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## Gender and identity reflected in the works of Nawāl Al-Sa'adāwī and Samīḥah Khrais

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**GENDER AND IDENTITY REFLECTED IN THE WORKS OF  
NAWĀL AL-SA'ADĀWĪ AND SAMĪḤAH KHRAIS**

**A Thesis**

**Presented in**

**Partial Fulfillment of the**

**Requirements for the Degree of**

**Master of Arts**

**June, 2021**

**BY**

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## INTRODUCTION

Gender and identity are two terms that often go hand in hand in both academic and quotidian discourses of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Our rising awareness of their interrelatedness has been in large part the corollary of breakthroughs in cognitive science and the culmination of insights brought by the field of psychology since the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Apart from engendering a radical shift in cultural sensibilities and scientific understandings, the implications of this reinterpretation of gender and identity have also sparked interest across a wide range of academic fields in reevaluating the ways in which our understanding of the world, both past and present, can be influenced, if not distorted, by factors relating to gender and the parts of identity built thereon. Middle Eastern studies have been no exception.

Take for instance Edward Said's pioneering work, *Orientalism* (1978), which not only debunked the fraudulent narrative Western scholars had successfully perpetuated theretofore, but demonstrated the ways in which Orientalists' "Other"ization of the East was gendered with their depictions of the Orient as irrational, intellectually weak, and feminized (65-7). As a seminal text of what would later be coined as the field of postcolonialism, *Orientalism* served as a foundation on which later works, such as those by Leila Ahmed and Lila Abu-Lughod, would find some of their grounding. These scholars would further expand on the issues emanating from colonialism and elucidate ways in which gender and identity were weaponized at the expense of the lives of the colonized. In the same vein as Said's work, the scholarship of Ahmed, Abu-Lughod, and their peers points to the consequences of Orientalist notions on Westerners' interpretations of gender in the East, which systematically result in the caricaturization and simplification of Oriental identity as it pertains to gender.

Consequently, present-day scholarship in Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) studies, and in particular analytical work of this region's classical and modern literature, is

oftentimes quite wary of monolithic generalizations and rather seeks to complicate the understanding of how gender is portrayed in authors' work. This approach, however, must always be employed with discretion so as not to project modern or foreign ideologies onto the works in question where they may not have been originally intended. Simply put, the analyzer of gender and identity in MENA literature must walk a fine line between appropriately recognizing the implications to be extracted under a postcolonial and gender studies lens and remaining cognizant of the ways in which taking such a vantage point might color our perceptions of the artifact in observation.

It was with great caution, therefore, that I approached the topics of gender and identity in Arabic literature; my selection of works by Nawāl al-Sa'adāwi and Samīḥa Khrais<sup>1</sup> to analyze said topics was intentional in that their respective novels excellently highlight the degree of diversity in views held by Arab women regarding gender and identity. That said, in using these two authors, I must acknowledge the glaring heteronormality exhibited in their works, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Such beliefs are neither representative of my own views nor those of countless other Arab writers who have explored these themes at length. However, for the purposes of this thesis, I will refrain from directly interrogating the ways in which queerness relates the formation of identity in Arabic literature as the topic merits a discussion of its own.

While a great deal of literature analyzing works like those by al-Sa'adāwi has indeed accumulated over the years, its conclusions are oftentimes construed, quite conveniently, as evidence in service of harmful tropes and ideologies that downplay the agency of Middle Eastern women, demonize their male counterparts, and substantiate interventionist imperatives. By

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<sup>1</sup> The former, a prolific Egyptian writer whose work often garnishes much attention among feminists in both the East and West (1931-202); the latter, Jordanian author b. 1956 whose novels tackle a wide range of issues including the 1916 Arab Revolt against the Turks

drawing comparisons between the style and content of al-Sa‘adāwi and Khrais’ works, I intend to present al-Sa‘adāwi in a manner less at odds with alternative approaches to what is commonly referred to as “Western feminism,” and more in step with the growing trend of foregrounding Middle Eastern women’s contributions to society (in this case via literature) as opposed to their indictments against it. Finally, by featuring Jordanian author, Samīḥa Khrais, at the opposing end of the comparison, whose work has not yet received its due analytical treatment in the literature, I believe I can incorporate a fresh perspective in the discussion on gender and identity in MENA literature and attract attention to an essential and urgent writer for future study.

# CHAPTER 1

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1.1 Introduction

The issue of women since time immemorial has occupied a highly contested space within the framework of discourse on the Middle East by both those within and beyond the region. Assertions about women's societal roles, obligations, and expectations are as varied as those who propound them—be it Orientalists, Western feminists, radical Islamic fundamentalists, or simply those individuals who inhabit the region's diverse multitude of states and communities. While pivotal developments in this discourse did indeed occur during and in the aftermath of 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>- century Western colonialism, particularly as imperial and local voices increasingly addressed “the woman question,” they left in their wake painful scars. As a result, discourses on women of the East have since then been polarized, obscuring the ways agents of oppression and resistance have often willingly or unwittingly colluded in stripping women of their rights and autonomy.

The main objective, then, of this thesis will be untangling the complex ways in which the question of women and gender in the Middle East has and continues to be enmeshed simultaneously in both the processes of oppression and resistance. By utilizing a transnational feminist lens<sup>2</sup>, I will analyze a body of literature that takes as its objective the deconstruction of common dichotomies between East-West, religious-secular, and indigenous-modern with the aim of demonstrating how they have and continue to be employed at the expense of the Middle

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<sup>2</sup> I.e., a perspective based in theories which concern themselves with how globalization and capitalism affect people across nations, races, genders, classes, and sexualities; developed by scholars including Lila Abu-Lughod, Leila Ahmed, Nadjie Sadig Al-Ali, Julie E Moody-Freeman, Aurora L. Morales, Traci C West, Aimee Carrillo Rowe, Anne Russo, and Madhavi Sunder and in contradistinction to feminisms which have historically undermined Arab men and women (discussed at length throughout this chapter).

Eastern woman. The relevance of this argument lies in the fact that even to this day a number of power structures both in the East and West depend on maintaining the false assumption that certain universal values are somehow incompatible across cultural borders. Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* eloquently illustrates this when he remarks that: "Imperialism [has] consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift [has been] to allow people to believe that they [are] only, mainly, exclusively, White, or Black, or Western, or Oriental" (98). Put differently, the incompatibilities and categorizations that women in the East are systematically subject to when taking stances regarding their position in society have in large part ideological roots in the struggles that occurred between colonial and oppositional forces during and after colonialism. Therefore, by examining the ways in which authorities, both local and global, have delineated, defended, and gained their territorial, intellectual, and political dominion by way of women as cultural markers, this thesis has the aim of bringing into recognition acts of resistance on and from the Middle East that might not have traditionally fallen neatly into conventional and/or acceptable forms of freedom struggle.

The scope of this thesis will generally be confined to writers/scholars who, if not explicitly self-proclaimed as an adherent of transnational feminism, have nonetheless explored topics which fall within a realm of work that challenges the separation of interlocking struggles and lacks intersectionality within its analyses. Although I will be primarily reviewing writers/scholars either from or well informed about the Middle East, I will weave into many of the works under discussion fundamental principles that have been developed within the transnational feminist movement<sup>3</sup> to serve as a frame of reference.

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<sup>3</sup> The praxis and manifestations of transnational feminist theories

## 1.2 Hailing Identities and Imprisoning Dichotomies

In her 2005 article, “Be Longing: Toward a Feminist Politics of Relation,” published in the *National Women's Studies Association Journal*, transnational feminist Aimee Carrillo Rowe elaborates on a term she refers to as the “politics of location”—understood to be “representing a particular set of modes of belonging...[that hinder us from] interrogating the *conditions* that enable, or would potentially disrupt, sites of affective investment” (18). This observation, made within the context of criticism toward 2<sup>nd</sup>-wave feminism, sought to challenge certain white Western feminists, such as Adrienne Rich, who despite having identified systems of oppression, failed to offer a complete positionality within them, only reflecting upon themselves as individuals not particularly within the large multiracial community of transnational feminists. For Rowe, not only did this further distance women like Rich from Black feminists (effectively cutting all sites of affective investment necessary for coalition), but more importantly prevented them from realizing the importance of interrogating “hailing discourses<sup>4</sup>.”

This term, if ambiguous, becomes blatantly clear and strikingly relevant to the Middle Eastern context in Anne Russo’s *Feminist Accountability*; on the subject of disentangling US feminism from US imperialism, Russo recalls how the Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF) sat at the forefront of the 1990s “Stop Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan” campaign (188). By failing to employ accountability comprehensively as a feminist methodology, the most prominent and visible US feminist voice lent credence to a narrative of saviorhood that would later be used in justifying US invasion in Afghanistan. Here, Russo demonstrates how FMF’s uncritical loyalty to Eurocentric

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<sup>4</sup> Those discourses on identity that solicit an individual’s exclusive loyalties to a particular group, thus hailing them away from larger collectives and preventing their reflection on the ways in which their interests and issues intersect with those around them.

feminist convictions blinded them from interrogating the ways in which US imperialism had provoked the conflicts against which they supposedly fought.

Rowe challenges the “politics of location” with her insightful remark: “*be-longing* precedes being.” By this she means that the relationships into which we affectively invest are built not on the physical and/or figurative localities that society inscribes us into, but rather on our desires to unite that result from realizations of our positionality, the ways in which we are interconnected, and the coalitional powers we obtain from coming together. Rowe’s alternative, “politics of relation,” fundamentally rejects restrictive memberships and loyalties that call us to collude in acts that might advance our individual agendas but harm those not immediately in our vicinity or a part of our direct communities. Therefore, adopting the “politics of relation” necessitates a re-visitation of our histories and re-evaluation of the identities and ideologies that seductively hail us at the expense of others.

The first set of studies I will examine all share this mission. By reexamining the history of Islam as well as a number of significant events that have left lasting impacts on the Middle East, scholars like Leila Ahmed, Lila Abu-Lughod, Nadjie Sadig Al-Ali, and Fatema Mernissi all exercise a practice akin to that of Aurora L. Morales (1998) in her “Medicine Stories.” Morales locates a significant form of oppression in the official historical narrative that loots the culture of its historical memory (i.e., identity) (11). “The more powerful the perpetrator, the greater his prerogative to name and define reality, and the more completely his arguments prevail” (12). “It is in retelling the stories of victimization, recasting our roles from subhuman scapegoats to beings full of dignity and courage, that [we succeed in] struggl[ing] to re-create the shattered knowledge of our humanity” (13). Morales employs the term “curanderas” (i.e., traditional native healers) for referring to those who weave together the untold stories of individuals and communities excluded from official

historical narratives. She maintains that through the application of the “curandera” methodology, a number of insightful realizations take form.

Of particular interest here is the second one of these insights which claims that centering women’s perspectives in the historical narrative not only contributes in enriching it, but rather fundamentally reshapes the landscape of our history and the questions we ask about it (27). In Ahmed’s *Women and Gender in Islam* as well as Mernissi’s *Beyond the Veil*, the strong dichotomies between East and West, traditional and modern are called into question. They engage in a reexamination of how these dichotomies were formed and challenge the identities that consequently developed. In this sense, the “curanderas” of the following section not only provide the readers with the tools to oppose “hailing identities<sup>5</sup>” but constitute in and of themselves acts of resistance given that domain of interest memory “is clearly a significant site of social struggle” (Morales 13).

