88). She expressed her views when it comes to politics as well. El Saadawi's autobiography shows her family discussing politics of the country and talking about the king. Her uncle Zakareya says that God is in the side of the king when Sittil Hajja interrupts bringing in her own opinion by declaring that God can choose to be where he likes and that opponents of the king have all people around them (89). Although her family members would burst in laughing, she would keep pride of herself.

El Saadawi's mother, grandmother, and other women I want to examine in this

- *Azraen: Israel the angle of death.*

dissertation are perfect examples of Arab Muslim women's individual efficiency as agents of colonial to post colonial transformations. The source of all these women's strength and empowerment is not men rather it is their own wisdom and deep insight to resist a male dominated system. Sittil Hajja's and her mother's resisting the headman are clear examples of this fact.

El Saadawi's feminist agency is clear since the opening of the autobiography when she depicts herself writing her mother's name immediately after her name and then her father replace it with his name describing this fact as being "God's will". Although El Saadawi admires and trusts her father she was not convince by this answer and she found it unfair that her mother's name is removed from next to her mine and abolished her as if she never existed (1). Although Moore-Gilbert explains El Saadawi's attitude toward the removing of her mother as her critique of the institutional religious where she challenges the authority of God, I still find that a feminist agency is obvious in her attitude and that she wants her mother to be as equal as her father (45). Later in life, she ended up having a Nawal Zaynab El Saadawi name and her daughter Mona Nawal Helmi name. Putting their names in such order was the subject of many criticism and attack in the Arab Muslim world.

The *daya* plays the role of a nurse in the Arab Muslim world. She usually knows all women in the village. Her job varies between deliver women who are getting birth, examining women who are getting pregnant, and in African countries they circumcise girls before they reach the age of puberty believing that this act brings women to purity and cleanness. Also, one of the jobs they do in African countries is to tear girls' hymens the night of their wedding to prove for people of the village that the girl is virgin. Sometimes the *daya* plays a religious role by reciting Qur'an on sick women and children.

El Saadawi describes the *daya* as "an angel of death" (124). The *daya* in El Saadawi's autobiography resists her weakness as a woman by enforcing her hegemony on other women for the sake of men and under cover of religion and culture. Circumcision is not only a practice that Muslims practice. Mariam, a Christian girl, did not escape from circumcision and the *daya*'s razor when she was six years old although she is not Muslim (63). This example shows that

some of the inhuman practices towards women in the Arab Muslim world are not Islamic or derived from Qur'an; rather these are culturally rooted and sometimes are stick to one Arab Muslim country and not the other. Some recent Western feminist texts produce the Third World women, Arab Muslim women included, as a singular monolithic subject (Mohanty2002, 51) and despite the fact that circumcision is spread in Egypt, Sudan, and most African countries, People in countries like Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, and the Gulf countries react strongly and resist it. People of the previous countries chocked when they know about he practice of female circumcision. A reaction of different Arab Muslim countries toward circumcision is great evidence that women in the Arab Muslim world are not singular monolithic subject. Each country has its own privacy and this is how Western feminist should read Arab Muslim women. In Egypt circumcision might be a tolerable practice whereas it is astonishing and beyond belief in other Arab Muslim countries. Nevertheless, although she lives in Egypt, El Saadawi refuses this practice same as all women including her grandmother, Sittil Hajja, refuse it. Circumcision also shows also the misunderstanding of Western feminist who attack the Arab Muslim world for this act and link it with Islam without reading the Arab Muslim society in an insider eye.

Women in El Saadawi's autobiography show their feminist consciousness and stand as an agency in their rejection of female mutilation. El Saadawi asserts that "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" (El Saadawi 2002, 63).

### ***El Saadawi and religion***

Miriam Cooke categorizes El Saadawi among the ranks of Islamic feminist and this looks surprising to most people because El Saadawi is well known for her criticism of Islam and religions in general (Cooke 2001: 76) Cooke cited Roald who included El Saadawi among

feminists engaged in reforming but still called a rejectionist by Islamic extremist (76). For Cooke El Saadawi is not attacking Islam but God – Satan dichotomy (76). El Saadawi for example shows how local cultures and religions have been used to serve people's own economic and intellectual interests and she is right to say that. The way she uses religion in *A Daughter of Isis* clearly points out the fact that leaders, extremists, and politicians interpret religion according to their needs and interests. El Saadawi has her own reading of Islamic religion discourse and the hegemonic of religion interpretation within the Arab Islamic context.

According to El Saadawi, women repression occurs because both Arabic Culture and Islamic religion understand the power of female aspiration (Kazin et al 254). Islam, for example, sanctions circumcision. However, the custom of circumcising females still exist among some Muslim societies like Sudan and Egypt despite the fact that it is sanctioned by Islam and that is because people of these countries fear the threat of females pursuing sexual pleasure if they are untrammelled (254).

Some American feminist welcomes El Saadawi's writing about circumcision because it meets their expectations of an Arab Muslim society. However, Kazin et al claims that Western feminist misread El Saadawi's work by highlighting the themes of sexuality and religion at the expense of her larger argument which indicates that Islam itself is not the source of women's subordination rather it is the interpretation and practices of Islam that lead to such subordination and marginalization of women in the Arab Muslim World (254).

In *A Daughter of Isis*, El Saadawi declares that the first lessons she learned in philosophy, religion, and politics were through her grandmother Sittil Hajja. El Saadawi points out that her grandmother had not read the Qur'an and has not been in school, but El Saadawi heard her saying to the village headman as she waved her hand in front of his face "we are not slaves and

Allah is justice. People have come to know that through reason” (El Saadawi 2002, 7). El Saadawi continues that her father used to repeat what her grandmother said using different words “Allah is our conscience which tells us we have done something wrong when we do not stand up for justice. God’s voice comes to us from our depths and not from the pulpit of the mosque” (7). Although she learned about religion and God from her grandmother Sittil Hajja, El Saadawi demonstrates that the first time she heard about God was from her father when she was five years old. El Saadawi linked this knowledge with a feminist consciousness and gender awareness. She mentions that as soon as she learns how to write her mother’s name next to hers, her father replaced it with his informing her writing the name this way is “God’s will”. El Saadawi’s reaction towards that sentence by the father that she could not love someone who abolishes her mother’s name from next to hers as if she never exists (1). The argument over her mother’s name was the first time El Saadawi starts her struggle against institutionalized religion.

El Saadawi studies Qur’an and Sunna and never depends on the ready interpretations of these two books by Islamists of different sectors. She questions the verse of Qur’an which values males twice as much as females (Gilbert-Moore 45). She also deprecates the interpretations of the verses of Qur’an that speak about men in Paradise and how a man can enjoy seventy two virgins while “a woman is promised no one except her husband, that is if he ...is not busy with the virgins who surround him” (El Saadawi 2002, 4). El Saadawi criticizes clerical figures such as her paternal uncle, Sheikh Muhammad, who cite certain Qur’anic verses for their gender privileges. Sheikh Muhammad is married for two wives and believes that this is a right given to him by God. Gilbert-Moore find that for El Saadawi the combination of holy Qur’an and cleric provokes the kind of fatalism embodied in her aunt Rokaya, who concludes, after the violent marriage and the arbitrary divorce she received from her husband “Everything

comes from God, we praise and thank ye, God, for the sweet and the bitter” (45). Even when El Saadawi recalls her circumcision she remembers the *daya* Um Mahammad after cutting her clitoris with a razor saying that “it was the will of God and she had done his will” (11). El Saadawi asks herself many times if circumcision is really God’s will. What evokes El Saadawi is the perfection of creation because she as some others interprets the Qur’an’s silence on the issue of circumcision on the basis that God create people to be perfect (Davis et al: 121)

El Saadawi maintains that “The written world for me become an act of rebellion against injustice exercised in the name of religion or morals, or love” (El Saadawi 2002, 292). She wrote and worked all her life against all forms of social injustice that are performed and exercised in the name of God and religion. She refuses the legitimization of women’s oppression using the discourse of religion. She criticizes and refuses the use of language’s power to control women’s vision “love and justice...shift meanings as we grow older” ((15)”. These very same words turn on “a sword over my head, a veil over my mind and face” (16).

El Saadawi condemns the politicians’ use of religion to fool people and rule them. She recalls Sheikh Al – Azhar and the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood playing games with the people in the name of religion and God. (88-9) El Saadawi’s father also condemned the use of religion by the Wafdist party and other political parties in Egypt that time and he also believes that they play games with the people with what they called “the demonstration system” (88) and hiding behind the constitution. He also said in front of his daughter Nawal El Saadawi that Sheikhs of Al – Azhar and leaders of Muslim Brotherhood were playing the same game with the people in the name of “Allah and religion” (89).

El Saadawi recalls the story when she was only thirteen at school in Helwan, an Egyptian City, and the Arabic teacher asked them as students to write a piece from their imagination.

When the teacher returned the piece to her he was very upset and he started screaming on her calling her stupid, and gave her a zero for the piece of work she wrote. The teacher remarked on her paper on red “a sick imagination born of a lack of real faith. You need to know your religion better” (15). The piece that El Saadawi presented to her Arabic Teacher was a sixty page novel she wrote previously. She mentioned the heroin name So’ad which indicates that the piece is nothing but *memoirs of a child called So’ad* which was published later in 1990. Later in her autobiography El Saadawi reveals that she wrote in the piece she handled as an assignment a sentence which says “heavens were unjust” (233). Yet, El Saadawi’s rejected the teacher attitude toward her piece of writing and considered him just a teacher who represents the values of traditional Egyptian society who saw in her work infidelity because it did not go with his own interpretation of religion and cultural norms.

El Saadawi indicates clearly that what she could not stand were always “the teacher, the rules of grammar, and religion” (216). She asserts that “no – one 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 on one’s throat like a knot and stopped there, in choosing meanings that one’s reasons refused, explaining that made things more confused, in proffering threats of hell – fire, or hopes of paradise where there was nothing to do except loll on sofas, or sleep, or eat”. (6) Since the age of thirteen El Saadawi was aware of religion and how others interpret it the way it meets their interests. She has her own interpretation of religion, paradise, hell, and other daily practices of people which have its own interpretation in religion.