### **1.3 Freedom from Identity: A Brief Rehistoricization of Women and Gender within the Middle East**

One of Ahmed’s strongest arguments put forth in *Women and Gender in Islam* is that of Islam’s compatibility with women’s demands for rights. With this claim, Ahmed attempts to problematize the commonly held belief (particularly in Western society) that holds Islam as an aggressive and subjugating agent that seeks to undermine virtually all manifestations of feminism that call for some form of gender egalitarianism. While she acknowledges the myriad of issues women do indeed face within the Islamic world, she makes a clear distinction between the religion’s actual teachings and how they have been traditionally interpreted throughout the ages. In

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<sup>5</sup> I.e., identities that obscure intersecting issues and possibilities for coalition (exemplified by the use of feminism in the colonial Arab world in the sections to come)

doing so, she identifies two ideological forces in the course of Islam's development whose unrivaled power she contends succeeded in monopolizing the discourses that would subsequently reshape both interpretations and applications of Islam within the Islamic world.

The first of these forces is what Ahmed calls "establishment Islam," which arose primarily during the Abbasid era (750-1258 C.E.) under the auspices of an elite ruling class whose application and enforcement of Islam in newly conquered territories following the Muslim conquests drastically differed from that of the preceding Muslim communities in the Arabian Peninsula. By highlighting both pre- and early-Islamic communities' beliefs and actions toward women in contradistinction to surrounding religions and societies, not only does Ahmed bring into clearer focus the radical changes that occurred to Islam's original doctrine concerning women, but more importantly fosters an appreciation for indigenous Arab/Bedouin culture that allows for its merits to be duly recognized as well as distinguished from the traces left behind by "establishment Islam."

With regards to marriage, Ahmed contends that both before Islam as well as shortly thereafter women enjoyed markedly better conditions relative to neighboring communities. Prior to the emergence of Islam, Arabia, in contrast to virtually every surrounding society in 6<sup>th</sup> century C.E., stood as "the last remaining region in which patrilineal, patriarchal marriage had not yet been instituted as the sole legitimate form of marriage" (41). Although records are scant, scholars like Robertson Smith and Montgomery Watt have found convincing evidence that suggests that while pre-Islamic Arabia was far from matriarchal, it was indeed predominantly matrilineal (43). Consequently, the social system at work, based on kinship through the female line, bestowed upon women a degree of autonomy and guarantee of justice as newly wedded couples remained within the wife's community and under the protection of her kindred. Furthermore, the fact that there

existed a panoply of marriage customs, including polyandry and martial repudiation at the hand of the woman, sets this region apart from neighboring communities.

Ahmed concedes that many of these then rather liberal freedoms granted to women did in fact diminish with the emergency of Islam; she cites Watt once again who speculates that commercial growth of Mecca during the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries was likely responsible for the shift from traditional tribal and communal values (e.g. those of the Quraysh) toward values favoring individual traders (read men) wishing to amass property and accumulate wealth to be later passed down to their offspring—growing aspirations that necessitated a shift to patrilineality unquestionability at odds with the society’s propensity for uxorilocal marriage (43). However, she makes the nuanced point that while women’s marital, and in some cases societal, autonomy had indeed been curtailed under Islamic control, their status as well as the ways in which society as a whole viewed them, remained somewhat of an exception for their time. One such example of this is the presence of women’s voices in some of the earliest of Islam’s foundational texts (albeit only transcribed subsequently) that helped to establish important normative practices in Islamic society—most prominently those of ‘Aisha. “The very fact of women’s contribution to this important literature indicates that at least the first generation of Muslims—the generation closest to Jahiliyya days and Jahiliyya attitudes toward women—and their immediate descendants had no difficulty in accepting women as authorities” (47). This starkly contrasts with some of the contemporaneous conceptions of women that dominated the surrounding regions as merely reproductive entities. Therefore, despite undeniable restrictions placed on women by Islam, the Jahiliyya mentality that preceded this period and allotted to women some degree of authority and autonomy was very much present both in the early Muslim community as well as its texts that would lay the foundation for the emerging religion.

Furthermore, many of the features of Islam that today come under criticism in fact did not figure into the religion's foundational texts nor were they practiced among the early generations of the Muslim community. For instance, Ahmed addresses the veil and practice of seclusion (often associated with harems), pointing out that "during Muhammad's lifetime the verses enjoining seclusion applied to [his wives] alone" (53). She later adds that these measures of seclusion taken by Muhammed were likely less out of a desire to subjugate his wives, and more out of a need to protect his household as well as himself, a quickly rising political/religious leader, from those around him potentially meaning him harm (54). Furthermore, the veil, so often associated with Islamic subjugation, was neither imposed on nor encouraged for everyday women per se as its primary function, as detailed in Assyrian Law, was none other than that of a marker for status and social class. "The veil served not merely to mark the upper classes but, more fundamentally, to differentiate between 'respectable' women and those who were publicly available...[it] classified women according to their sexual activity and signaled to men which women were under male protection and which were fair game" (15). In contrast, under Abbasid rule, the veil found its way into Islamic teachings and soon thereafter would become increasingly synonymous with Islam's concept of the *hijab* (16). Ultimately, what Ahmed seeks to nuance is the rather egalitarian principles of Islamic tenets, such as those expressed in Surah 33:35 which suggest an ontological equality between men and women, in spite of the societal or religious caveats to that equality whether inscribed into foundational texts or subsequently derived from them via interpretations by religious authorities.

Despite the merits of Islam in principle regarding gender egalitarianism, Ahmed qualifies them by contending that their acceptance by early Muslim communities is likely to have been contingent on the historical constructs the religion had to create with respect to the Jahiliya

period—an unfortunate legacy it would later bequeath to a number of its power-mongering successors. “[With the aim of] serv[ing] vested political and ideological interests[,] Islamic civilization developed a construct of history that labeled the pre-Islamic period the Age of Ignorance and projected Islam as the sole source of all that was civilized—and used that construct so effectively in its rewriting of history that the peoples of the Middle East lost all knowledge of the past civilizations of the region” (37). It is this divorce, therefore, from the cultural advancements and heritage of Jahiliyya society that made the task of re-historicization for a subsequent and more established Islam all the easier to execute.

What makes “establishment Islam” so essential to Ahmed’s argumentation of reconciling Islam with women’s rights is its role in reshaping these seeds of pre- and early-Islamic gender egalitarianism, albeit modest, into a discourse that not only rejected women’s place in society and religion, but tyrannically imposed its interpretations as being the solely legitimate reading of Islamic doctrine. The oppressive and monopolizing discourse that Umayyad and Abbasid rulers promulgated during this time gained momentum for a variety of reasons, one of which arose as a result of rapid expansion of Muslim territories under religious conquests of neighboring regions. This hasty acquisition of foreign territories and the necessity of ruling non-Muslim people within them created unforeseen issues “attendant upon interpreting and rendering ethical ideas [found in Islamic doctrine] into law” (88). For instance, following the establishment of the capital of the Umayyad empire (661-750) in Damascus, “Arab rulers adopted the administrative machinery of the Byzantine rulers they had succeeded which facilitated the infiltration of foreign concepts into the still-developing and essentially rudimentary apparatus of Islamic law (89). Whether out of personal political expediency or a genuine predicament with applying a sociopolitical system in the form of a religion onto foreign peoples, the founding fathers of “establishment Islam” made

sweeping changes to the way Islam was understood and enforced. Furthermore, as this quickly developing Islamic empire consolidated power, its ability to assert without contestation its own interpretative understanding of Islam, which suited a new set of mores, attitudes, and agendas, increasingly grew in force. One example of this that Ahmed provides is of the Abbasid ruling class who systemically gave preference to what they interpreted as androcentric teachings in Islamic doctrine while conveniently brushing over some of the more explicit ethical injunctions concerning equitable relations between the sexes (87).

However, as stated above, the more devastating effect “establishment Islam” had on the Muslim community was its imposed monopoly of interpretive authority, which delegitimized dissident voices and labelled them as nothing less than heretical. As these modifications to and distortions of religious doctrine came to be known, internal conflict within the Islamic community consequently grew. These contestations were led by groups including the Sufis and Qarmatians who categorically “rejected elements of the dominant ideology [of “establishment Islam”] and its political and social ethos regarding [among other things] the ideology of gender” (87). Sufi narratives on female figures such as that of Hasan al-Basri—one of the most revered male Sufi leaders of his time who was said to have described himself as “bankrupt” in comparison to female Sufi scholar Rabi’a al-‘Adawiyya, a woman he believed to be “of truly superior merits” (96)—undermined dominant discourses on women. Moreover, Sufis’ “emphasis on the inner and spiritual meaning of the Quran, and the underlying ethic and vision it affirmed, similarly countered the letter-bound approach of orthodoxy” as well as its self-proclaimed exclusivity to forming interpretations of Islam upon which the ruling class had based its indisputable authority (96). The struggle of Qarmatians, similarly, represents this internal resistance—a group whose “movement...rooted in the underclass...challenged the Abbasid regime militarily and for a time

even succeeded in establishing an independent republic” (98). That virtually no records written by them exist today stands as a testament to the brutal repression exerted on groups like these. Therefore, contrary to the narrative put forth by “establishment Islam,” their authoritative readings on Islam were neither consensual nor resemblant of early Islamic communities.

In sum, then, Ahmed’s rehistoricization of early Islam and account of how “establishment Islam” coopted the religion’s original tenets regarding women and gender in service of their political agendas serve two purposes. First, it belies the notion that Islamic texts can be read unequivocally. And secondly, it problematizes the so-called *ijma’* (i.e., consensus) that is said to exist among Muslim thinkers which rejects interpretations of Islamic teaching that differ from those of “establishment Islam.” In this sense, many of the institutional voices that have and continue to dominate the discourse on what is and is not permitted in Islam with regards to women achieved their legitimacy by oppressive means non-representative of early Islam nor the many concerns that were risen throughout the religion’s history in protest to these radical alterations.

In the final section of *Women and Gender in Islam*, clear parallels can be drawn between early and modern Islamic discourses. Whereas “establishment Islam” sought to manipulate and distort religious texts with the aim of subjugating women, the new discourses that arose in the Middle East during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries addressed “the woman question” not so much with the aim of subjugating the woman alone, but rather in order to instrumentalize her struggle with the clear intent of subjugating the society as a whole. While each instance involved its own unique targets, both indeed had devastating consequences on the ways in which cultures and societies would later view the connection between Islam and women.

In many respects, therefore, this multitude of discourses on women of the modern Arab world taken in sum can be considered the second force Ahmed points to as being fundamental in

disrupting the nature call for gender egalitarianism within the context of Islam. Colonialists, nationalists, and Islamists, at this time, all vied for power over emerging nation-states using culture, and in particular the woman, as a contemporary currency for legitimacy. It is for this reason that Abu-Lughod in her introduction to *Remaking Women* insists that “women in the Middle East must be studied not in terms of an undifferentiated ‘Islam’ or Islamic culture but rather through the differing political projects of nation-states, with their distinct histories, relationships to colonialism and the West; class politics; ideological idiom; and struggles over the role of Islamic law in state and legal apparatuses” (5)—i.e., an intersectional/transnational feminist lens which merges factors of class, race, gender, and the likes.

In her discussion on what she terms “colonial feminism,” Ahmed brings to light how the dynamics in Egypt between colonialists and Arabs—both nationalists and Islamists—artificially exaggerated the dichotomies between East-West, indigenous-colonial, and religious-secular with women thrown in sharp relief. For example, Lord Cromer, consul general of occupied Egypt between 1883-1907, hinged many of his justifications for the occupation of Egypt and his calls for its Westernization on the idea that Egyptians indigenous and Islamic culture, inherently aggressive toward women, was incapable of reconciling itself with modernity. He wrote: “whereas Christianity teaches respect for women, and European men ‘elevated’ women because of the teachings of their religion[;] Islam degraded them...and it was to this degradation, most evident in the practices of veiling and segregation, that the inferiority of Muslim men could be traced” (Ahmed 152). Cromer conveniently makes no mention of the then present condition of the Victorian woman in Britain whose struggle for rights he, along with many of his contemporaries, flatly rejected (154). If these contradictions were enough, his detrimental policies on governmental schools, which including raising of their fees at the expense of families of modest income, as well as discouragement of the

School of *Hakimas* (which trained female doctors) left no doubt that his route to liberation was anything but genuine.

The force with which colonialists, like Cromer, employed their “feminist” discourses, which condemned both Islamic and indigenous cultures as backward and immoral, forced anticolonial nationalists and Islamicists to take a counter-stance. Despite being casted in terms of opposition to European colonialists and their exploitation of the Eastern woman, both these oppositional groups ironically shared many features with “colonial feminism” and therefore also instrumentalized the woman as a tool for marketing themselves. Omnia Shakry’s work on motherhood and child rearing in turn-of-the-century Egypt helps to illustrate this point with respect to nationalists in particular. She notes that during and particularly after colonial rule, leaders in Egypt often problematized mothers deeming them unsuitable in preparing a new generation and a “locus of the country’s backwardness” (Abu-Lughod 126). “An attempt to reconstitute motherhood along middle-class lines of rational-economic and scientific-hygienic domesticity and child rearing, serving both to efface and to recast class differences under the rubric of an ‘idea mother’” (127). In other words, although nationalists and colonialists indeed had vastly different objects in terms of the future of Egypt, both sought to superimpose a new identity by way of women who would henceforth be brought out of “seclusion” into the public sphere. There they could be bearers of a new ideology which could be then brought back into the private home through child rearing.

Even the Islamic discourse at this time, which staunchly opposed both secular nationalism as well as European imperialism, reflects many of these false assumptions about women that their rivals so often resorted to. For instance, the process by which Muslim children were now to undergo self-actualization and development (*al-tarbiyya*) under the care of the mother no longer focused strictly on their spiritual autonomy and fulfillment, but rather on “the cultivation of

religious sentiments, the inculcation of the moral virtues, and formation of disciplined souls and community...to be achieved within the Muslim *umma*" (153). Put differently, Muslim women in many respects were to be a starting point for what the Islamic magazine al-Manar called a socioreligious reform (*islāḥ*) toward a modernized Islamic community. Despite being articulated in Islamic terminology, the call for a renewal of values (*tajdīd*) to avert a furthering decline and digression of the Muslim world into traditionalism and superstitious (often represented by uneducated women) was nothing more than a rephrasing of the goals of secularists and colonists to modernize the state (150). Indeed, then, these groups all sought to superimpose a unifying national identity, be it religious, secular, or colonial, that would transport the diverse subcultures of Egypt into modernity via the nation-state.

Therefore, in a way not so dissimilar from the early British colonialists, who took issue with women seclusion (not out of concern for gender egalitarianism, but rather frustration of not being able to penetrate the household which it sought to transform), both Islamicists and Egypt nationalists targeted the woman as a means of infiltration into the home where it hoped to achieve the socialization of a new generation. Both Abu-Lughod and Ahmed's observations make clear that the narrative at work is very much dominated by male authorities. This is why Ahmed's ample use of women writers' own voices to tell the story shed new light on what has historically been recorded concerning this time in Egypt's history. As Morales prescribes, it is the curandera's reframing of history, centering on the voice of women, that changes the entire framework within which we can understand historical events.

Ahmed brings to attention the concerns and writings of Islamicist thinker Malak Hifni Nassef, who was quick to suspect the instrumentalization of the veil question in her comments regarding calls to unveil. "How can you men of letters...command us to unveil when any of us is

subjected to foul language if she walks in the street” (180). For Nassef, the “intellectual” debate that political groups were engaging in about women was missing the point entirely. If those proscribing measures truly were concerned with elevating women, then the aim according to Nassef would be “to give women a true education and raise them soundly and rectify how people [were] raised and improve [their] moral character, so that the nation as a whole [would be] well-educated and well-mannered. Then leave it to her to choose that which is most advantageous to her and to the nation” (180-1). The picture that Malak draws here is one not of victimhood or need for empowerment, but rather a call to trust the judgement of females in deciding how to live. Yet, this course of action was hardly heeded given that it undermined the role of nationalists and Islamicists in mediating the transition into modernity.

The result of these polarizing discourses between Islamists, secularists, and colonialists was the overemphasizing of differences between many women whose ideologies often overlapped considerably. For example, in Abu-Lughod’s *Remaking Women*, Deniz Kandiyoti discusses the ideological clashes that were often publicized between women working in colonial Egypt press. She suggests that despite Levantine immigrant women writers’ frequent use of Western references, many of them nonetheless held pro-Arab and nationalistic aspirations (276). In this sense, contrary to their portrayal as pro-colonial Eurocentricists, their willingness to adopt and advocate syntheses of East and West ideologies was less about disagreements with Muslim nationalist women, but rather a reflection of the differential and less aggressive relationship they had with the British because of their status as Christians (276). Kandiyoti points to the novel as being an essential tool in understanding these differences. She maintains that through this form, women were able to transmit their views without the heavy influence of the press which sought to politicize emerging feminist views for their own personal interests.

In sum, the work that the scholars above have carried out shed light on a few important points. First, they demonstrate the extent to which identities and ideological titles obscured common objectives to subjugate women among the rivals of pre- and post-colonial states in the Middle East. More importantly, however, they reestablish common ground between potential allies across traditional divides thus allowing for relations based not in location but in a common desire to achieve a fairer and more just society.

#### **1.4 Forming New Alliances**

In this final section, I will review the work of Madhavi Sunder and Islah Jad with the objective of examining the current status of women and gender activism. Furthermore, I will demonstrate how the strategies Middle Eastern women are employing fundamentally challenge the restrictive identities that historically have had that part in divided movements and activist groups.

In her article “Piecing the Veil,” Sunder (2003) argues that the tendency to place blame on Islam as a religion has been rather misleading in uncovering the present-day obstacles that women face in the Middle East. She maintains that while indeed certain Muslim communities do commonly enforce laws and customs that disadvantage women disproportionately, in reality international law is to be scrutinized if women are to succeed in their efforts for social justice. This argument addresses the common assumptions in the West which view Muslim women as either acquiescent or unable to combat gender inequalities without the assistance of foreign intervention. In contrast, Sunder’s thesis posits that international law fails Middle Eastern women in its failure to understand that “religious communities are internally contested, heterogeneous, and constantly evolving over time through internal debate and interaction with outsiders” (266-7). She links this shortcoming to secularism’s historical conflict with European religious authorities during the Enlightenment; in an effort to achieve their objectives of reason and rationality in the public

sphere, proponents of secularism settled for a compromise of deference to religious within the private sphere (266). The result, as Sunder would have it, has been that “human rights law continues to define religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a sovereign, extralegal jurisdiction in which inequality is not only accepted, but expected” (266).

Therefore, Sunder contests the notion of cultural relativity, particularly when used to legitimize religious authorities’ violations of women’s rights, because it warrants this injustice so long as it remains confined to the private and/or culturally indigenous spheres. Sunder problematizes this practice by pointing out how cultural relativity disregards the internal contestation and heterogeneity that naturally occurs within any religious community by assuming that the voice of orthodoxy is sacrosanct and inherently representative of the community in its entirety. This, consequently, negates women’s agency in defining and transforming how *they* wish to envision their religious practices and identities (266-7). She brings to light the false dichotomy of having to choose either rights or religion by introducing the voices of Muslim women insisting to have both. Not only does Sunder’s reevaluation undermine stereotypical representations of the “Muslim woman” as a docile and passive victim of Muslim men’s crippling oppression, but also redefines the terms assumed to be necessary in achieving that freedom by way of a route other than secularization.

Proponents of the Sunder’s New Enlightenment—i.e., those individuals who “reject the binary approach of the Enlightenment [between rights and religion]” (268)—therefore insist on the limitations, if not destruction, this mentality gives rise to, advocating instead for moving “beyond *freedom from* violence to *freedom to* make the world” (270). In other words, although NGOs and feminists demand that Muslim women be granted their agency, in deferring to the current

articulations of human rights law they paradoxically strip these women of all forms of freedom to negotiate the terms by which *they* wish to engage in their communities.

Activist movements such as Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML), however, are addressing these fundamental flaws in international law by forming broad and diverse coalitions that tackle inequalities from a local and oftentimes Islamic perspective. Islah Jad (2003), in her “The NGO-isation of Arab Women’s Movements, asserts that “at [the] base [of social movements] are the social networks and cultural symbols through which social relations are organized” (9). Where WLUML has succeeded in this respect is its willingness to allow women to incorporate their own cultural and/or religious understandings into the movement. Their extensive work in empowering women by familiarizing them with religious texts that support their demands for liberties has been instrumental in reorienting discourse on gender egalitarianism from a matter exclusively Occidental to something far more universal.

### **1.5 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have reviewed some of the prominent writers on gender and women in the Muslim and Arab World. The theories and insights that these scholars provide are vital for any study of this region because they identify crucial misconceptions and biases that have long influenced scholarship on both the Middle East as well as the individuals that inhabit this region. More importantly, however, the analyses reviewed above have been instrumental in reshaping the ways in which Middle Eastern women are read and understood because they challenge the traditional labels under which women (and men) are placed in favor of a more nuanced understanding of how these labels are designed to resist change and ultimately social justices.

Furthermore, the studies in this review demonstrate the necessity of using the transnational feminist lens beyond the scope of one particular discipline given the extent to which they recast Middle Eastern voices under a new light devoid or at least suspect of hailing identities that obscure forces of oppression such as “establishment Islam” or “colonial feminism.” Therefore, much caution must be taken when analyzing female voices in the Middle East so as to not conflate views and arguments expressed in their works with cultural dichotomies whose aim has always been to present a unified and uncontested front line between civilizational foes.

Within the framework of these insights, the next two chapters of this study will deal with the works of contemporary Arab writers Nawal El Saadawi and Samiha Khrais. Both authors are particularly relevant to the subject at hand because they have often been associated with a number of the all-consuming discourses analyzed above. While Saadawi’s criticism of realities of everyday life in Egypt repeatedly has been associated with Occidental (even Orientalist) tropes that supposedly do more harm than good, Khrais’ embrace of traditional Bedouin culture may appear incompatible with the struggle for gender egalitarianism. In the subsequent chapters, I intend to challenge these assumptions and highlight essential similarity so as to reconcile conflicting notions that present views such as Khrais and Saadawi as incompatible if not adversarial. The conclusions I will draw there will have the aim of demonstrating the potential for a broader and more diverse coalition of Middle Eastern voices that is not only unique to the region but based in long-standing values endowed with the power to inspire grassroots-based movements.

## CHAPTER 2

### NAWĀL AL-SA'DĀWĪ

#### 2.1 Writing as Resistance

One of Nawāl al-Sa'dāwī's greatest achievements in Arabic literature, as well as in the scholarly work she has contributed to the corpus of feminism of the global South, is her ability to

eloquently weave her intimate knowledge of life as a woman living in “al-Rīf” (Egypt’s countryside)<sup>6</sup> with striking insights she developed after years of practice as a psychiatrist and Egyptian public health physician treating women from Egypt’s rural regions.