El Saadawi does not only go against Islamic and Qur’anic interpretation, but rather she goes against all religious practices that fool the mentality and intelligence of people due to the corrupted interpretation of religious leaders and other clerics. For example, El Saadawi knew



from her Jewish classmate that in Torah, the holy book of Jewish, that God speaks about menstruation and that during the seven days of menstruation a woman is unclean and she should not touch anything sacred. Once the woman is cleansed she must slaughter a lamb, a female dove, or a female pigeon and offer to God to forgive her sins and to cleanse her. El Saadawi claims that she thanked God that she is a Muslim and does not need to offer anything to God after her menstruation days.

However, El Saadawi told the story of her classmate to her father and showed the reader through his answer another interpretation of religion which might constitute the moderate stream of interpretation. El Saadawi listened to the story and explained to her that Torah and Gospels are like the Qur'an and they are revealed by the same God as guidance to people. El Saadawi's father adds that she as a Muslim has to believe in all three books. Other Islamic leaders would not like this interpretation and would say that Qur'an is the only book to believe in and all other books have been misused and changed a lot.

Interestingly, El Saadawi mentioned the role of women in the Islamic history. In particular, she detailed Khadija's, the Prophet's Mohammad first wife, role in empowering Islam and assisting Prophet Mohammad to spread his word. El Saadawi explains that Khadija was the first Muslim to convert to believe in Mohammad as a Prophet of God and that "After that people flocked to Islam, but were it not for her, her husband might not have engaged in his mission and founded Islam" (248). El Saadawi showed how she is proud of Khadija because she is a woman like her. Moreover, El Saadawi mentioned that she used to refer to Khadija to challenge her uncle Sheikh Muhammad when he claims that "...in the Qur'an Allah did not address himself to women, and had not mentioned a single woman a part from Mary the mother of our Lord Jesus" (248). Of course, El Saadawi did not depend on her uncle's interpretation and opinion of women

in Qur'an and read it right through from beginning to end for herself. Then she found out that what her uncle asserted is just true and no woman's name is mentioned in Qur'an but Mary's. After finding this fact in the Qur'an, El Saadawi began questioning the wisdom behind Qur'an's ignorance to women who had fought and died for Islam. Also, she started to question some bad men's presence in Qur'an like Lot, Majuj, Yajuj, or Isaac and Jacob whereas women like Belkis, queen of Sheba, was neglected. El Saadawi went to her father to explain women's absence from Qur'an, but her father's answer could not satisfy her this time because his answers were like "It's God's will" (248), or "There are things in religion we believe with our hearts because the human mind is incapable of penetrating God's wisdom" (248). However, my own interpretation for the fact that women's names are ignored or not revealed directly in Qur'anic verses is that because Qur'an honors women. Concealing the names of women in Qur'an is a sign of respect and dignity and not out of ignorance or marginalization. Qur'an refer to women in Qur'an by not using the women's known name but some indication to the woman by using words or phrases to describe them or to identify them. There is a verse in Qur'an called "the Women" and no verse is called "the Men". The verse of "The Women" talks about women's rights in many sectors of life and shows guidance to men on how to treat their women fairly and gently "And give the women [upon marriage] their [bridal] gifts graciously" (Qur'an 4:4), and "O you who have believed, it is not lawful for you to inherit women by compulsion" (Qur'an 4:19). I think not stating women's names in Qur'an counts for and not against Islam religion and Qur'an. In real life we do not call the queen, for example, by her first name but we use words like your Majesty or mistress out of respect and dignify and this is exactly what Qur'an does to show the great value of women in Islam. Qur'an mentions different things and names like Iblis, Al - Jinn, Abu Jahl, Al - Hadid (iron), As - Shms (the sun), Al - Layl (the night), and An - Najm (the star).

Mentioning people or things by name is not an indication of glorifying or honoring because sometimes Qur'an mentions names of people who were against Islam and figures that are evil.

### ***Nation in El Saadawi's A Daughter of Isis***

The first time El Saadawi starts talking about her nation is early in her autobiography *A Daughter of Isis* where she directs the attention of the reader to the fact that a small group of men and some women who write and talk like men in her country who do not believe that there is such thing that relate to women's rights. Rather they humanize the issue by asserting that only important issues that are related to the nation and people in general regardless of being women or men. El Saadawi believes that such people are concealing gender oppression of women behind their calling of human rights. She considers women half of the society and there should be no differentiation between liberation of women and liberation of the country as a whole. Moreover, El Saadawi emphasizes that distinguishing between women's liberation and country's liberation is only a creation of the class patriarchal system that occupies her society (El Saadawi 2002, 10).

Nation to Nawal El Saadawi is the country she loves and sings songs to during her childhood and youth. This nation turns to be a source of fear and then "...becomes a prison or a policeman in a fez, a skull cap, a turban or a hat, speaking English, or classical or colloquial Arabic, or a dialect from the Gulf states as he pursues me day and night?" (16). For El Saadawi, nation was a word people recite in their slogans and her own freedom is much more important for her than her country's liberation (233). El Saadawi always links her own liberation with her country's liberation and if she has to choose she values her own liberation.

El Saadawi was born in a family where the sense of nationality is high. Her father was loyal to his country and opposed the King and his government and stood against the British occupation of Egypt and the colonial rule (5, 6). She depicts her father reading government and

opposition newspapers and always talks about the governmental corruption, the British colonization, and the ruling class. El Saadawi's father understands well the political, economical, and political views of his country and he has his own analysis of the poverty and ignorance that Egypt faces. He always says people must wake up and change the regime. On the other hand, El Saadawi claims that for herself politics remained a dark world that she knew just a little about. Despite the fact that she understands just a little about politics, she participates in demonstrations provoked by the love of her country (260).

The first political demonstration that El Saadawi witnessed was when she was seven years old (79). She describes people flooded in Muharram Bey Street when she was returning back from school and how she fell under their legs. Obviously, national consciousness started with El Saadawi when she was a child at school when she evaluated her history books that she used in school and found them bores and non sense. These history books, for her, mentions nothing about the British invasion of Egypt in 1882 because British still occupied Egypt that time. Also, history books mention nothing about the king or the political parties and nothing about modern Egypt.

In Helwan Secondary School for girls where she lives as a boarder student, El Saadawi practices her first lessons in politics and nationality. Among other female boarders, she learned about the banned parties in Egypt like the Communist Party. Also, in Helwan Secondary School she meets Fikreya and Samia who also have national consciousness and political orientations. Samia, whose father is in the Communist Party, a secret party that time, gave El Saadawi the Communist Party's newspaper and insisted on her to read secretly and not to allow anyone to see it with her (213). The newspaper called *Al – Gamaheer* (The Masses). El Saadawi read it and could understand nothing of it and then decided to show it to her father who supports the Wafdist

Party because it opposes the king and the British occupation. Her father claims that he knows nothing about the Communist Party apart from what he reads in the governmental newspapers about it. Though, her father advised her to keep a way from politics by asserting that politics “is a game without principles” (214) and when she asks him why he participates in all these demonstration then, he stated that “Popular demonstrations are a different thing”. 214)

Sometimes El Saadawi, as many other Arab Muslim women, seems ambivalent when it comes to nationalism (Moore-Glibert 45). In the times when she participate n a demonstration, nationality becomes a “break down the barriers between body and reality, between body and mind, uniting the parts with the whole, the earth with heaven” (El Saadawi 2002, 229). The ambivalence of El Saadawi is represented in her unified discourse about the social and the physical. El Saadawi also links the degradation of the Egyptian people with the neo- colonialism when she explains the circumstances of people after the ending of the British occupation of Egypt which lasted for seventy two years “As a rural doctor I lived close to village people..., witnessed what the triple scourge of poverty, ignorance and sickness did to them” (290).

Recalling Arab Muslim women from history and showing the role they played in empowering their countries and the Arab Muslim civilization is clear in El Saadawi autobiography. She does not only portray herself advancing the crowds, holding a banner in her hand while participating in a nationalist demonstration in Egypt, but rather sees herself “holding up the torch of liberation above our heads, as though I were Joan of Arc, or Zaraq’a Al-Yamama leading her country for freedom” (287).

Elaborating the role of Egyptian women in the Egyptian nationalist demonstrations takes two dimensions in El Saadawi’s autobiography. First, El Saadawi shows that participating in demonstrations and politics is not a woman’s business. Second, she shows young women

participating in the demonstrations and being parts of political parties early in the 1940s and 1950s in Egypt. Some women that are presented in El Saadawi's autobiography are examples of my assertion above. Fikreya and Samia are two classmates of El Saadawi at the Helwan Secondary school and they have their own views about politics and participating in nationalist demonstrations. Fikreya is shown by El Saadawi as a woman who has a strong political and national consciousness. Fikreya is critical of the ruling regime and she used to utilize her paint - brush to draw King Farouk in the form of a sheep ready to be slaughtered while drawing men of the government as clowns in a circus. Samia also critical of the corrupted regime in Egypt uses her tongue instead of the paint-brush to criticize the government's men, the king, and their relation with the British (212). Later, El Saadawi found that Samia is a member of the Communist Party after she handed the Party's newspaper to her to read. El Saadawi illustrated that Samia always made her feel guilty when she blames her that she is setting there writing and living in a world of imagination while the country is in crisis. This shows the high level of the national consciousness that Samia carries for her country and her people. Samia is the one who informed her classmates about a big patriotic and national demonstration that is taking place the next day and all schools are participating in it.

The night of the demonstration the girls did not sleep and in the morning they gathered in the courtyard were supposed to stay in school according the Ministry of Education's rules. However, after they heard that the Helwan School for Boys is participating in the demonstration, they began shouting "we want to join the demonstration" (227). Even though the headmistress closed the outer gate with a heavy lock and chain, hundreds of young girls managed to open the gate by force which indicates not only the girls dream of librating their country through participating the boys in the demonstration, but also the girls hatred against chains, locks , to free

and liberate themselves as well. Nawal El Saadawi found herself leading the demonstration and chanting “Long live Egypt in Freedom” and “My country, my country I give you my heart and my love” (29). That was the first demonstration that El Saadawi participated in. However, that demonstration led to her expulsion from school, punished for leading a national demonstration as Ministry of Education had forbidden all demonstrations, but later her father returned her back to it. Later and during her university life, El Saadawi states that she participated in many national demonstrations “impelled by the love I had for my country” (261) although politics for her was a dark world.

## CHAPTER # 6

## **FATIMA MERNISSI'S *DREAMS OF TRESPASS: TALES OF A HAREM GIRLHOOD*, A FEMINIST INVENTED IN HAREM AND NOT MADE BY THE WEST**

*“The frontier indicates the line of power because wherever there is a frontier, there are two kinds of creatures walking on Allah's earth, the powerful on one side, and the powerless on the other. I asked Mina how would I know on which side I stood, and her answer was quick, short and very clear: “If you can't get out, you are on the powerless side.” (Mernissi 1994, 242)*

### ***Introduction***

In her autobiography *Dreams of Trespass: Tale of A Harem Girlhood*, Fatima Mernissi describes herself as a girl growing up in a harem in Morocco. As her autobiography opens, Mernissi presents herself as a precocious child who is close to her mother. It is from her mother and maternal grandmother, named Yasmina that she comes to realize some important facts of life, specifically as it relates to women living in Moroccan harems. Mernissi puts a great deal of thought into every aspect of life. For example, when her mother says that her goal for her daughter, the author, that she should be happy “one hundred percent of the time,” (Mernissi 1994, 81) immediately begins to think about how a person would go about achieving this. She puts the same level of thought into understanding all aspects of life and especially wants to understand and explore the ideas of a frontier, or boundary, between the harem and the outside world. Mernissi knows personally about the way to escape the harem by climbing onto the terrace and going through a neighboring house and says that this method of escaping the restrictions of the house is symbolically important to the women of the harem because it is one of



the few instances in which they take control of some part of their lives. Mernissi takes in all that her mother tells her but is not personally ready to commit to either a life within the harem or a life outside the protected family unit. Mernissi eventually comes to accept the need to live outside the harem and does live up to her mother's dreams of making a life for herself, and of having the freedom to do as she wants with that life. To sum up, the harem's life in particular as described in Mernissi's autobiography rapidly disappeared in the wake of Morocco's independence from France in 1956 as she indicated her showing the women of harem participating in a march against the French occupation (119).

### ***Who is Fatima Mernissi?***

Fatima Mernissi is a Moroccan nonfiction writer, a university professor, feminist, and sociologist who was born in Fez, Morocco in 1940. Mernissi belongs to a wealthy family of landowners and agriculturalist. She lived in a privileged family while many women of her generation were poor and illiterate. Yet, despite the fact that she lived in an upper – class home, she did not escape the life of a formal harem at her family's house. Mernissi grew up during the French Occupation of Morocco and the World War 11 and lived in harem (Bullock 137). Mernissi received her early education at the Qur'anic school and after completing a degree in political science at University of Mohammad V, she was awarded a scholarship to study at the Sorbonne in Paris. She later moved to the United States of America to attend Brandeis University at Massachusetts State where she earned her Ph. D. in Sociology. After completing her education, Mernissi returned to Rabat, Morocco where she became a professor of sociology at University of Mohammad V. Mernissi has served as a visiting professor at Harvard University and at the University of California, Berkley. This international experience allowed her to widen

her vision about how the West look at the East and Islam in particular and this is why she wrote most of her books directly to either English or French (Kamrava 205).

Born in Fez city, one of the most important centers for nationalists during the time of Moroccan's occupation, Mernissi benefited from her country's decision to admit girls to the nationalist school that instructed its students in French. Mernissi mastered the French language and years later she started writing in French. After she graduated from Mohammad V University as a sociologist, she started writing her non fiction work mostly in the academic field. Most of her writing examines the dynamics of contemporary Muslim women. She is engaged in work that explores conflicts between "sociopolitical forces of rabid urbanization and fundamentalist conversation" (Hawley 296). For Mernissi, the postcolonial discourse has turned toward fundamentalists' discourse throughout Muslim countries. For her, this is a distortion of the spirit of Islam since Islamic religion confirms equality between men and women (296).

Mernissi's own education is vivid in the work she handles because it discloses a comprehensive understanding and a well knowledge of the ancient Islamic poetry, philosophy, and religious texts. In almost all her work, Mernissi asserts that feminist is compatible with the origin of Islam as it is practiced during the time of Prophet Mohammad whereas current Islamic leaders those days seek to maintain authority over people, mainly women, by denying their rights to access political and social power through interpreting the spirit of the religion to serve their desires (296, 7).

Writing about feminism in Islam and its reception in the West, the historical development of Islamic thought, the veil, the harem, and the Western thought and feminism, most of Mernissi's work is written from an Orientalism lense. Her books are on topics that constitute a positive reception in the West as in the east due to their richness of information that clarifies

stereotypical images and misunderstood subjects like the harem, veil, and Islam. Some of her work includes:

- *Beyond the veil: male – female dynamics in modern Muslim society* (1975; rev. 1987).
- *Islam and democracy: fear of the modern world* (1992)
- *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of women's rights in Islam* (1991)
- *Scheherazade Goes West: Different Cultures, Different harems* (2002)
- *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Inquiry* (1993)
- *The Harem Within* (1994)
- *Doing Daily Battle: Interviews with Moroccan Women* (1988) and her autobiography that I am going to analyze for the purpose of my dissertation:

- *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* (1999) (Google. *Dreams of Trespass* is the only book Mernissi wrote directly in English and then translated to Arabic and French. Most of her books are wrote in French and then translated into Arabic and other languages (Fatima Mernissi's Page. 15. Feb. 2011).

### **Women's Agency in *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of A Harem Girlhood*:**

Western feminists claim that Third World women, Arab Muslim women are part of Third World women) are subservient, obedient, and learned from Western feminism, that liberates most of the world's women, to resist the injustice (Goodwin 1995). Some of these Western feminists are de Beauvoir, Wittig, Butler, and Cixous. These feminists universalize their claims on all women of the world and treat them as one singular unit ignoring all the differences of experiences that different women from different places in the world have. *Dreams of Trespass* reveals the misguided perceptions of the reality of Arab Muslim's status and to show from the

point of view of Mernissi, as an insider, that Arab Muslim women are empowered and not weak as they usually are perceived by the Western feminist.

In *Dreams of Trespass* Mernissi presented women of harem in her family as an example to represent Arab Muslim women in general and in the Postcolonial era in particular. She presents them as agents of cultural transformations with their strength and power (Dean 4). They are strong and have to resist the actual presence of the male dominated society even when presented within a harem culture. Some of them claim the power of the heroines who are existed in the tales they tell and some try to copy other heroines. Women in harem recall Egyptian feminists who were leading women's movement that time like Huda Shacraoui [Shaarawi] and Aisha Taymour (129, 130). Moreover, *Dreams of Trespass* challenges Western feminist concepts and principles that they usually use to evaluate Arab women's strength and power and confronts Western feminist with the fact that the measures they use should be replaced by principles from within Arab women's culture and through the Arabic and Islamic context only. Mernissi's confrontation of the Western feminist is considered the spirit of the Transnational Feminist Theory which emphasizes on studying women's status within their social, economical, historical, and political context.

Claims of both sides Fundamentalists and Western feminism were refuted by Mernissi. She does not only tackle Western misperceptions that Arab Islamic societies oppress women and assign them the status of slaves or Jarriyas, but she also navigates the argument between Islamic society and Western thought. For fundamentalists, the issue of women's rights is another Western occupation to impose Western culture on the Arab Muslim world. She refutes their claims by asserting that Islam elevated women's rights more than any other religion and that it is their own interpretation that intends to stop any women's intention of empowerment (McGarvey

26). She also finds out that women through all Arab Islamic history were able to tell stories within their patriarchal societies and here lies their strength and power. Mernissi shows herself as an example since she narrates her own life story within the structure of harem system to testify women's equality as protected by Qur'an although centuries later interpretation of Qur'an and Hadith were utilized for the benefit of the political system (Dean 8).

Adding to that, Mernissi's personal experience as a child lived within an Arab Muslim family lays the foundation for her own feminism which later allows her to argue in favor of feminism and Islam (Al-Hassan 113). Mernissi not only describes her own path to be a feminist, but also shows many other women's feminist aspiration like her mother, maternal grandmother, her cousin Chama, and her aunt Habiba. In showing these women's feminist aspiration, Mernissi tends to dispute the notion that such feminist movements are inspired by or imported from the West. Smartly, Mernissi not only refutes the idea that feminist movement in the Arab World is a Western import, but also refuses the accusation of the Islamic fundamentalists that the Arab Women's movement and feminist consciousness are Western influence that aim to damage the family unit, the morals of the Arab Muslim female, and to devastate the conservative Muslim society through spreading liberation ideas that assign women rights that contradict Islam like the right of free movement without a male safeguarding. Furthermore, Al-Hassan contends that Mernissi makes the connection between male fundamentalist Muslims and Western feminists who deny the fact that Arab Muslim women's movement is a pure Arab Muslim women's movement which comes out from feminists' aspiration and not by instructions from the West since Arab Muslim women are aware of the fact that they are deprived under the fundamentalist's system (114).

Like the Islamic fundamentalists Mernissi shows his own interpretation as a conservative Muslim. He who presents a version of how life is supposed to be separated between men and women as Allah wanted it. Mernissi's father also thinks that this separation is right and that it creates a system of harmony and respect. Contradicting her father, Mernissi says that the women she knows are constantly thinking of ways to trespass into the property held by the men. This seems to be both symbolic and literal. The women want to be allowed more freedom of movement in a physical sense but also want more rights. This tangible and intangible is typical of Mernissi's viewing things including life in the harem.

Mernissi presents different passive female characters in her autobiography although they are trapped in harem within the frontiers. Mernissi herself suffered the sever restriction of her life and right to movement, yet women of harem including herself were good examples of resistance and feminist inspiration to make their dreams of trespass come true since they believed that "a woman could be totally powerless, and still give meaning to her life by dreaming about flight" (Mernissi 1994, 154)...and "True a dream alone without the bargaining power to go with it does not transform the world or make the walls vanish, but it does help you keep a hold of dignity" (Mernissi 1994, 214).