While rural Egypt as well as the many social inequalities that plague it have often been dealt with intimately by some of Egypt’s greatest writers such as Najīb Maḥfūz and Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, Nawāl al-Sa’dāwī offers a further dimension to this commentary by fleshing out the struggles and complexities of living as a woman in such milieus. While Maḥfūz and Ḥusayn have been praised for their exploration into the lives of women in rural and urban Egypt, there has been a fair share of criticism regarding their treatment. For instance, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn’s masterpiece, *Du‘ā’ al-Karawān* (1934, *The Nightingale's Prayer*), does in fact explore the precarious and unjust condition of 20<sup>th</sup> century Egyptian women both in the rural lands as well as cities, yet reinforces tropes of their enfeebled societal status without problematizing their victimization nor examining with an authentic voice their resistance albeit in formerly unconventional ways.

In this regard, much credit has been bestowed upon al-Sa’dāwī for having re-explored the most prominent tropes on “the Arab woman” as well as for the extensive incorporation of her activism in women’s rights and feminism within her works, both of which are in great part due to her personal history and life experiences. Born on October 27, 1931 in Kafr Ṭaḥlah, Egypt, al-Sa’dāwī’s childhood was marked by dissidence toward her family and society as she began to protest against the privileges that she felt had been unrightfully withheld from her based on her gender. According to her account of this period which she elaborated on during an interview conducted in 2018 with Britain’s Channel 4 News and detailed at length in her autobiography,

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<sup>6</sup> Rural regions outside of Egypt’s capital historically impoverished and quite conservative with further disenfranchisement following the rapid modernization of Egypt under rulers like Khedive Ismail that left many farmers in this area without work or means of support for their families

*Ibnat Īsīs* (1999; *A Daughter of Isis: The Autobiography of Nawal El Saadawi*), some of her earliest memories were those of jealousy toward her brothers whose unmerited favor allotted them privileges to which she herself was not so easily entitled, namely education. Nearly all of her cousins had been already married by the age of ten, a fate al-Sa‘dāwī escaped thanks only to a distinctively liberal family relative to their milieu during the 1940s and despite her father’s reservations pressured by the extended family and only acquiescing after al-Sa‘dāwī’s staunchly supportive mother interceded (Channel 4 News).

While al-Sa‘dāwī was in fact successful in circumventing attempts to bring her educational career to a halt, the preferential treatment toward her brothers and subsequent male figures in her life, trauma inflicted upon her as a result of her gender (e.g. female genital mutilation FGM), and invocation to religion as justification for all of the aforementioned were instrumental in forging her as a writer as well as have given shape to countless issues she has addressed in her works.

After completing her medical formation at Cairo University in 1955, al-Sa‘dāwī remained at the institution for the ensuing decade working both as a physician whilst holding a position in Egypt’s Ministry of Health. This latter role would result in her appointment in 1966 as director of the Health Education Department within the ministry. During that same year, she received her M.P.H. (Master of Public Health) in 1966 from Colombia University and founded *Health* magazine two years later. Its content as well as her publication in 1969, *Al-mar’ah wa al-jīns* (*Women and Sex*), led to her expulsion from the ministerial position at the behest of both religious and political men threatened by her growing readership and dissident voice. From 1972 to 1974, therefore, al-Sa‘dāwī devoted herself fully to her psychiatric research at ‘Ayn Shams University in Cairo where she examined and treated women coming from conservative and rural

household/communities—data from which she would later draw inspiration in her works such as *Imra'ah 'inda nuḡṡat al-ṡifr* (1975, *Woman at Point Zero*).

In September of 1981, after having established for herself a politically controversial reputation and publishing an openly feminist magazine entitled *Confrontations*, al-Sa'dāwī was imprisoned by then President of Egypt, Anwar Sadat. This did little to deter al-Sa'dāwī's fervor to write and thus with a smuggled cosmetic pencil and a roll of toilet paper she penned *Mudhakkirāt fi sijn al-nisā* (1984; *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*) during the two months of her imprisonment (El Saadawi, Nawal). Upon her release the following year (1982), al-Sa'dāwī founded Arab Women's Solidarity Association (AWSA) along with the organization's publication, *Al-nūn*, both of which were forcibly disbanded by the Egyptian government in 1991. Since then, literature has become one of al-Sa'dāwī's most influential vehicles through which she mobilizes social change in Egypt into which she infuses her long-standing political and medical activism.

Despite being revered in the West as a prominent scholar and author particularly within the realm of feminism and gender studies and respected by many within the Arab World for her unrelenting activism in advancing women's rights and social justice as well as speaking out against such difficult issues like female genital mutilation, al-Sa'dāwī has received a great deal of criticism both literary as well as with regard to her political stances on a variety of social issues in the Arab World for which she has often been caricatured as a puppet for Western agendas in disseminating their ideologies in the Arab World. In the following section, I will address these criticisms particularly as they pertain to her work, *Imra'ah 'inda nuḡṡat al-ṡifr* (1975, *Woman at Point Zero*), as well as highlight several important insights al-Sa'dāwī's work imparts on her readers that may be overlooked when analyzing her work solely within the frame of reference of traditional feminism. This in no way is to downplay the significant contributions al-Sa'dāwī's novella has made in the

realm of women's rights, but rather to highlight the ways in which her message, which can be ascribed to transnational feminism, transcends a limit set of issues regarding women and rather implicates the whole of society in ways that were rather ahead of the author's time.

## 2.2 Woman at Point Zero

When Nawāl al-Sa'adāwī first published *Imra'ah 'inda nuqtat al-ṣifr* (*Woman at Point Zero*) in Lebanon in 1975 after having received rejections from virtually every publisher in Egypt (Saadawi and Cohen, 60), few might have imagined the extent to which the work would reach its readership around the globe. Today, *Woman at Point Zero*, stands out as seminal text in the global feminist cannon. And yet, quite unfortunately the text has been known to be misconstrued, by the West who praise it as a categorical indictment on the “violent and primitive traditional Arab man” as well as among al-Sa'adāwī's original targeted audience, Arabophobes, and others who like Drosihn (2014) claimed it amounted to nothing more than “[a] reproduction of Orientalist stereotyping[,] feeding into Western tendencies of simultaneously superiority and fear of the Middle East and especially Islam” (62).

In contrast, scholars such as Luma Balaa (2018) have argued quite the contrary, contending that al-Sa'adāwī does anything but Orientalize given that the stereotypical motifs that appear scattered throughout the text are almost always interrogated rather than perpetuated with the aim of complicating the nuanced terrain women in the Middle East occupy (236). Consequently, the monolithic experience of the Arab woman is refuted to make way for a deeper understanding of the many ways in which class, ethnicity, and religion radically alter these experiences depicted within the text (238).

The novella's structure consists of three chapters of which the first and last describe a brief encounter between the unnamed narrator, a psychiatrist conducting research on female inmates, and Firdaus, a woman imprisoned on charges of murder in Qanatir Prison in Egypt of 1977. The story commences with the failed attempts of the narrator at gaining access to Firdaus who has rejected all requests to be visited by guests in the days leading to her execution. The enigma surrounding Firdaus' refusal to appeal to authorities against her charges—which with proper litigation could easily be deemed as self-defense—, serene demeanor despite an impending fate at the gallows, and indifference towards the narrator's interest in her all generate within the narrator an implacable obsession to uncover the secrets and truth regarding Firdaus. So persistent and unsettling are the narrator's ruminations that nearly everything in her life including her self-confidence as a respectable scientific scholar and upstanding member of society are called into question.

The tension that fuels the narrator's obsession and the entirety of the first chapter stems from perhaps the most fundamental question of the novella: how ought "victims" of society confront the injustices that oppress them? For the doctor who tends to Firdaus' psychological examinations, her calm and docile composure contradict the malice her crime suggests: "If you look into [Firdaus'] face or eyes, you simply cannot imagine that this delicate woman could kill" (al-Sa'dāwī, 2). In essence, he looks upon her as a victim, but more importantly mistakes her intent thus dismissing the unjust circumstances which gave rise to the crime. When the narrator retorts to his comment: ("*wa-man qāla inna 'amaliyata al-qatali lā tahtāju ila riqqatin*")/Who says murder does not require that a person be delicate) (2), his astonishment serves as a testament to his incomprehension of the crux of the issue.

In contrast, the warden appears far more cognizant of the injustices levelled at Firdaus as is evidenced by her anger towards the narrator after accusing her of collaborating with and being sent on behalf of “*humma*”/them (3). Her sympathy for Firdaus is clear and albeit by implication she firmly lays the blame on a male-dominated society which grants no protection for women/victims such as Firdaus. However, the ambiguity with which the warden makes her indictment and particularly her precise use of the pronoun “*humma*” (marked by quotations in the text without any clearly stated antecedent) reflect the difficulty the warden and others in the novella have at pinpointing the precise culprits in a morally bankrupt society. Despite the masculine connotations that reside within the warden’s accusations, their linguistic ambiguity with regard to gender and antecedent foreshadows the deceptive dimensions of their society and the ways in which men *and* women are complicit in its upholding. However, the warden’s puzzlement and growing frustration over Firdaus’ decision to abstain from seeking recourse in the authorities for reconsideration of her unjust sentence demonstrate that like the doctor she too has misconstrued the meaning of Firdaus’ actions in resisting her oppression.

It is the narrator who is most troubled by this ostensible act of capitulation; for her, Firdaus’ rejection of help from the head of state and hers initially are internalized as a declaration of superiority and independency from the state and society of not needing the support and authorization to live in her unadulterated authenticity. Although this fact alone suffices to bewilder and captivate the narrator, something far more troubling results from her encounter with Firdaus. In essence, Firdaus serves a mirror of sorts onto which the narrator inevitably projects her own fears and insecurities regarding authenticity and identity, causing her to ponder the extent to which she may or may not have become too complacent about her high-standing in a society whose norms have allowed the situation of Firdaus to come to fruition. This becomes even more

apparent when she discovers by word of the warder that Firdaus appears to be familiar with her and thus has rejected her on personal grounds (4). Fears substantiated, the feeling of rejection washes over the narrator's thoughts and seems to draw out suppressed memories of love and pain:

*'Ihsāsun lam 'ojarribhu fi ḥayātī min qablu 'illa marratan wāḥidatan, wa-munthu sanawātin ba'idatin ḥīna 'aḥbabbtu rajalan lam yuḥibbunī, wa'aṣbaḥa raḥḍuhu ḥī...raḥḍa al-'ālimi kullihī ḥī, bi-kulli mā fihi wa-bi-kulli man fihi/ A feeling I had never felt before save once long ago when I fell in love with a man who did not love me; and what merely was his refusal of me felt as if it came from the entire world—from everything and everyone in it. (5)*

Here al-Sa'dāwī adroitly blurs the boundaries between descriptions of the narrator's experiences of rejection by Firdaus and a past lover. While at first such a likening may appear hyperbolic and even bizarre given that Firdaus is neither acquaintance nor lover, the passage and its repetition virtually verbatim pages later when Firdaus decides to accept the narrator's request, underscore the difficulty with which the narrator derives self-worth when acceptance has not been granted by those she respects. While her educational and societal statuses have sufficed hitherto in reassuring the narrator of her dignity, the sudden and unexpected encounter she has with Firdaus disrupts her self-complacency as well as bearings within society, stirring up within her a visceral epiphany or rebirth. In this sense, acceptance from Firdaus is synonymous with love; rejection a violent assault on her self-worth. Throughout the remaining chapters, al-Sa'dāwī returns to this idea zooming in and out from a personal to societal lens to explore the dimensions of acceptance and rejection and how they are used as a coercive force on the individual.

The opening chapter concludes with the narrator on the verge of leaving the premises only to discover by way of the warden Firdaus' sudden change of mind to finally permit a visit before being executed later that day. Upon entering the cell, the narrator is filled with a sense of ecstasy

and awaits impatiently explanations from Firdaus; what she receives, however, is a comprehensive retelling of Firdaus' life-tale from infancy up to the crime that has sealed her fate, which in effect sheds light on both the true nature of Firdaus' resistance as well as the significance of three leitmotifs that reappear throughout the ensuing chapter: identity, rejection, and rebirth. Not only are these three topics heavily discussed during Firdaus' narrative in the subsequent chapter, but also constitute the most urgent conflicts the narrator is faced with in this first and brief chapter—a struggle for defining her identity within society as a woman of science and scholarship yet increasingly conformist, a rejection from Firdaus' as well as past lover which act as powerful coercive forces on the narrator's thoughts and actions, and finally a reawakening that occurs within her first upon entering Firdaus' cell and then following the completion of Firdaus' story in the final chapter.

### **2.3 Duplicity of Identity: Mirrors and Reflection of the Inner-Self**

Among the most prominent of themes in the second chapter of al-Sa'adāwī's novella, *Woman at Point Zero*, is that of identity, its complexity, and most importantly the seemingly inevitable duplicity with which it must be developed in a society such as Firdaus' where gender and class harshly dictate the appropriate behaviors and worth of its members. These ideas are developed by al-Sa'adāwī early on in the second chapter of the novella, most prominently through the ample usage of mirrors which serve Firdaus throughout the narrative as a reminder in the most literal sense of the image by which she is recognized within society (i.e., her external appearance), yet more metaphorically of the startling incongruity between that image and the one she herself holds to be true—her identity.

The mirror, therefore, like society, relentlessly hurls onto the reader as well as Firdaus a reflection that she has had no part in choosing nor finds remotely indicative of the true nature of her character that constitutes the “*self*.” Al-Sa‘adāwī resorts to this object on several occasions, all of which are predicated on the notion of identity as fragmented and multifaceted as well as deceptive in revealing the true or authentic representation of the protagonist, Firdaus. Furthermore, these extended motifs transcend gender lines with ample examples provided by al-Sa‘adāwī of how this struggle is shared by men and women alike in Firdaus’ world, thus reaffirming the universal nature of al-Sa‘adāwī message typically read with a far narrower lens.

One such example of this comes shortly after Firdaus has made her journey from the countryside to Cairo where apart from a seemingly more liberal and welcoming world (at least at first glance), she discovers for the first time her body and the sharp disparities of it with what she had previously thought of herself to “look” like. Al-Sa‘adāwī captures Firdaus’ sense of estrangement toward her body as well as outward appearance in a scene occurring shortly after the death of her mother and father, after which she is taken by her uncle to live in his flat in Cairo:

When I opened my lids again[,] I had the feeling of looking out through them for the first time, as though I had just come into the world, or was being born a second time...I glimpsed myself in the mirror. This also had never happened before. At first, I did not know that it was a mirror. I was frightened when I found myself looking at the little girl wearing a dress that reached down no further than her knees, and a pair of shoes that hid her feet...But I recognized my face immediately. Yet how could I be so sure it was my face since I had not seen myself in a mirror before? (19)

Although only sparingly alluded to, and not fully developed until much later, the issue of class emerges within this passage as well as shortly thereafter as Firdaus discerns not only her

reflection for the first time, but the differences in attire that come with moving from the hands of her rural and improvised parents to those of her more affluent and learned uncle among the ranks of the bourgeoisie. Juxtaposed are her tidy well-tailored dress and clean pair of shoes with the traditional *galabeya* and bare feet attributed to Firdaus in the text several times before her arrival to the flat.

More salient and pertinent to this idea of identity are the lines which follow in which Firdaus remarks upon her striking resemblance to father and mother despite an obstinate determination to affirm her fundamental detachment from their values:

I stood in front of the mirror staring at my face. Who am I? Firdaus, that is how they call me. The big round nose I got from my father, and the thin-lipped mouth from my mother. A sinking feeling went through my body. I neither liked the look of my nose, nor the shape of my mouth. I thought my father had died, yet here he was alive in the big, ugly, rounded nose. My mother, too, was dead, but continued to live in the form of this thin-lipped mouth. (19-20)

One might conclude from her remarks above that they merely reveal a juvenile dissatisfaction with something as superficial as physical appearances, but to do so would be to dismiss one of the most essential conflicts the protagonist grapples with: agency in forging one's self-definition or simply put identity. In this particular instance, thought recurrent throughout the narrative, Al-Sa'adāwī seems to fuse so inextricably physiognomy, or appearances in later iterations, with the notion of identity that one cannot but feel stifled by the crisis Firdaus' reflected image generates; her face elicits existential questions of selfhood ("Who am I?") and carries with it the souls of her deceased parents.

In a scene that occurs approximately mid-novel, Firdaus has yet another particularly crucial encounter with her outer appearance via the mirror in the flat of Sharifa Salah el Dine, a strong-willed independent woman in whose arms Firdaus initially finds refuge. Estranged from her uncle and left to fend for herself, Firdaus has quite inadvertently been forced into the world of prostitution filled with despicable and manipulative individuals. By contrast, and much to her relief, she soon stumbles across Sharifa in whom she finds a sympathetic mother/sister presence and to whom she can finally confide her misfortune. Despite this respite, however, while lodging in Sharifa luxurious flat on the Nile, Firdaus is inevitably faced with the task of wrestling with her deep wounds and the changes that have occurred since her flight into the streets.

While she is yet to discover the full nature of her subsequent liberation, one particularly important realization she makes at this time takes form in Sharifa's flat as Firdaus gazes at her figure in the mirror, reflecting upon the changes both within and without her body that have developed over this short yet eventful period of her life:

I discovered I had black eyes, with a sparkle that attracted other eyes like a magnet, and that my nose was neither big, nor rounded, but full and smooth with the fullness of strong passion which could turn to lust. (58)

In a manner relatively consistent with her previous encounters with the mirror, here Firdaus yet again discerns the societal projection, this time quite different, that has been cast onto her body denoting an eroticism by which men of late recognize her and which one might stereotypically ascribed to the archetypal prostitute. *Al-Sa'adāwī*, however, subverts this literary trope by infusing in it a sense of liberation on the part of Firdaus as she both embraces her new-found sensuality and reconciles herself with particular features of hers that once posed restraints on

how she was perceived by herself and society as well as moored to the memory of her father whose values she so ardently despised. It is at this pivotal moment, reinforced by several other instances, that we begin to see Firdaus' reseizure of identity, albeit not fully ripened, which will be further discussed in the following section of this chapter.

Despite al-Sa'adāwī's clear and searing indictment in *Woman at Point Zero* on Firdaus' society for its unjust norms and conventions vis-à-vis women customarily found in traditional second-wave feminism, her message transcends the diagnoses one might conjure up using this outdated frame of reference. As mentioned in the previous chapter, much of the scholarship emerging from transnational feminism has sought to problematize the way in which women's rights are viewed and discussed, most prominently the way in which all genders are implicated in oppression and liberation as well as how these problems intersect with a number of other social justice issues.

In *Woman at Point Zero*, al-Sa'adāwī explores these transnational feminist considerations, particularly in how the societal oppression of Firdaus' world extends itself onto men, in a fashion not unlike Fatima Mernissi's seminal text, *Beyond the Veil*, published four years after al-Sa'adāwī's novella in 1987. Like Mernissi, al-Sa'adāwī examines the roles of the men in societies such as Firdaus' and illuminates the equally oppressive nature of their existence. For instance, whereas the image takes on a recurrent and fundamental form of hindrance for women in the novella, money in contrast acts as an undeniable obstacle in the lives of several men in *Woman at Point Zero*.

A clear example of this appears fairly early on in the narrative when Firdaus overhears a conversation between her uncle and his wife discussing the matter of marriage, which they plan to arrange between Firdaus and a repugnant widower several decades her senior. Concerned by the difference in age, Firdaus' uncle initially declines the suitor, later adducing the issue of his

“deformity,” a pustulant sore conspicuously protruding from his nose, to which his wife retorts: “*al-rajulu lā yuṭbuhu illa jaybuhu*”/nothing shames a man but an empty pocket (38).

The inability to meet all expectations of the successful breadwinner comes down as a terrible blow to the men of *Woman at Point Zero*, just as is true in virtually all societies both in the East and West. Furthermore, the more egregious acts of men like this suitor, whose abusiveness and immortality are later revealed to the reader, are downplayed if not pardoned as a result of his financial standing by those in Firdaus’ immediate circle. While al-Sa‘adāwī utilizes these events to make a commentary on the double standard of morality between the sexes, it serves just as well as a reminder of the brutal injustice placed on men in less fortunate financial circumstances.

These oppressive dimensions of money in society become apparent to Firdaus as she begins to navigate life as an independent in need of supporting herself. After her sheltered but unbearable life under the roofs of tyrannical men as well as that of the at-time-tender-yet-manipulative Sharifa, Firdaus discovers the intoxicating excitement money procures her after receiving payment for the first time in exchange for her first act of self-managed sex work—“giv[ing] her a strange sense of selfhood, or ownership and of agency and feelings akin to the ultimate in sexual pleasure, a feeling she had failed to experience during her numerous sexual encounters” (Palmer 105).

With these revelations, however, swiftly comes the implicit understanding of money’s illicitness, or more precisely the unrepressed taking of pleasure in its derivative: agency. This is exemplified in the following scene when Firdaus treats herself to a meal bought with her first payment. At this point, she encounters a waiter whose restrained look askance in avoidance of the ten-pound note visible from her opened bag triggers a realization of the extent to which working-class men are subjected to an indivisible part of the same societal system that deprives women like

her—"Could it be that the ten pound note I held in my hand was as illicit and forbidden as the thrill of sacrilegious pleasure?" (72).

In short, the novella suggests that the image of oneself projected into society—either by choice so as to present oneself according to the mores and expectations of society or by force particularly with regard to the marginalized and oppressed—is particularly problematic in that it fragments identities in artificial and deleterious ways. This al-Sa‘adāwī illustrates by throwing into stark relief—at times at the risk of being stereotypical—the unrelenting negotiations her characters must engage in with society between their private and public face.

While the motif of the mirror as a portal into the complex realities of the self and source of the immutable reflection it casts back upon us and surrounding society is an important symbol al-Sa‘adāwī utilizes throughout the text in order to embody universal dilemmas of identity, she simultaneously subverts this imagery by suggesting the power we possess in shaping the way in which we are seen by others. Accordingly, as her protagonist, Firdaus, comes to understand the inutility of fine-tuning her morality, virtue, hard-work ethic, and intellectual cultivation to the acceptable standards of society in her search for love and acceptance, the identity she projects and high esteem in which she had once wished to be held by others become meaningless; in fact, her rejection of these preoccupations is the very thing which ultimately enables her to alter the perceptions of other about her.

17<sup>th</sup> century sociologist, Charles Cooley, once said: "I am not who you think I am; I am not who I think I am; I am who I think you think I am"—"which is to say, we are who we believe others see us as in a constantly evolving feedback loop created out of our actions, other people's perceptions of our actions, and our assumptions of their perceptions" (*Pursuit of Wonder*). Among the many messages, then, that can be derived from *Woman at Point Zero* is the realization

that with dismissing the many anxieties of how we are experienced in the minds of others come not only a frighteningly powerful and exciting sense of liberation, but the power to change those very perceptions we fear and/or suffer from in those around us. As will be discussed in the following section, although Firdaus finds solace and emancipation in this act of resistance, the social repercussions of her actions are great and threaten to deter all who follow her path.

#### **2.4 Resistance: Rejecting the Imprisoning Image and Understanding Agency in All its Variations**

Central to the themes of *Woman at Point Zero* is the symbol of the prison—in all its manifestations—whose walls Firdaus, the protagonist, must learn to circumnavigate in her quest towards freedom. Given that al-Sa‘adāwī’s main inspiration for the novella derives from her own experience examining and treating incarcerated women of Egypt, the metaphor seems rather fitting for the novella. However, even before Firdaus begins to recall her story to the attentive narrator, it becomes apparent that the prisons which populate the novella are far more than meets the eye, one lying within the confines of the next like a matryoshka doll each of whose layers reveal the further complexities that lie beyond.