Chandra Talpade Mohanty stresses the concept of women's solidarity as a way to enhance women's rights and justice in the anti – globalization struggle. However, Mohanty who believes that "feminist solidarity... constitutes the most principled way to cross borders" (Mohanty 2004, 7) also argues that women's solidarity can only be achieved if feminist theorists and women activists are aware of and attentive to the marginalized women's voices and experiences (242). For Mernissi women's solidarity as a communal society within harem was the main element that constitute their patience, joy, and resistance. Mernissi mentions the

expression women's solidarity five times in her autobiography. Women's solidarity appears in many places in *Dreams of Trespass* in both the Medina harem where Mernissi's family lived and in the farm harem. For example, although Tamou is a co-wife of Mernissi's grandfather she was helped by Yasmina Mernissi's grandmother and one of the many co-wives in the harem. Even though they are married to the same man "their two story house outside the main building became the official headquarters of both Tamou's horseback riding competition and women's solidarity" (Mernissi 1994, 54). Another example of women's solidarity even between the co-wives is the example of Yaya, another wife of the grandfather who feels homesick is helped by Tamou and Yasmina in planting her a native banana tree to help her feel more at home and to exceed her sadness every time she sees her native tree (55). Women's solidarity here exceeds the instinct jealousy of women.

Women's solidarity was in its ideal image in the courtyard where the women of harem gather. Mernissi indicates the high sensitivity of the issue of women's solidarity to stand strongly against the decisions that are taken by men. Women's solidarity reaches the level that they were willing to put aside their own entertainment to please Mina's desire for information about her home country which indicates the attitudes of the women toward each other. However, there were women in harem who used to break this solidarity and agrees with the men's decisions since they were benefited from the harem life like Grandmother Lalla Mani and Lalla Radia. Mernissi's, mother, a woman whose feminist consciousness is aware of the necessity of being solid against women's unequal treatment, explains that women like the Grandmother and Lalla Radia are responsible for women's suffering and they are much more dangerous on women's progress than men. Such women for Mernissi's mom are responsible of the harem life

they and other women live “If women’s solidarity existed, we would not be stuck on this terrace” (Mernissi 1994, 141).

Mernissi does not only raise the importance of women’s solidarity through the examples she examines of women from the harem where she lived, but also she recalled examples of the issue of women’s solidarity for women in history. In the story of Princess Budur that she took from the *One Thousand and One Nights* famous tales, she introduces Budur in danger and her life is threatened by death until she reveals her secret to Princess Hayat al-Nufus. Choosing women’s solidarity principle which was proven to be the good choice for Princess Budur, she managed to stay alive when Princess Hayat al-Nufus promised to keep her secret, help her in having a false ritual virginity ceremony, and to save her life (142). The example of Budur tale as taken from One Thousand and one Nights and as historical evidence demonstrates the value of women solidarity that managed to save Princess Budur life.

Women solidarity implies the existence of positive women in Mernissi’s harem in her *Dreams of Trespass*. One of the most passive and attentive images she portrayed is the image of her own mother. Similar to Nawal El Saadawi’s mother, Mernissi’s mother teaches her daughter to stand up for herself if she wants things in life. Mernissi’s mother role in motivating her daughter in achieving her goals in life is apparent. She believed in her daughter since the day she was born. Mernissi was born just an hour after her cousin Samir, a male, but Mernissi’s mother immediately defies tradition by insisting that there be a joyous celebration over the birth of both children and not just the boy child. Similar to El Saadawi’s mother, Mernissi’s mother insisted on her daughter’s education and determined that her daughter moves from the Qur’anic School to the National school which taught in French. Furthermore, her determination led not only to the immediate transfer of Mernissi to the National school, but also to permit all the girls



in the harem to be transferred to the National school as well. Education was one of the first things that women insist on offering for their girls as the first step on freedom. As El Saadawi, Fatima Mernissi mentions that she had her first taste of freedom walking the distance between her gate and the school because freedom was forbidden by life in the harem. However, when Mernissi's mother asks to be allowed to go to a community school where literacy is taught the family denies the request after discussing the matter and she consoles herself by the fact that her daughters are going to have a better life and will be part of the change that is occurring in the country. All the previous actions and thinking show the positive attitude and the feminist consciousness in a world with a strong gender bias.

Mernissi's mother has a forward and rebellious thinking. She had emotional support and clear encouragement from several women in the harem, including Mernissi's young cousin Chama who is openly rebellious. Mernissi's mother also supported by the divorced aunt Habiba who also lives with her extended family in the harem and believes in Mernissi's mother's arguments but cannot express this support publicly due to her precarious situation in the household as a divorced women who has no man to protect her. Mernissi's mother has a high level of feminist consciousness and when her husband and the men of the family oppose the American goods that women buy such as chewing gums, scarves, red lipstick, and cigarettes, she states that they have no objection other than the fact that these goods are something the women choose since there is nothing wrong with the gum and that the men objection is that women choose to chew without consulting the men (187).

Another example of assertive and strong women in Mernissi's autobiography is her maternal Grandmother Yasmina who lives in the rural harem with her husband and his group of wives. She explains to Mernissi the role of harem in society and depicts that Mernissi's life will

be better than that of Yasmina or Mernissi's own mother. She also told her that she will be educated and different from her mother and grandmother. Overall, Yasmina makes a series of predictions for Mernissi's future and these seem to do with things the grandmother desired for herself including that Mernissi will "devour books" (64), learn languages and "have a passport" (64). Finally, Yasmina predicts that Mernissi will "speak like a religious authority" (64). All these predictions seem to be what the grandmother lacks and wishes to achieve through her granddaughter. It is crucial to claim that most of what Yasmina predicted has come true. Fatima Mernissi became a prominent scholar and an influential Islamic feminist and thinker in the Arab Muslim world whose work transformed all over the world to reach the voice of Arab Muslim women and to allow others especially Western feminists read Arab Muslim women in their own lenses and to shatter any stereotypes that surrounded them for years.

Mernissi herself records her voice as a woman who lived in the Arab Muslim world experiencing the harem life in an early age of her life and as a confused child who was asking questions of her elders struggling to know the answers and understanding what these answers mean. Al-Hasan claims that these childish confused tone transformed into a mature poetic voice tells many lessons she learned later from her elders' life's lessons (Al-Hassan 115). By raising her voice, Mernissi shows the reader who she has become rather than only recalling a life story that was rich of events about her life as a child (116). As Mernissi ages and matures, she studies the stories of lives of those women around her, taking the advice of Mina the servant telling Mernissi that she must always draw on her strength. She also learned from her cousin Chama about magic, incantations meant to create love to keep love a life in a relationship. Above all, one great thing she learned from her mother is to desire for freedom for herself and to live a life that is a one hundred percent filled with happiness. This could be a way that Mernissi

“revenge” for her mother’s life of unhappiness which put a burden on her that she worries about the possibility of failing to achieve the mother’s desire.

Women in Mernissi’s *Dreams of Trespass* not only have their women’s solidarity, but also aware of gender bias in their society. Mernissi gives the example of her mother seeing Samir’s temper tantrums and tell her not to allow him to throw these tantrums on her and to learn to rebel and at the same time to weigh situations and decides when she can successfully rebel as she is not allowed to rebel against her mother if she gets mad on her. Mernissi’s mother teaches her that she cannot allow Samir to rebel alone, and that Mernissi has to stand up for herself because crying on insult by him only invites more insults. The wise maternal grandmother Yasmina advices the Mernissi’s mother to stop comparing her daughter to Samir and instead she has to encourage her to become more protective of other younger children of the family saying that is another way for forge a strong personality. Moreover, although Samir and Mernissi were close as children and spend much time with each other, Samir eventually expelled from the women’s side of the house after several women in the hammam noticed that he had “a man’s stare” (239). Women in *Dreams of Trespass* challenge their social norms in many aspects. Some manifestations of these challenges are: pursuing education, purchasing American goods, desire to share same place with men like the desire of Mernissi to stay with her male cousin Samir, and finally their many attempts to trespass the frontiers of their harem which ended up with success and uncovering of the veil after the independence in 1956.

### ***Mernissi’s Harem:***

Most of the work Mernissi has done so far entitled by the harem word like *the harem and the West, the Harem Within, The Political Harem, and Dreams of Trespass: Tales of A Harem Girlhood*. Out of all these books, specifically *Dreams of Trespass* is a “fictional biography”

(Rhouni 123) as stated by Mernissi herself. It is an autobiography novel in which Mernissi indicates that “feminism does not come to me from the West, but from the harem women” (123). The previous quotation tells a lot about the impact of life within harem on not only Mernissi’s reading of her own society and culture, but also on her writings and reception in the West. Moreover, in this autobiography she attempts to locate feminism in Moroccan culture and refutes it in the Western location that Western feminists usually claim.

To make that distinguish between harem perception in the Western mind and the harem she herself lived in, Mernissi demystifies the site of harem as a place where women gather to have pleasure and to invent ways in order to resist the harem and its outcome on women and family. Rhouni’s reading of harem in Mernissi’s *Dreams of Trespass* explains that this kind of harem as a household existed among urban and middle classes that aimed to seclude women during the French occupation of Morocco. According to Rhouni, Mernissi’s talking about harem life is something not valid in the twenty one century because Moroccan young people now do not know what is harem since harem is something vanished years ago. She also claims that portraying harem by Mernissi meant to attract the Western audience since they are interested in reading materials that show Arab Muslim subordination (132).

As an Arab Muslim woman, I maintain that harem still exists in many parts of the Arab world and may be in different forms. Harem word as used in the Middle East (Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine) and the Gulf countries (Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates) in general means women accompanied with a sense of protection or safeguarding. However, Mernissi uses harem to mean women when she talks about women watching a movie in the Cinema (122). I associate Women as plural to the word harem and the one woman as a singular to mean *hurma* whereas the place where women kept in and men are not allowed in as a

Mahram which means exactly what Mernissi talks about in *Dreams of Trespass* mostly as harem. Mahram as I associate it, from my understanding as a woman who came from a Middle Eastern culture, means the place where women of the family should stay in and not show up when a man, usually not a blood relative, enters the house. Mahram in Arabic language and as understood by most of Arab Muslim countries also means the man who safeguards a woman when she travels or moves outside the mahram the place. A Muslim woman is not allowed to travel a lone without a Mahram. The Mahram who is supposed to accompany the woman in her travel should be a blood relative like the brother, the father, the uncle, the nephew, or the husband.

Defining the word harem, its context, and the women's reaction towards it are detailed by Mernissi in her *Dreams of Trespass*. Mernissi sums up her understanding of the word harem by claiming that "A harem had to do with men and women – that was a fact. It also had to do with a house, walls, and the streets – that was another fact" (Mernissi 1994, 46). Makward maintains that Mernissi's discourse on harem associated with men when she asserts that a harem was a place where a man sheltered his family and this means that the man is central to the notion of harem which indicates that women are trapped within patriarchal modes of representation (Makward 132). Mernissi was right when claiming that man is central to harem definition because without the orders of men no harem would be existed. Despite the fact that Mernissi indicates in her autobiography that harem is associated with men, women sometimes play the role of Mahram as it means the safeguard when women are instructed by men to safeguard other women. Women Safeguards usually the older and wiser women. For example, a woman could move outside the mahram as a place but she is supposed to be accompanied with other woman or women. Mernissi gave examples of women accompany each others when they go to hammam the public bath.

Explaining the word harem, Mernissi contends that although people associate harem with eroticism the harem where she lived had little of that. Mernissi's harem consisted of her paternal grandmother (Lalla Mani), her father and his older brother, her mother, her uncle's wife, the daughters of her uncles, some extended family, and the servants of the house. Each of the men has only a single wife though each has several children. The extended family members were divorced or widowed aunts who have nowhere else to go. When life in the harem is discussed and anyone suggests that there might come a time when harems stop to exist, Mernissi's father usually asks the question, what would the poor women relatives do? Recalling her father's answer, Mernissi introduces to us a positive side of the harem existence when she presented the domestic harems in particular as harems that are focused more on the use of a single home for the men of a family with the men pooling their resources to provide for that extended family.

The fact that the place where women stay is called a harem means that the women are enclosed and sealed. Harem according to Mernissi forces the separation between women and men and women and the outside world by employing the gate man or the door keeper Ahmad to guard the door and watch women's movements by not allowing them to go outside and forbidden men from outside to come inside. The only case he allows women to go outside is when he has orders from the men of the family usually Mernissi's father or uncle. Harem is not only the courtyard of the house but it could be any other place with one condition and that is only women allowed in like the terrace were women used to tell stories and play in Mernissi's family house, the *hammam* or the public bath were they used to bath and gather as women only.

Life in the harem is basically split into two segments. The life in the courtyard and on the lower level of the house is stricter and there is less room for openness and individuality. Upstairs, this is less the case. Those who live upstairs are those with less importance in the family

structure, such as women who are divorced or widowed and have nowhere else to go. Mernissi asserts that there are various relatives taking advantage of the rooms upstairs at any given time and that those living there vary regularly. One who lives upstairs is Aunt Habiba, a divorced woman who says she will never return to her husband though he kept all her property, leaving her at the mercy of her relatives. Mernissi and Samir often go upstairs where aunt Habiba tells stories. Sometimes the children are ushered out of aunt Habiba's quarters and sent home before they are ready. Sometimes they are allowed to spend the night. Mernissi says that her aunt's ability to take her listeners on great adventures makes Mernissi long to become "an expert storyteller" (19) as well.

Furthermore, Mernissi maintains that there are two types of harem the first one of these harems is the domestic harem like the one she and her family lived in and she does not think that polygamy is a main factor of this kind of harem so the closest definition or explanation of domestic harems is that "What defines a harem is not polygamy, but men's desire to seclude their wives, and their wish to maintain an extended household rather than break into nuclear units" (Mernissi 1994, 35). The second harem according to Mernissi is the imperial harem which consisted of a master with a group of women usually his wives and in a footnote she indicates that the second kind of harem disappeared with the fall of the Ottoman Empire twenty or thirty years before events of her autobiography took place (36).

Mernissi contends that entertainment is important in the harem and when the chores for the day are finished, everyone rushes to find out if aunt Habiba is telling stories on a particular day or if Chama is acting out a play. Sometimes the men go to the movies but the women are seldom allowed to go. On those rare occasions when they were allowed, the women and children were accompanied by male cousins and Ahmed. The group would reserve four rows but would

sit in the center two, leaving an row unoccupied both in front and behind them to ensure that no strange men got too close.

Mernissi introduces another face of the harem and that is the harem with no walls where her maternal grandmother, Yasmina, lived in the farm. However, Yasmina states that the separation between men and women still exists in the harem of the farm despite the fact that this harem has no walls and she illustrates the example where men from outside the harem still turn away their eyes if it happens and they see a woman of the harem as a sign of recognizing that by merely looking upon the woman he is trespassing into another man's harem. Mernissi affirms that the rules of the harem are usually not in women's interests and while men pay all efforts to keep trespassers a way, women themselves dream of trespassing.

The concept of harem is questioned by Mernissi and at the same time she explores the notion of frontiers or boundaries. She starts her discourse about harem by associating it with both visible and invisible boundaries introducing them as being historically constructed. In her initial chapter "My Harem Frontiers", she is initializing the challenging nature of harem and frontiers in the Muslim world (Ahmida 88). Most of the time, she was not happy about the harem which kept her inside, but she is pleased with frontier because the rules regarding it comparing to the harems are "crystal clear" (3). "For Mernissi, the frontier is arbitrary determined as "an invisible line in the mind of the warriors" (Mernissi 1994, 2). When Mernissi talks about the frontiers she draws up to the division of Morocco between the French and the Spanish the time it was occupied. However, comparing the frontiers to the harem itself and concluding that the division of Morocco between Spain and France is similar to the division between women of harem and the outside world.



Interestingly, the comparison Mernissi holds between the French's frontier and the harem in her family's house show the similarity and the difference between colonizers and colonized. Mernissi depicts the frontiers between the Medina where her family lived and the Villa Nouvelle where the French lived in the other part of the city (23). Although, the French Villa Nouvelle was much more beautiful than the Medina in all means, still "The Villa Nouvelle was like their harem; just like women, they [French] could not walk freely in the Medina" (23). Like the French, women of harem could be powerful from inside and have power to fly even just in their dreams, but at the same time they are still kept within harem. However, Mernissi shows that on the passage of time power was not longer manifested in the hand of those who rule harem but "instead, power was in the hand of those who could build the most powerful weapons and machines" (44). Mernissi's depiction of the French who are powerful but are preserved within their frontiers sends the message that women themselves are powerful than the ones who kept in harem. Women have their own weapons such as the many tricks they use in their attempts to trespass out of the frontiers resisting life in harem. Similar to the French, women are powerful than those who kept them inside their frontiers. They are the ones who can rule their own lives and lead their daughters to their lightened future which will not be similar to their mothers' present life in harem.

Although many women are against harem life and they have their own dreams of trespassing the frontiers, grownups are separated with their stands on the benefits of a harem. These stands were divided according to the benefits of those people within harem regardless of their sex, age, or class. For example, Mernissi's paternal grandmother Lalla Mani said the harems were vital because without the harsh supervision of the men, the women would never get any work done (42). Mernissi's paternal grandmother is benefited from harem and this is why

she goes against any attempt to break its rules. She is a traditional woman who does get along will with Mernissi's mother. Lalla Mani was praising the harem life all the time and was standing against any view to break it. She defended her perception by asserting that "If women were free to run about in the streets". She said "men would stop working because they would want to have fun" (Mernissi 1994, 40). Lalla Mani is privileged from life in harem since she "acting as a chairperson" (166) the old lady who is surrounded by her sons and their families and all respect her and everyone comes to her in the morning to kiss her hand and then invites her to the meals with no efforts what so ever from her side she would for sure insists that "The harem makes it impossible for men and women to see each other, so everybody proceeds with their duties" (42).

Although Yasmina, Mernissi's maternal mother, is an old woman lives in harem, her views about the harem life was not traditional like those of the paternal grandmother Lalla Mani. However, Yasmina's harem where she lives in the farm does not look a lot like the harem of the city. Yet, Yasmina refuses the harem's life even as it is an open farm with no visible walls. For her, the bamboo fence marks the "frontier" or boundary between parts of the house used by the men and that used by women is considered as a prison which deprives women from their rights even to earn money when they work all the day within harem "both men and women worked from dawn until very late at night. But men made money and women did not. That was one of the invisible rules. And when a woman worked hard, and was not making money, she was stuck in a harem, even though she could not see its walls" (Mernissi 1994, 63). Moreover, Yasmina talks about what life in a harem means to the women involved. She says that "sometimes to be stuck in a harem simply meant that a woman had lost her freedom of movement other times, she said that a harem meant misfortune because a woman had to share her husband with many

others” (34). It is important to clarify that Yasmina’s talk about the life in the harem forms some of Mernissi’s ideas and impressions. Another old woman who supports the harem life is Mernissi’s grandfather Tazi’s first wife among his nine wives who has more power than the others, including Yasmina. Lalla Thor is a city woman with white and lively skin who never did any house work projects when she knew that women of the harem in the farm came up with the idea of washing the dishes in the river and Kirsha, a man works in the farm as a driver, is drive their truck to the river. She “was scandalized” (68) and considered the idea against Muslim’s civilization. According to Mernissi’s analysis Lalla Thor projected and that was her nature since she does not like to see women of the farm having fun.

Comparing to the grandmothers who also divided according to their view of harem, the daughters in law are also divided according to their perception of harem. Mernissi’s mother, who I claim is the voice of women’s consciousness in *Dreams of Trespass*, is willing to stand up to the grandmother Mani and to argue her point of living in harem. Mernissi’s mother says that women in France do not live in harems, and that they are allowed to go where they want - including the market - without supervision. She says that the French do get their work done on time and that they are apparently adept enough at it that they are also able to make war on the Moroccans. Another aspect of the situation is that “respectable men provide for their womenfolk” (46) so that the women had no need to go out into the dangerous situations of the world. These people realize that the poor women who are not part of harems are forced to go out into public to make money. Mernissi’s mother does not only has her own views about life in harem, but also she has her attempts to move out of harem and live with her immediate family in a single home far a way from the extended family house. On the other hand, almost the same generation of Mernissi’s mother and Mernissi’s uncle’s wife Lalla Radia upholds the family

house and thinks it is a “wonderful thing” (Mernissi 1994, 46) where women have fun and have the privilege of having men provide for them without the need to go out and face the danger of the colonizers who walk around the house all the time and she ended up with “What more did a woman need to be happy?” (46).