As early as the second page of the novella, the boundaries that separate the narrator from Firdaus are clearly delineated as she finds herself face to face with the prison gates that hold within them Firdaus (2). Their impenetrability is reinforced by the distrustful and standoffish warden who stands between the narrator and a Firdaus unwilling to be seen coupled with what the readers themselves bring to the table in terms of preconceived assumptions on the moral chasm that separates those within the prison from the rest of “civilized” society.

Upon learning that she has been rejected by Firdaus, however, the narrator's "whole life seem[s] to be threatened with failure [as a result of this rejection]" as she begins to reevaluate both her life achievements and self-worth (3).

It looked to me as though this woman who had killed a human being, and was shortly to be killed herself, was a much better person than I. Compared to her, I was but a small insect crawling upon the land amidst millions of other insects. (3)

In this way, al-Sa'adāwī turns our bearings as well as those of the narrator on their head, deconstructing the boundaries and understanding of what the nature of Firdaus' imprisonment actually means. Furthermore, when the narrator is finally admitted into Firdaus' cell, even the epicenter of confinement has morphed into a fluid and defiant space that foreshadows the power Firdaus possesses in resisting the constraints of both society as well as its futile attempts at imprisoning her:

My body bent down and sat on the ground...[which] was bare, but I felt no cold...Yet the cold did not touch me, did not reach me. It was the cold of sea in a dream. I swam through its waters...but I neither felt its cold, nor drowned in its waters. Her voice [Firdaus] too was like the voices one hears in dreams...For we do not know from where these voices arise: from above or below, to your left or our right. (7-8)

It is throughout the course of the second chapter that Firdaus begins to reveal the many prisons over which she has prevailed in a final act of resistance in which she affirms her de-victimization and agency as the "curandera" imparting her truth and legacy in spite of the forces that wish to stop her. To understand the power of this particular action of Firdaus', it is helpful

here to explore a film released in 2019 that examines the ways in which the victimized can subvert oppression in the face of a seemingly unvanquishable force.

In *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*), writer and director Céline Sciamma fleshes out the idea of the “male gaze”<sup>7</sup>. Sciamma examines to what extent the object of desire—i.e., the woman onto which a set of aesthetics and values have been superimposed by the “gazer”—can subvert the portrayal foisted upon her so as to alter or refuse it in favor of one more congruous with an inner essence. The director builds her film around the burgeoning relationship between two young European women at the end of the eighteenth century; Marianne, a young, talented, and ambitious painter, is commissioned to paint a portrait of the daughter of an aristocratic family named Héloïse who upon completion of the commissioned painting is to be married off to an Italian nobleman thus sealing her fate into the restrictive life of a conventional housewife of eighteenth-century European aristocracy. Grief-stricken by the prospects of traditional marriage, no less oppressive given her homosexuality, Héloïse obstinately refuses the attempts of her mother at having her painted as it inevitably implicates her into her own consignment to a future husband. Therefore, Marianne unbeknownst to Héloïse is tasked with the mission of surreptitiously capturing the essence of the young lady piecemeal through a series of encounters she has with her under the guise of a presumed companion Héloïse’s mother has hired following the traumatic suicide of her eldest daughter, Héloïse’s sister.

As Marianne and Héloïse’s relationship develops, unmistakably laying bare sexual, intellectual, and spiritual connections between the two of them, the former finds herself ensnared not only in an ethical dilemma—that of deceptively conspiring in the ultimate conferment of Héloïse to her future husband—but also, and certainly more relevant to the themes of *Woman at*

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<sup>7</sup> Act of depicting women and/or the world (via literature, the visual arts, or similar forms) from a masculine, heterosexual perspective as sexual objects for heterosexual male viewers’ pleasure.

*Point Zero*, a metaphysical one. Despite Marianne’s growing familiarity with Héloïse’s physiognomy, which she acquires through proximity with and outward appearance of her artistic subject, she soon comes to grips with her undeniable inability to capture Héloïse essence. In reference to this dilemma, Raymond De Luca explains both the cinematic and philosophical implications this has on the characters as well as audience:

The access into a person’s interior world facilitated by the face—so central to the close-up in film history—is deferred in *Portrait*. Sciamma’s viewers are *not* invited to identify with Héloïse, thereby disrupting the ways female subjectivity is “captured” onscreen or, for Marianne, on canvas. Like the faceless grim reaper figure in *Meshes of the Afternoon*<sup>8</sup>, Héloïse’s visage is a kind of unreflective mirror, a source of *misrecognition*. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* upends the standard practices of portraiture.

It is only after Marianne has confessed her true intentions for coming and she and Héloïse have given each other their mutually consent in the act of creation that the “gazer,” Marianne, is able to catch those fleeting glimpses of Héloïse’s true essence and render them into painting. In this way, “Héloïse negotiates how she will be represented on canvas and, in turn, onscreen; she curates her own image...*she* will determine how her likeness is committed to canvas” (De Luca). By disrupting such an entrenched dynamic portrayed in cinema between “gazer” and “gazed,” not only does Sciamma assert Héloïse’s agency over her representation both on canvas and in the mind of Marianne, but more extraordinarily demonstrates the power Héloïse possesses in transforming herself from victim into actor in the eye of the film’s viewer.

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<sup>8</sup> An experimental short released in 1943 by Maya Deren that served as inspiration to Sciamma after studying it during her time at the renowned French filming school La Fémis

The Greek myth of Eurydice and Orpheus, referred to throughout the film, whose protagonists' love for one another is cut short by the latter's failure to abide by the sole condition given to him by Hades not to look back at Orpheus upon leaving the underworld, also serves as further reinforcement to Sciamma's assertion. While reading Virgil's tale in the company of Marianne and her maid, Héloïse suggests an alternative interpretation to the tragedy whereby it was Eurydice, not her lover, who proposed that they should take their last forbidden look. For her, the act signifies Eurydice's determination to be etched into the mind of her lover precisely the way in which she wishes her memory to live on.

Like Héloïse, by adulthood, Firdaus has come to terms with the inevitability of being rejected by society as well as the sheer impossibility of changing the oppressive structures that seek to imprison her. The power of their resistance therefore lies not in their ability to wholly eliminate the forces that oppress them, but rather in subversively projecting onto their societies a counterimage of which they become an essential actor in its creation. Much like the medicinal stories of Aurora L. Morales previously discussed, Firdaus' retelling of her life's trajectory to the narrator at a time when she has reached relatively advanced stages of her evolution serves to reinforce her new identity which she creates throughout the arc of the story. Her action, therefore, as storyteller takes on new meanings as we come to realize its intention of etching into the minds of both the narrator and al-Sa'adāwī' readership a final image in the likeness of Firdaus' true self.

Al-Sa'adāwī makes this point extraordinarily clear when, at several points throughout the novella, Firdaus' rejection of imposed identities and ability to craft within the mind of the gazer an alternative identity of her own choosing takes on a very literal sense. The scene during which Firdaus encounters the Arab prince towards the end of the novella, for instance, exemplifies this when, after having rid herself of all attachments to the need for affirmation and acceptance as well

as the dependence on social status markers like money, Firdaus receives from the prince the following remark: “from your face, I can see you are the daughter of a king” (108).

In sum, despite Firdaus’ impending fate, which by all appearances heralds the triumph of an unjust system that has sentenced her to death, al-Sa‘adāwī message both liberates and reaffirms the agency her protagonist wields in both defining her past and forging her legacy in the eyes of those around her.

## 2.5 Rebirth

*[Self-h]onesty lies not in a one-time revelation, but in its repeated practice, in the never-ending process of falling down the pit of lies and climbing back out of it. Like the endless cycle of life, death, and rebirth, the struggle towards truth begins anew over and over. (Like Stories of Old)*

Central to the works of both Ann Russo and Aimee Carrillo Rowe, previously discussed in the literary review, are the notions of positionality and accountability both of which necessitate an unwavering, yet oftentimes uncomfortable, will to self-examine one’s position and world views. Russo discusses the ease with which one can come to rest on one’s laurels and thus miss crucial moments for self-revelation regarding the ways in which we ourselves are implicated in the systems of oppression we oppose. It is no wonder, then, that the quest towards freedom and resistance is a constant struggle as implicit in this process is the constant need to reflect on our own role in it.

In *Woman at Point Zero*, al-Sa‘adāwī masterfully captures this liberatory, albeit painful, journey of self-understanding and awareness through the voice of her protagonist, Firdaus. While several recurrent images help in achieving this, rebirth and regain of sight are among the most important of these symbols. Their appearances in the novella betoken crucial moments at which

Firdaus' world comes crashing down, giving way to new opportunities for her to reconstruct a more nuanced and complete understanding of society and herself.

Al-Sa'adāwī's first reference to rebirth occurs quite early in the novella and assumes a quite straightforward symbolism; having lived all her life under the rule of an oppressive and cruel father, Firdaus' first moments of freedom after moving in with her uncle at Cairo marks the start of a new chapter in her life in which, at least initially, it appears to her that she has been freed of the tyranny and authoritarianism that both her father and village represent (19). Life with her uncle, however, proves to be quite different from her initial expectations as she realizes how her uncle's liberalism and value in education are but a veneer concealing the fundamental similarities between his middle-class milieu and that of Firdaus' village. While Firdaus' uncle places considerable importance on teaching her the fundamentals like learning the alphabet (14), it is clear by his subsequent actions that these gestures are only superficially in the interests of Firdaus and not intended to elevate her by providing the tools for social motility or autonomy in her later years.

In this sense, al-Sa'adāwī begins a recurrent pattern that continues throughout the novella by which each reincarnation experienced by Firdaus engenders both a sense of genuine liberation from the shackles of a prior oppression as well as the realization that the territory in which that tyranny had been exercised was merely a microcosm of larger systems of oppression. The implications of this are not only to suggest the difficulty with which Firdaus will have to struggle to truly escape these oppressive forces, but rather more importantly serves to implicate the household dilemma Firdaus and women like her may face within the family into a larger societal issue that directly relates to all. Viewed in this way, al-Sa'adāwī's message helps to shift the private scene, often relegated to discussions of less import in politics and society, to the centerstage, both demonstrating how "the personal is political" and laying bare the larger societal dynamics that

permit for injustices to persist. Firdaus's comments, therefore, on patriotism helps to reinforce such ideas when she remarks:

When [the powerful] pronounced the word [patriotism] I could tell at once that in their heart of hearts they feared not Allah, and that at the back of their minds patriotism meant that the poor should die to defend the land of the rich, their land, for I knew that the poor had no land. (27)

Sight as well as its loss and regain also figure quite prominently within the symbology of *Woman at Point Zero*. When the revelatory experiences of the novella's characters are not directly likened to some metaphorical rebirth, al-Sa'adāwī employs sight as an alternative for expressing the impact of her protagonist's epiphanies. One such example occurs immediately after Firdaus decides to flee from her uncle whose wife insists on marrying her off to the repugnant suitor, Sheikh Mahmoud. Upon descending to the streets, free to move and act as she pleases, Firdaus is filled with an overpowering thrill:

When I looked at the streets it was as though I was seeing them for the first time. A new world was opening up in front of my eyes, a world which for me had not existed before...How was it that I had been blind to its existence all these years? Now it seemed as if a third eye had suddenly been split open in my head. (42)

No sooner, however, does Firdaus discover this new world free from the clutches of the male figures of her immediate family than she takes notice to the cruel apathy and ignorance of the mob of individuals (i.e., society) that pass her by unaware of the young Firdaus lost in the streets of Cairo "with unseeing eyes, incapable of noticing anything or anyone" (43). While Firdaus does initially allow herself to be engulfed in this world, "[having] become one of [those] blind creatures

(43), it is her obstinacy in self-examination which frees her from becoming content with the artificial liberties that the unjust society into which she has entered offers instead.