Not only women have their views on harem, but also men express their own perceptions about the harem life which usually supports permanence of harem. Mernissi’s father, for example, encouraged harem life and resisted any attempt of change. His backing up of harem life is obvious when he criticizes Mrs Bennis, a Tunisian Turkish neighbor who is unveiled, “...the frontier protected cultural identity, and that if Arab women started imitating European ones by dressing provocatively, smoking cigarettes, and running around with their hair uncovered, there would be only one culture left. Ours would be dead” (Mernissi 1994, 180-181). For the Mernissi’s father, stepping outside harem with heads uncovered, smoking cigarettes, or rounding in the streets are the slippery slope that harem’s break will start with. However, every time his wife Mernissi’s mother asks him to move out of harem and live as an immediate family in a separated single home far from his extended family, he is torn between the desire to please his wife and his feeling of responsibility toward the extended family and tradition. This implies that he believes in moving out of harem, but he is staying there as part of his culture and to protect the tradition of being responsible for his mother and the poor ladies that he thinks without harem they have no one to provide for them and protect them like aunt Habiba, Mina, and other servants in the house. So, harem for him is not a prison but a place to protect those who have no men, to provide for those who he has responsibility towards, and to protect everyone by supporting the unity of the family inside one place. For Mernissi’s father all that could not be existed without the harem continuity.

Another man who tolerates women's movement outside harem is Mernissi's grandfather Tazi who was convinced when Yasmina justifies the women's intention to go with Krisha the driver washing the dishes in the river. He not only accepts their trespass of harem, but also shows his respect to Yasmina's knowledge when she explained that Lalla Thor's theory about the non Islamic civilization of taking the dishes to be washed in the river is not an Islamic theory. Mernissi introduces a different perception of men when she mentions Samir and how he raised many questions about harem.

Suffering the harems life, women were always trying to entertain themselves through plays acting, singing, dancing, and storytelling. One of the issues they were trying to understand about harem which they hate is the history of harem who invented it. Chama Mernissi's uncle's daughter is one of the young girls who hates harem life and recalls the history of it. Chama initiates more education about harem when she recalls the history of harem. Chama explains that the origin of the harem was not an invention of the Islamic Arabic culture but instead it was started by the Byzantine, who were Christians in order to symbolize their power after winning a race in which they collected the biggest number of women among all nations. Their emperor, conquered the world, and put all women in his harem to prove that he deserved to be the chief of the world. According to Chama's harem theory, centuries later Arabs managed to chase larger number of women and conquered the Byzantines (Mernissi 1944, 44).

Despite the fact that she introduces the resistance of many harem women to life within harem and Cham's previous story is an example of this resistance, Mernissi demystifies the harem and frontiers in her *Dreams of Trespass*. She also denies the fact that Western feminist depict harem as an exotic place where women are reserved to please men as they were in the times of Harun Al – Rashid or stories of One thousand nights and one. Mernissi rather explained

how she herself a well educated and open minded woman lived in such a place. She clarifies how she lived her girlhood in a domestic harem, which consists of her immediate family, extended family and some others who serve in the house as maids or a gate keeper. Mernissi portrays harem as a place which is designed to allow women little movement freedom and shelter them from men who are from outside of the family. By examining the word harem Mernissi rejected any monolithic representation of it and rather presents the word as a subject of interpretation which differs in meaning and function from place to place (Fayad, 91).

Towards the end of her autobiography Mernissi tries to show the reader signs of her generation's attempts to break the harem rules. She explained how young men of the house started to come up to the terrace to look at the neighbors' girls specifically the Bennis's daughters. "Men were not allowed in terrace, it was the women's territory" (189) and before men's trespass it was used to be one of the elements that constitute the harems pleasure since they play and tell stories without the interference or interruption of the unwanted people of the house like the men and the grandmother Lalla Mani. Also, trespassing to watch girls from other people's harem was not acceptable (Mernissi 1994, 176). Not only young men's gazing to girls of the neighbors is a step towards breaking harem rules, but also smoking cigarettes, chewing gums, and listening to the radio by harem women considered resistance to revolt harem's life and another pace in stepping out of harem since these practices were not tolerated by men (182).

The obvious reality in *Dreams of Trespass's* is that harems are varied. Harem in the farm is much freedom than the one in the city. So, despite the fact that women's life in the farm is a harem, after each return from a visit to the farm, Mernissi's mother says that, having had the freedom of the country, returning to the confines of the harem is more upsetting (59).

To refute the Western feminist assumption of the monolithic of the Arab Muslim women I contend that both Mernissi and El Saadawi present two different life style for women in each one's country although they live in the same period and face the same circumstances regarding occupation and Islam extremists' influence. Mernissi presents harem life as the most prominent issue that affected women's progress that time while El Saadawi mentions nothing about women being lived in harem in Egypt that time. According to El Saadawi, women in Egypt, although their movement is restricted due to the occupation and the culture of their society that was impacted by Extremists' views on women's rights, they did not suffer the life of harem as been confined within frontiers. On the contrary, women of Egypt were able to take the train and to travel by themselves from the village to the city to pursue higher education and El Saadawi herself is an example when she took the travel to Cairo at the age of only fourteen.

SO on the other hand, women in Mernissi's harem never mentioned being subjected to female circumcision for example. Female circumcision and harem as different form of women's victimization indicate the fact that Arab Muslim women are not monolithic when it comes to women's status and suffering. Different Arab Muslim countries have different forms of women's status. Some countries impose religion and culture to control women under the name of protection and this protection take diverse types. In Egypt protecting women was in the form of female circumcision so as to control women's sexual instinct while in Morocco religion and culture were imposed on the form of harem to control women's movement and freedom.

### ***Religion and Veil in Dreams of Trespass***

Isobel Coleman contends that Mernissi is considered the godmother of Islamic feminism and one of the first among women in her generation to learn to read and write before she went on to become an activist and a prominent voice for women's rights in Islam (36). On the other

hand, McGarvey considers one of the Arab Muslim feminists who did not refuse that there are any contradictions between Islam and democracy or Islam and secularism and rather he borrowed the Islamic feminist Leila Ahmed's words when she called Mernissi a feminist "who hears the voice of ethical Islam" (McGarvey 26). Mernissi wrote many books in which she demystifies topics like harem, veil, and women's status in Islam in general. Although in her work Mernissi claims that Islam should not be compared to democracy because it is a modern political concept while Islam is a medieval religion, she is still considered the one who gives Islam its liberal meaning (Rhouni 244). Furthermore, Mernissi criticizes the orientalist's discourse when they question the compatibility of Islam and democracy asserting that such a comparison is an indication of a racist thinking because when a Westerner asks holds such a comparison he automatically means that democracy is rational and Islam is not rational.

Not only Mernissi criticizes the orientalist's discourse on Islam and democracy, but she also wanted to stress the colonization consequences on the liberation of women. To show such colonization's effect she gave the example in her *Dreams of Trespass* of Moroccan nationalist establishing the National school that teaches girls in French as "a defense reaction to Western attacks on Islam as a backward religion" (Rhouni 49). Before *Dreams of Trespass* Mernissi wrote many books targeting the Western audience having in mind one main aim and that is to change the shattering images they have about Islam in general and women's status in Islam in particular. *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of women's Rights in Islam* (1991) is one of her first Islamic masterpieces that she wrote to clarify mainly to the West how feminist interpret women's rights in Islam and what is the actual status of Muslim women in Qur'an and Hadith. Rhouni contends that the previous book was seen as a book that praises secularism because writing the aims of the book she established a clear line between Islam as a



religion of State and it as a personal choice (242). In establishing that difference between Islam as the religion of State and Islam as personal identity, Mernissi answers the Western feminist's claim that third world, women who Arab Muslim women part of, are monolithic and a singular unit. Claiming Islam for Mernissi is "a civil right, a national identity, a passport, a family code of laws, a code of public rights" (Mernissi 1991, 20, 21). Although Mernissi makes that separation between Islam the law and Islam the belief, which most of the Islamist in the Arab Muslim world refuse although most Arab Muslim countries practice it, she is the one who helped to clear the nice image of Islam and show it as a religion which elevate women's status rather than any other religion as McGarvey puts it (McGarvey 26). Zayzafoon agrees with Rhouni and McGarvey that Mernissi reproduced Islam in a way that locates the origin of culture and civilization in its early years (Zayzafoon 2).

Western feminist treats Islam religion as a monologic thought and this is what transnational feminist theory argues against when it asserts that women in the third world and Arab Muslim women included should be studied within their religion and according to their own experience and interpretation and not as seen or interpreted by the Western feminist who portray them as victims of their religion. Western feminist consider Islamic thought as a one singular unit that manages all Muslims and women in particular around the world in the same way. Western feminist believe that Islam has only one interpretation which allows the control of Muslim women and treat them as victims and weak. Mernissi as an Arab Muslim feminist is like other third world feminist is committed to impact the social and economical changes in her societies, but she believes the best way to achieve these changes is through enacting laws that guarantee women's educational rights, women's equal access to economical and social privileges (McGarvey 26). McGarvey concludes that the challenge faces Islamic feminists is not to prove

whether Islam is compatible with democracy or not but rather how Islam can empower and include women to part of the political life in the new Islamic State (26).

The discussion of Islam compatibility with democracy and the necessity of empowering Muslim women by their inclusion in the political process in their Islamic States were not the only topics that Mernissi works on concerning Islam as a religion. Furthermore, she has her own interpretation for Islam as a religion in its two main elements Qur'an and Hadith\*. Her main interpretation of the issues related to women's oppression in the Arab Muslim world. This interpretation goes around a prominent argument and that is women's oppression did not arise from the Qur'an or Mohammad but from the Hadith reports of Mohammad's words, deeds, and instructions that were compiled by his clerics (Dimuck et al 79). She rather contends that many of those clerics were misogynistic (79). This assertion by Mernissi is so serious and so immense because it touches on things that Muslims have no doubt about like when she asserts that Hadith might have been changed or even transformed upon the clerics' own interpretation. Muslim people believe that both Qura'an and Hadith are the spirit of Islam and these were protected. Mernissi herself will be attacked to interpret Qur'an and Hadith in a way that serves her purpose which is liberating Muslim women.