The metaphorical veil, therefore, which is torn from the eyes of Firdaus on several occasions during moments of revelation, symbolizes societal lies which conceal or give pretense to blatant acts of injustice regularly committed within society. For instance, Firdaus' first encounter with a paying client who compensates her a ten-pound bill "[tears] away the shroud that [had] covered up a truth [she] had in fact experienced when still a child" (68-7)—namely that it had been money which had equipped her oppressors with the necessary tools for exercising their tyranny; "from that day onwards, [she] cease[s] to bend [her] head or to look away...[instead] look[ing] at people in the eyes" (73). Consequently, money does indeed grant Firdaus a degree of independence and thus freedom, but ultimately embroils her into a larger system of oppression: that of the world of capitalism.

Grappling with the issues of how to properly excel in this new world of money as well as on which terms she is willing to do so, Firdaus confronts issues like having to meet the standards of societal respectability which forces her to reconsider her work in sex. In the end, however, she comes to understand that the gauges by which these standards are measured are impossible to attain and built to be fallen short of. At this point, the final veil is struck down when Firdaus tears the banknotes she has received from the prince in an act which symbolizes her utter rejection of the society in which she had formerly attempted to gain her independence and agency. Through this act alone does Firdaus complete her final rebirth and a sense of true agency.

## CHAPTER 3

### SAMĪḤA KHRAIS

#### 3.1 Reimagining the Past (and Future)

In this third and final chapter, I will incorporate my analysis of one of the works of Samīḥa Khrais, *Al-Qurmiyya* (1998; *Tree Stump: An Arabic Historical Novel*), into the current discussion of gender and identity in order to argue that while the approaches Khrais and al-Sa‘adāwī take in redefining and asserting women’s role in society and the implications this has on identity, the two have essentially quite similar objectives. After I have elucidated the distinctions that exist between these two approaches, I will use Khrais’ as a frame of reference for examining the importance of

the work being carried out by the Bedouin women of Negev with regard to reclaiming autonomy and self-definition as well as achieving justice both for women and those around them.

Samīḥa Khrais, born in Amman in 1956, is a Jordanian writer whose dozen novels and several short-story collections have won numerous accolades making her one of Jordan's most important contemporary writers.<sup>9</sup> Unlike al-Sa'adāwī, Khrais was born into a family that highly valued education with a paternal grandfather that provided all his children with the opportunities to pursue their academic and professional careers at the very best of institutions, including Khrais' father, and a mother from a family of “politicians, professionals, intellectuals, and poets” (Akhtarkhavari vi). Consequently, from an early age, Khrais was imbued with the culture, literature, and politics that inhabited her milieu, one rich with guests and discussion which would later inform much of her work. Furthermore, her education abroad, be it in Qatar during her primary schooling or Sudan while completing a degree in social sciences, exposed Khrais to a wide variety of cultures and peoples from which she has drawn, most notably in *Fustuq 'Obeid* (2017; *Pistachio Ebeid*).

Al-Sa'adāwī and Khrais' upbringings, therefore, cannot be more unlike, Al-Sa'adāwī having grown up within a household that embraced or nurtured her intellectual development. As a result, a work of Khrais like *Tree Stump* tends to be less combative and oppositional to society and the microcosmic family structure. However, this in no way deters Khrais from achieving political relevance and envisioning societal betterment—objectives which she masterfully attains in her subtle way. In fact, one of the most prominent ways Khrais accomplishes this is through her bountiful incorporation of women's voices into her texts. The diversity that Khrais' female characters

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<sup>9</sup> See Nesreen Akhtarkhavari's introduction of her translated copy of *Tree Stump* (2019) for more on Samīḥa Khrais' awards and other professional endeavors (p.v-vi)

represent not only help to counter Western tropes of uniformity vis-à-vis Middle Eastern women, envisioned as a monolith, but more importantly reminds the Arab reader, of the historic as well as familiar images of women at the center of family and society immersed in the decision-making processes that ensure the well-being of their communities. Khrais localizes these paragons of Middle Eastern/Arab women front and center within deeply entrenched Arab roots, thus demonstrating a clear alternative to the dichotomy that colonial feminism tried to impose on Arab women between Western modernity and Eastern regression. On the topic of the women of her writing, Khrais attributes much of her inspiration to the diverse set of women she grew up around who “ran the household, set the rules, and commanded respect from all” (vii). She remarks:

I write about women I know. They come out of the sleeves of the peasant dress my paternal grandmother wore, the kohl in my other beautiful grandmother’s eyes, and from the vivid dreams of my mother and her love for life. All the women that appear in my work are images of women from the heart of Jordan; I selected them from among others because of their strength, commanding presence, influence, and ability to lead and create change...[like] my paternal grandmother who ran the tribe with its men and women...this never stopped her from being soft and compassionate with the weak, a tyrant with wrongdoers, and decisive with the confounded...this exceptional grandmother appears in all my novels, with her full commanding personality at times and in fragments at others. She is always present—lending her voice to the weak and empowering the women to live free with dignity<sup>10</sup> (vii)

At first glance, one might be quick to conclude that Khrais’ socioeconomic background is responsible for her apparent disengagement with the preoccupations of the traditional feminist writer, a role she openly has foregone (vii). Yet, terminology aside, Khrais’ insistence in expanding

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<sup>10</sup> Except of interview with Khrais conducted by Akhtarkhavari and included in *Tree Stump*’s English translated introduction

the contours of modern femininity in Arab society to match the reality that she is familiar with both from her knowledge of Arab literature and that of her own personal life is nothing short of a feminist objective. In fact, it quite resembles al-Sa‘adāwī’s crafting of Firdaus’ narrative such that one can appreciate the far more expansive possibilities that gender may or may not have on the formation of identity.

Furthermore, both writers are acutely aware of the modern expectations, regardless of their origin, placed on women. Yet, unlike some of her contemporaries, Khrais insists on looking within her community’s tradition for answers to these predicaments and social ills. “The culture itself carries within it, if correctly invoked, the potential roots of greater morality and traditions capable of addressing its current transgression against women” (viii). In this regard, one can find many parallels between Khrais’ approach and that of Indigenous feminists whose empowerment is derived first and foremost from the cultural values and priorities present within **their** Indigenous communities rather than from mainstream ones (read white and patriarchal) (Celeste). Further research into the similarities between Khrais’ work and the activism being carried out by Bedouin women and Indigenous feminists is, therefore, a quite exciting frontier and would offer interesting possibilities for collaboration and cooperation.

In the following section, however, I will limit my discussion solely to Khrais’ *Tree Stump* in order to bring forth the essential contributions I believe Samīḥa Khrais brings to the discussion of gender and identity within Jordanian/Bedouin societies and beyond. By exploring three key feminine characters in *Tree Stump* and the central roles they play in the tribe around which the novel revolves, I will demonstrate the unique perspective Khrais has taken to model the “Arab woman” in a position of leadership, reverence, and power, that is strikingly different from contemporary understandings of female empowerment. Khrais’ models serve to remind the reader

of the diverse ways that women exist and act as free and strong characters via innovative paths that refrain from provoking tension between genders or contradicting indigenous customs and/or histories as modern feminism often ends up doing.

### 3.2 Tree Stump

As I discussed at length in the literature review, in recent decades, many of those who have dedicated themselves to the work that has been conducted in academia on the veil, Arab women, and the society in which they inhabit have been faced with the task of not only discovering the lives and stories of women of the past buried beneath the detectable surface, but of also reteaching their readers the many untruths and misconceptions that have been systematically taught throughout the early years of scholarship on the subject. Scholars, therefore, like Leila Ahmed and Fatima Mernissi, as I previously mentioned, can be considered what Aurora Morales terms “curanderas,” or more fittingly *ḥakawāṭiyyāt*, in that they recognize the power of stories—those which the historians have for so long authoritatively professed to be truths—and in turn parry these blows with their own stories collected from the mouths of women living their lives day by day.

*Tree Stump* is such a story, written by Khrais with the ardent desire to tell “the story of her people [the Jordanian Bedouins] from their point of view after being told for decades by the pens of others” (Akhtarkhavari xi); in it, she provides a counternarrative to T.E. Lawrence’s pervasive *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* whose telling of the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire from 1916 to 1918 has yet to cease shaping the conventional imagery and preconceptions Western and even world media have when depicting the Bedouins and often Arabs in general. More damaging yet, Lawrence’s autobiographical account, unsurprisingly, centered all the glory of these revolutionary days on himself, casting as a result a dark shadow on some of the most influential, noble, and

instrumental Jordanian figures of that time, including ‘Auda Abu Tayeh—one of the protagonists of Khrais’ novel. Consequently, their stories as well as the many women of this time have had little bearing on the historical discussion of Jordan under the late Ottoman Empire. While the oral histories Khrais meticulously collected from Bedouins in preparation for writing the novel clearly demonstrate that the veneration of such heroes has remained very much intact, this often is lost beyond the confines of such indigenous groups, hence the gravity of Khrais’ endeavor.

With regard to women, throughout the historical novel’s nineteen chapters, the pivotal occurrences are by no mistake buttressed by the female protagonists of *Tree Stump* who serve as the backbone to their tribal community in several ways, including in the capacities of (1) mediator in diplomacy between neighboring tribes on which the community’ survival rests, (2) instiller of fundamental societal values so as to preserve customs and tradition, and (3) liaison between the tribe and one of their most vital and treasured assets: nature.

‘Alia is the first of these complex women who play a central role in the Bedouin tribes and the novel as a whole. She is the sister of ‘Auda, current leader of the focal tribe depicted in *Tree Stump*, whose marriage to ‘Abdan, head of the sons of al-Jazi—cousins of ‘Auda who have transitioned from nomadism to some form of agricultural life—, has placed an end to a longstanding feud between the two peoples. Flipping the stereotypically passive role of women as solutions to intertribal disputes via their transfer of custody in arranged marriages, Khrais displays the complex and deeply reverential position women wield in such a capacity that greatly differs from our traditionally Eurocentric understanding of this role.

This becomes strikingly apparent at the start of chapter four when ‘Auda’s tribe is faced with impending demise after having endured an extended period of drought. With the tribe’s survival and very way of life at stake, clear from the objections of some of the tribesmen

increasingly more charmed by the stability promised by the sons of al-Jazi's agricultural lifestyle (Khrais 31), 'Auda must decide whether or not to invade the tribe of his sister's husband, knowing the devastating implications it will have on 'Alia's heart and future. In the end, 'Auda is certain that 'Alia understands the gravity of such a decision whose grounding lies in the long-accepted tribal laws and customs of which "[the Bedouins] drank with their mother's milk" (31)—implying the central role of "mother" in upholding the legacy of customs explored in the following sections. When sent one of 'Auda's nephews to be secretly brought to safety before the invasion, 'Alia valiantly declines, preferring instead to wait among her husband's people so as to not betray the intentions of her brother<sup>11</sup>. The following day, once the plot has been revealed to all, 'Alia partakes in the boosting of her tribesmen's morale as they fight at the risk of her life. Her bravery and steadfastness to sacred tribal laws wins the awe of all including her brother, who proudly declares his familial association<sup>1213</sup>, as well as husband despite the pain such a betrayal has inherently brought about<sup>14</sup>.