Interpretation Islam in its two elements Qur'an and Hadith by Mernissi herself and by other Muslim women is clear in her *Dreams of Trespass*. In her interpretation of religion she meets Transnational feminist's theme that urged Western feminist to read Arab Muslim women and other third world women through their context and own interpretation of their religious, social, economical, and historical context. Interpreting her religion and reading what other men and women of her society interpret Islam is a main thesis in her autobiography *Dreams of Trespass*. In one of her footnotes in her autobiography Mernissi distinguishes between Qur'an as

she understands it and the Islamic laws in most Arab Muslim countries contending that women's rights are rejected in most Arab Muslim countries today "as a form of Western aggression against Muslim values" (165).

Grandmother Yasmina is one of the positive examples that Mernissi presents in her autobiography and although Yasmina is an old she has her own progressive interpretation of her own religion which refutes the Western feminist assumption that Arab Muslim women are victims of their religion and that these women take men's interpretation of Islam for granted. Yasmina talks about equal treatment between human beings regardless of their origin, class, language, richness, religion, or sex "if you had two eyes, one nose, two legs, and two hands, then you were equal to everyone else" (Mernissi 1994, 35) and she urged Mernissi not to accept inequality because it is not logical (26). Yasmina's interpretation of her religion was an evidence of her high level of education although she was illiterate. When women raises the issue of King Farouk of Egypt and his injustice treatment of his wife Princess Farida, Yasmina condemns the King to cast his wife and she says "what a kind of good Muslim leader dismisses a wife just because she does not produce a son? Allah alone, says the Koran [Qur'an], is responsible for the sex of babies. In a justice Muslim Cairo, King Farouk would be dismissed from the throne!" (33). Yasmina's religious interpretation goes farther to question the Islamic laws in many Arab Muslim countries that claim women cannot rule a country according to Muslim law. Yasmina takes her evidence from history and points out the fact that Shajrat al-Durr had accepted the throne of Egypt after the death of Sultan al-Salih her husband. Yasmina's interpretation of Islam goes further than her own understanding of her religion to a well understanding of religion that sometimes contradicts or does not agree with historical and cultural evidence. Yasmina shows her well understanding and a special reading of her religion after Lalla Thor's objection on

women of the farm to go and wash dishes in the river. Lalla Thor's objection was a result of her own understanding of Islam as she read it in history and in particular in the Introduction of Ibin Khaldoun, and Arab Thinker and historian, when he claims that "Islam was essentially a city culture and peasants were its threat" (68, 69). Lalla Thor sees in the women of the farm intention to go and wash the dishes in the river an event which is going to damage the family's reputation and cause a scandal. As a city woman she considers washing dishes in the river is a peasant event which threatens Islam the city culture. However, Yasmina although not educated as Lalla Thor and as a peasant read Lalla Thor's interpretation of Islam is just an attempt to stop women of enjoying themselves while washing the dishes in the river and considers her objection as a meaningless one because "responsibility was an individual matter in Islam" (69).

In the end, Yasmina's interpretation of Islam is the one which convince the grandfather and impressed him because Yasmina's interpretation shows logic while Lalla Thor's theory proved to be wrong. Denying the validity of polygamy is considered anti Islamic in most of the Islamist arguments. However, bravely Yasmina expressed her hatred to the fact that she has to wait her turn for a night with her husband due to the reality that he is married to eight wives and each one has a one night with him (34). Mernissi articulates that even those who have nothing in common would have the same attitude towards polygamy in Islam asserting "A fierce hatred of co-wives was just about the only thing that my mother and Lalla Radia, Samir's mother, had in common" (150).

Interpreting religion according to one's interest not only goes to men but also to women who tend to interpret Islam the way it serves their needs hoping that depending on such interpretation may give them consolidations and sometimes other people's sympathy. Aunt Habiba is one example of women who interpret Islam to serve her purpose since she has been

cast and send back to her family by her husband whom she loved without any reasonable reason to be casted. Aunt Habiba interpretation of religion and God's will depicts a hidden wish for God to punish her husband when she says "Allah [God] had sent the Northern armies to Morocco to punish the men for violating the *hudud* protecting women. When you hurt a woman, you are violating Allah's sacred frontier. It is unlawful to hurt the weak" (3).

Interpreted Islam as it would serve women's rights is a main issue to Mernissi's mother who depends on the fact that "Allah made us all equal" (9). Launching from her belief of equality between people especially between males and females, she insisted to dress her daughter in Western clothing same as young men of the family who are always dressed in Western clothing. Not only her mother insisted on dressing her daughter Western clothing, but also got so mad when Mernissi the daughter tries to cover her head with a scarf while they are in the public baths. Mernissi's mother would intervene saying that Fatima Mernissi will not be allowed to cover her hair. The mother claims that she has spent her entire life rebelling against the idea of the veil and that her daughter must not willingly cover her head, ever. Mernissi justifies her wearing of the veil as being afraid of Hitler hitting those whose are dark and their hair is not blond as she usually discusses the idea of the Germans' war on Morocco with her cousin Samir. Mernissi's mother would response that "Even if Hi-Hitler, the Almighty King of the Allemane, is after you," she said "you ought to face him with your hair uncovered. Covering your head and hiding will not help. Hiding does not solve a woman's problems. It is just identifies her as an easy victim. Your Grandmother and I have suffered enough of this head-covering business. We know it does not work. I want my daughters to stand up with their head erect, and walk on Allah's plant with their eyes on the stars". (100). Mernissi's mother reaction toward the veil seems odd and extreme since she is a Muslim woman lives among a conservative family in the

harem age, but her personality shows the reader that her reject of the veil is her way of rebelling against the confines of the harem life that she hates.

Unveiling is associated with cultural survival and progress for most women in Mernissi's autobiography; her mother and grandmother are examples. In many of Mernissi's writing, veil is portrayed as a symbol of women's oppression (McGarvey, 20). Nonetheless, unlike Leila Ahmed another Arab Islamic feminist who believes that veiling of Mohammad's wives is a logical continuity to the male domination system that emerged in Arabia before Islam and continues later, Mernissi contends that Mohammad is a model of equality and justice whose practices and teachings transform women from being oppressed before Islam to participate in wars, gain booty, enter the mosque, and have their own words in marriage and divorce. However, Zayzafoon contends that that Mohammad's fear on the survival of Islam as a new religion at the time forced him to abandon many of the ideas that empower gender equality due to the male opposition of such ideas that enhance women's progress and equality (18).

Linking unveiling to progress and development is backed by her historical example in *Dreams of Trespass* when she presented the Moroccan King Mohammad V in 1943 introduced his own daughter Princess Aisha unveiled before the nation to deliver a speech (Mernissi 1994, 180). Shama's reading of the veil constitutes a smart indication that veiling is an obstacle in women's intention to be progressive, have their freedom in movement, and in trespassing the frontiers of the harem when she states that the *haik*, the traditional long dress that women wore in public, accompanied with the head covering or the veil "was probably designed to make a woman's trip through the streets so tortuous that she would quickly tire from the effort, rush back home, and never dream of going out again" (118).

On the other hand, in *Dreams of Trespass* the veil is linked to the occupation and is considered in many places in Mernissi's autobiography as a class issue. She affirms that after the independence of Morocco in 1956 her mother participated in a march that was organized by the nationalists' wives and that she came back from the march uncovered to continue her life without it and achieve what she desired all her life (119, 120). However, Mernissi asserts that even after independence old women and young or newly migrant peasants kept wearing the veil (120).

Like El Saadawi who is eighty one years now and not veiled and Fadwa Tuqan who dies at the age of eighty six and was not veiled, Mernissi is now seventy one years old and is not veiled. Their attitude towards the veil is something that unites their interpretation of Islam as they read it. This interpretation and understanding of the idea behind the veil in Islam refutes the Western feminists' assumptions which imply that Arab Muslim women are only receptionists of men's interpretation of Qur'an and *Hadith*. By reading their own religion, Arab Muslim women depict that they should be seen in their own lenses and not be portrayed by Western feminists as being victimized and veil is forced upon them by Islamic law and men Islamists' interpretation of both Qur'an and *Hadith*.

## CONCLUSION

Interviewing women victims of domestic violence, sexual assaults, and physical and emotional abuse did not only, for me, women's real life stories, but it also unveiled the fact that these real life stories have a lot to say. Almost all of these life stories show the big impact of norms, traditions, the rooted Arabic culture, misinterpretation of Islam, especially the Qur'anic verses and the Prophet's *Hadith*. The impact of culture and misinterpretation of Islam are the main factors behind the suffering and the backwardness of women in the Arab Muslim World. However, it is a fact that the legal system and the political system in many Arab Muslim countries still constrain Arab Muslim women's rights. Despite this fact, changing governmental policies and legal system in many Arab Muslim countries could not succeed in combating many of the cultural chains that surround Arab Muslim women. The "Honor crime" in the Arab Muslim world is a good example that explains a lot about the rooted culture in the mentality of Arab Muslim people men and women equally. In spite of all the efforts that have been paid by the legal system and the political leaders in Jordan for example, the Jordanian society still demands the killing of women who people think that they put their and their families' reputation in risk. Killing of women under the name of protecting the reputation and family honor is committed by people from different backgrounds regardless of religion, education, or economical situation. The culture of blood to wash the dirt of reputation is deeply rooted in minds of people although it is against Islam. In Islam, only the State has the right to punish those who commit adultery or involve in any sexual relation. Based on tradition and culture people choose to revenge of what they call their honor by their hands and regardless of the punishment. Even the change in the punishment law and the penal codes that increase the



sentence for perpetrators of honor killings have not changed in people's attitudes towards killing in the name of honor.

The previous problematic integration of religion and culture in the Arab Muslim daily life could not be read accurately or understood in a right way unless one is an "insider" who lives all his or her life in the Arab Muslim world and experiences norms, traditions, historical and colonization background, religion, and culture of Arab Muslims. As an insider who understands and experiences the Arab Muslim culture and religion, I chose to write my dissertation on this critical and up-to-date topic that has been a field of debate recently. I backed up my work by using the Transnational Feminist Theory. The reason behind this choice of this theory in particular is that this theory calls for a better understanding for non – Western women based on their experiences, social, cultural, historical, political, and economical backgrounds. At the same time transnational feminists such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty work to bridge the gaps between Western feminists and non – Western feminists.

Adding to what is articulated previously; transnational feminism focuses on the role of gender, class, and sexuality and on "organization of resistance to hegemonies in the making and the un - making of the nation state" (Mohanty 2003, 9). So, transnational feminism does not focus on generalization of women's oppression but rather it examines the specific nature of oppression as it occurs through intersectionality of race, class, and other social identity locations within a particular local context. However, transnational feminists themselves are extremely diverse. Some of them challenge the feminism of poverty and class inequality that globalization entails. Others sought to extend women's civic rights. Based on the above argument and due to the hegemonic of the Western discourse, transnational feminism emerged effectively to give a

better understanding of the needs and experiences of non Western women and to show that women of the glob are not monolithic or singular unit in what they experience or need.

Arab Muslim women are part of what called, by Western feminism, Third World women. As other Third World women, Arab Muslim women have been portrayed by Western feminists as being oppressed, negative, submissive, and marginalized. My dissertation aims to shatter these misperceptions and correct the misunderstanding of Western feminism. I do so by studying the actual status of Arab Muslim women in the Arab Muslim world. I examine real women's status through analyzing four Contemporary Arab Muslim women's autobiographies. These autobiographies are chosen from four different Arab Muslim countries that spread in both Asia and Africa to give a good sample of how Arab Muslim women live and how they depict their lives in their own lens. Furthermore, these four autobiographies are chosen based on specific elements. These elements are: four of these women are Arab Muslim contemporary writers. These women were born to conservative Muslim families and their autobiographies are written either directly in English or translated from Arabic to English.

Studying Arab Muslim women's autobiographies reveals the fact that they share a lot in common with the Western women's autobiographies. The genre of women's autobiographies both in the Arab Muslim world and in the West have tackled similar topics like women's personal life, social and political obstacles before women, women's struggle and suffering. At the same time Western and Arab Muslim women differ a lot in the issue of subjectivity. The level of subjectivity may exists in a less degree in Arab Muslim women's autobiographies due to many obstacles that hinder telling the truth and being subjective when revealing a woman's personal life story in the Arab Muslim world. These factors start with the Arab conservative culture of the Arab Muslim society that treats women and anything belongs to them as if it is not

supposed to be exposed publically. Also, the political situation and lack of democracy are other obstacles that hinder autobiography's work for both men and women, but women in a sever degree since the belief in the Arab world is that politics is a men's business. So, women sometimes do not dare to articulate governmental policies that deter women's forwardness and empowerment. Further, religious factors might obstruct women of writing on issues that contradict the religious beliefs whether it is Islam or Christianity. All the previous factors limit what women might tackle in their personal lives' accounts. As a result, fields like religious issues (changing one's religion, contradicting polygamy or divorce, etc.), sexuality related issues (sex, female and male body, gay's issues, etc.), and political issues are still in the forbidden zone for women's writings and they do not usually come close to them. If some women do, and this is usually rare, these women sacrifice themselves to become subjects of attack by both Islamists and traditionals.

However, although the four autobiographies which are analyzed in this dissertation are vigilant in handling the sexuality related issues in frankness, they are brave to tackle national and political issues boldly. Further, four authors of these autobiographies do not only address religious issues, but they also dare to examine them and to interpret Qur'an through their own lens. Four of them explore cultural, social, and national issues in the Arab Muslim countries. All of them succeed in revealing debatable topics like harem, veil, men in women's lives, political and national participation of women in public life.

The four authors, in this dissertation, present women as attentive figures and as efficient weapons in social and political change. This presentation goes against Western feminism's claims that Arab Muslim women are submissive and lack their individual feminine identity. Shaarawi, Tuqan, El Saadawi, and Mernissi peak as insiders from and for the women in their

Arab Islamic culture. They identify women as humans who deserve to be illustrated as values by which cultural and political change in the Arab Muslim world could be explained and critiqued.

Although women who live in different countries in the Arab Muslim world are not a singular unit or monolithic they still share same experiences of struggle and suffering. They also share the same social, cultural, religious, economical, and political factors that hamper their progress. These shared factors among Arab Muslim women in general makes me claim that I am an insider alleging Arab Muslim identity who share four women writers in this dissertation their status as an Arab Muslim woman. Regardless of the fact that I am a Jordanian and there is no one Jordanian autobiography among the ones I am analyzing, I still consider myself an insider because, as I mentioned previously in this dissertation, being an Arab Muslim living in the Arab Muslim world all my life makes me claim that I share the same experience that women in this dissertation claim. Moreover, I have a similar reading of my culture, religion, and political system as they all do. So, as an insider I can evaluate the actual real status of women in the Arab Muslim world as lived and being read by women themselves and through their own lenses..

In analyzing these four autobiographies I find that the four authors of these autobiographies read their religion and in particular Qur'anic verses and Prophet's Mohammad's teachings. All of these autobiographies explore the issue of religion interpretation by men to serve their interests. Women in these autobiographies urge for a thorough reading of Qur'an for a better understanding of the actual teachings of Islam specifically, women's issues. They also ask women to read and interpret Qur'an for themselves in order to utilize it in a way that serves purpose of achieving emancipation. A critical finding of this dissertation is that the subordination and marginalization of women in the Arab Muslim world is a cultural issue and have never been an Islamic one. My dissertation gives evidence from Qur'an, Prophet's

Mohammad's teachings, and historical events to show the high and respectful status of women in Islam and that Cultural beliefs and social norms are behind most of the backwardness and suffering that Arab Muslim women encounter. However, my work articulate the fact that Muslim extremists, fundamentalists, and traditional utilize Qur'anic verses to show that women are not equal to men and should be treated as less. Similarly, Western feminists utilize Islam and misinterpret verses of Qur'an to show Arab Muslim women's subordination. Both claims of Islamists and Westerners are mistaken. As a result, both Western feminism and Muslim extremists believe that Arab Women's Liberation Movement is a Western copy and deny the fact that it is authentic and stemmed from the Arab society's needs and interests. This authenticity is clear in the topics that Arab Women's Liberation Movements all around the Arab world address. They all call for women's emancipation of all forms of violence, subordination, marginalization, and abuse. No one of these women's movements calls for gay's rights or women's rights over their bodies when it comes to abortion for example.

The construction of the veil in particular is examined in the four autobiographies in this dissertation as a conflicting issue and a complex construct with its historical, cultural, and political contexts. These autobiographies reveal that the image of the veil in both the Arab Muslim world and the West has been a controversial topic which is discussed in depth since it defines the Arab Muslim woman's identity. Although the veil is considered the source of the women's backwardness as Western feminists claim, it is also considered a symbol of the resistance to the colonial narrative as Leila Ahmed claims (Ahmed 163). So, although some Arab writers, Amin is an example, and some Western feminists viewed the veil as oppressive and being the reason behind women's and nation's backwardness, others have dealt with it as a protector and a liberator. Arab Muslims consider the Western attack on the veil is a political

subject within the hegemonic discourse of the West in order to justify the Western interference in the Muslim world's affairs, to provide protection for Israel, and to put American's hands on the Arab natural resources and mainly Oil.

Many women in the Arab Muslim world wear the veil, but at the same time do not follow Islam's teachings like practicing prayers which is a basic pillar in Islam. Some wear the veil under families' pressure and others wear it as a fashionable dress recently. However, most women who wear the veil, regardless of being good fellows of Islam or not, believe that the veil liberates them from men's potential sexual and verbal harassments. If veiled, women can work side by side with men avoiding criticism of being not decent or not mannered. So, currently, veil in the Arab Muslim world is an efficient tool to emancipate women and have them to be efficient in their communities. Arab Muslim people respect veiled women and easily receive their advice and liberation teachings when it comes to women's rights rather than if these teachings come from unveiled woman. So, veiled feminists are much more welcomed and acceptable in the Arab Muslim world than the unveiled feminists who usually are accused of being Westernized even though they have the same discourse that veiled women have. In the end, if we want to achieve women's rights and emancipation of all forms of social and political constrains, a religious feminism should be launched in the Arab Muslim world with veiled liberal women to lead the women's rights discourse.

Living in the Arab Muslim conservative societies of the Arab Muslim world, women in my dissertation redefine their status and position. They have transferred from traditional harems to a more progressive status and a modern lifestyle after they have crossed all gender interactions. This change in Arab Muslim women's status took place in colonial to postcolonial era. For example, Fatima Mernissi shows examples of women who became agents of

empowerment even though they lived within their respective harems. As many women in this dissertation, women of harem started the internal change for the sake of themselves and their society as a whole. Arab Muslim women in this dissertation have been good examples for positive figures who could change themselves, women around them, and manage to be part of the public life. That was clear in national demonstrations that were led by women to liberate their countries from the Western colonization. Examples of these demonstrations are the one took place in Cairo and led by Huda Shaarawi, the demonstrations led by Nawal El Saadawi, the one Mernissi's women were part of in Fez, and the demonstrations that Tuqan was part of in Nablus.

My dissertation recommends more studies on current Arab Muslim women's status taking into accounts the Arab World Spring with all its demonstrations by the young youth women and men who revolt against corruption and backwardness. This work might inspire Western feminists and audience to do more work and more research on the Status of Arab Muslim women in particular and Third World women in general as being non monolithic and not one singular unit who have different experiences that should be read within their historical, social, and cultural contexts. The dissertation also recommend more studies and analysis of Arab Muslim women's autobiography which although rare but at the same time rich of the experiences, facts, and miracles they reveal about women's real lives. My work recommends reading Qur'an in particular and Islam in general as interpreted by women to explore how Arab Muslim women read their religion in their own lens and not as interpreted and presented for them ready by men. Finally, there is a BIG need to more research on Western feminist thought that read and analyze Arab Muslim women to show that Western feminists are naïve or ignorant of Arab Muslim women's status. At the same time, such research on Western feminist thought will

bridge the gaps between Western women and Arab Muslim women and shatter the stereotyped images that both hold for each other.



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