In short, Khrais not only plays with the notion of the role of women in conflict resolution via intertribal marriage among Bedouins by demonstrating the degree of agency (as opposed to passivity) that underscores their actions, but more importantly, she highlights the way in which the reactions of others, particularly men, denote deep reverence for Bedouin women in society. The fact that these traditions and accounts are still very much present within the oral histories of Bedouins in Jordan attests to Krai's' relevance in the feminist discussion regardless of whether or not she herself actively seeks to have her voice be heard in these particular issues.

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<sup>11</sup> "I will not go back with you; I will return with 'Auda when he wins the raid." (Krais 32)

<sup>12</sup> "Auda replied proudly, 'I am 'Alia's brother'" (Khrais 33); "'Alia...whose name they ['Auda's tribe] proudly invoke in peace and war" (Khrais 31)

<sup>13</sup> An utterance that can still be heard to date among some of the shi'ār al-qabā'il (or phrases used among tribesmen for recognition, encouragement, etc.

<sup>14</sup> "He knew her well enough to know that she could not but be there to support her brother! He wanted to tell her that he understood with his mind, but not with his heart! (Khrais 33-4)

The second facet of Bedouin women Khrais emphasizes throughout *Tree Stump*, to which I alluded with the metaphor of milk, is that of the woman as a progenitor as well as vector for the transmission of values essential to the tribe and community. Khrais makes clear that the fundamental role of the mother in the tribe is not only rearing the child toward adulthood but serving as a model herself for leadership and dignity on the public stage amidst the tribe members. ‘Amsaḥ, the mother of ‘Auda, is perhaps one of the most prominent of these motherly figures, and as such commands an immense level of respect among the entire tribe. When ‘Oqab and the mare, al-Asilah, are welcomed by the community for the first time, it is none other than ‘Amsaḥ to whom ‘Auda entrusts the task of training the mare that will later serve in defending the tribe against the Ottomans during the Arab Revolt. As a result of his action, “the status of the horse [rises among the tribe] because the shaikh (i.e., ‘Auda) [has left] her in the care of his mother” (Khrais 10). In other words, the task of preserving the skills and values, which the tribe holds dearest and that ensure its cohesion and survival, very often is bestowed upon the mother who is recognized as the most appropriate candidate.

The story of ‘Auda’s childhood is a case in point. As ‘Amsaḥ prepares for an imminent departure of her son for war, she finds herself reflecting upon the tribulations she and her son have had to endure; when famine and a lost herd threatened to ruin the tribe, ‘Amsaḥ’s tenacity was tested and it was her emotional restraint that allowed her to prepare her son to become the savior the tribe was so desperately in need of:

Her heart was full of love for her son; she wished to hold him tight, bid him farewell, and ask him to take care of himself. How could she show her emotions now, when she had held them back all these years, even when he was a child? She recalled how she stepped on her heart when he was a mere child, put on his goatskin coat, tied it around his slim body with a wide belt, and sent him out to bring back the tribe’s herds that had been stolen

during a raid. She had to do that to save the tribe, prevent a famine, and make him a man. She had no choice. His father, the shaikh, lay sick in his bed...she ignored her maternal instincts and told him, 'If you come back without the herd, I will kill you with my own hands and cut off the breasts that fed you.' (11-12)

Here Khrais offers a snapshot of the complexity of this Bedouin mother whose stoicism serves a noble purpose for the good of the community despite its excruciatingly painful personal burden. Her passivity, insofar as being remote from the battlefield, is seen in a new light where Khrais elucidates the grave implications the mother's actions have on the family and community alike.

Ramla is yet another example, who despite her personal need to remain beside her husband during her pregnancy and precarious state, grasps the profundity that the religious rites hold for both her husband and his peers, and therefore chooses to assume a permeating calm whose strength bespeak of the kind of woman Khrais and the oral histories from which she has constructed her narrative insist on presenting.

Ramla who knew the hardship and the danger of such a long journey to Hijaz, passionately held tight to the garment of her husband in desperation. She then let go thinking of the wrath that might befall them if he did not fulfil his promise! Thoughts and feelings flooded her mind and heart. She convinced herself that the safety of her pregnancy depended on al-Hareth's safe arrival to the blessed land. She held back her tears...and was content with a tender quietness and the soft loving look that comforted her husband and eased his fears. (17-18)

Inner strength is further emphasized by the third and final role I will examine that Krai's women exhibit as liaisons between nature and men. As if to root the tribe within their only source of nourishment—i.e., that with which the desert furnishes them—women of Khrais often wield a

rather mystical force, allowing them to tap into the powers of nature in the direst of circumstances. For instance, on the day of birth of Mizna, the bride of ‘Oqab, “the sky was generous...the place was filled with a scent like musk, and the girls kept singing and dancing in the rain with great zeal and joy” (21). Therefore, drought, Nature’s most imminent threat to the sons of ‘Auda, often is pacified by the feminine force.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, Mizna’s love for ‘Oqab is arguably the most powerful force that motivates him to continue on his journey with ‘Auda’s men in protection of the tribe and later for the cause of the Arab Revolt. Despite Mizna having no active role in the literal fight against oppositional forces in the revolt, she nonetheless serves as a powerful source of energy embedded in Khrais’ tribal feminine figure which ‘Oqab often discovers in times of need mediated by the forces of nature and in particular by the presence of water.<sup>16</sup>

In short, the women of *Tree Stump* offer vital insights into the way femininity is interpreted within Bedouin oral histories, which in turn hold some of the most fundamental beliefs of the community that have been passed down from one generation to the next. Khrais’ work in uncovering these tales of men and women not only sheds light on the way gender and identity are understood by Bedouin women today, but may prove vital in understanding the way in which they resist against the injustices they face today.

### 3.3 On the Ground: Bedouin Women in Action

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<sup>15</sup> Incantation chanted by the women of ‘Auda’s tribe in hopes of procuring rainfall (pp. 19-20):

*O mother of plentiful rain, water our sleeping harvest.*  
*O mother of plentiful rain, by God, rain on our crops*  
*O mother of plentiful rain, O savior, fill our dried streams*  
*Fill them with gushing waters.*  
*Quench the thirst of our meadows and dreams.*

<sup>16</sup> “Like a naïve child, [‘Oqab] ran into the waves [after conquering ‘Aqaba and seeing the sea for the first time], welcoming the sea with open arms, soaking his thirsty chest...his soul rejoiced, and he knew that Mizna was there with him at that moment” (79).

Before concluding this final chapter which I have dedicated to Samīha Khrais' *Tree Stump*, I would like to direct my attention to groups of Bedouin women whose activism is expanding men and women's rights as well as the way in which we think about feminism and its manifestations among conservative communities. Using portions of my analysis of Khrais' work in the previous section as a frame of reference for understanding these women's achievements and aspirations, I hope to contribute to both the literature on writers such as Khrais who examine identity and gender in Bedouin tradition as well as on transnational feminist studies looking at various modes of resistance and how they can be understood by the larger audience who might expect feminist activism to take on different appearances.

Take the case of the Bedouin women of Negev—a group whose accomplishments are well documented within scholarship, most notably by scholars Madhavi Sunder and Sarab Abu-Rabia Queder. As mentioned in the literature review, Sunder's piece, "Piercing the Veil" (2003), is among the most prominent works responsible for fundamentally shifting, at least within the academic community, the way in which the utility of NGOs, so-called human rights laws, and foreign feminist activities in support of Arab women are understood; in Sunder's estimation, the Western approach of fighting for women's rights in the Middle East implicitly necessitated a choice Arab women are called on to make between either embracing "modern"/westernized values, and in doing so severing ties with their religio-cultural communities, or remaining ensnarled in certain injustices within these communities to which Sunder asserts human rights laws have clearly deferred in the name of cultural relativism. This has traditionally impeded women's efforts from within their communities to define religious and cultural interpretations of norms and practices which the international community has often protected insofar as it remains limited to the private sphere.

As for Sarab Abu-Rabia Queder, her work on Negev Bedouin women's activism demonstrates the plethora of alternatives to the dilemma outlined by Sunder, which are being carried out **by and for** Arab women. This is most apparent in her piece, "Permission to Rebel: Arab Bedouin Women's Changing Negotiation of Social Roles," where she argues that these women have come to rely less on external aid, operate *within* their cultures and traditions, and thus achieve advancements in their rights all while maintaining their deeply cherished connections to family and community well intact.

The first of these organizations described is called Taṭrīz al-Bādiya (Desert Embroidery) founded by Bedouin women of Lakiya whose mission is "empowering Bedouin women and children to attain equality through the improvement of their economic, educational and social status."<sup>17</sup> By drawing from a skill that women of Lakiya both master and for which the roots are deeply embedded in local culture and tradition, Taṭrīz al-Bādiya has created a means by which Bedouin women can sell and profit from their intricate weaving and gain financial and social stability/independence.

Given that one of the most essential and pressing issues that face Arabs in general and women in particular who live within Israeli-controlled territory is no less than how to **survive** in occupied Palestine, it comes as no surprise that the long line of feminists who have traditionally opted to demonize Arab culture has no place in the agendas of Negev women who struggle tirelessly to simultaneously make progress on their own rights all while protecting the image of their community lest the media and popular opinion turn against them and give the Israeli occupation yet another *raison d'être*.

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<sup>17</sup> Self-description of organization provided on their webpage (<https://desert-embroidery.org/>)

Under these circumstances, one can fully appreciate the power of Krais' envisioned Bedouin women who harness the power of their own tradition instead of resorting to the "redemptive" grace of foreign aid. Furthermore, the respect 'Alia, Mizna, and 'Amsah command from their community by virtue of their steadfast devotion to it echoes in the women of Tatrīz al-Bādiya who have harkened back to their foresisters and utilized the skills and traditions they bequeathed. In fact, these Bedouin entrepreneurial women integrate their culture, values, and autonomy into all of their work. For instance, Nama Elsana, one of the cooperative leaders at *Tatrīz al-Bādiya*, insists on the importance of the selected colors used in their garments as well as the significance of the designs and insignias of their embroidery which undeniably bear witness to the deep bond these women have to their communities (Dichek).

It is clear, therefore, that these women are fully aware of how to balance between the freedom that entrepreneurship has brought them and the roles they remain loyal to within their own communities. Moreover, these achievements made by traditional, rural, and conservative women, feminists Khrais' characters might more fittingly resemble, help to debunk what Sarab Abu-Rabia Queder warns are the false notions of exceptionalism and overemphasis on the contributions of more privileged Bedouin women [and men].<sup>18</sup> These figures often receive far more attention from media and traditional western feminist discourse—the implications of which relegate the work of a much larger group of women in Negev to the sidelines.

Yet another example in the region are the women of Lakiya—a Bedouin town just over 20 km northeast of Beersheva—who have single-handedly undertaken over the past two decades the establishment and successful development of the by-women-for-women organization *Sidreh*. Founded by two sisters, Khadra and Hanan Elsana in 1992, theirs and the fruits of numerous other

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<sup>18</sup> "Permission to Rebel: Arab Bedouin Women's Changing Negotiation of Social Roles," 2007 (p.162)

women alongside them have resulted in the transformation of countless women's lives in the Negev community (Kloosterman<sup>19</sup>). As Karin Kloosterman rightly insists on pointing out in her piece dedicated to the Lakiyan organization, one must not forget that the achievements of *Sidreh* fall within a larger historical context of the Bedouins of Negev including the many obstacles they have had to face over the past decades as a result of grappling with the myriad changes that have arisen from their relocation and deprivation of autonomy by the Israeli government. Rather than battling against entrenched misogyny or tradition antagonistic to women attempts to participate in various facets of society, *Sidreh* and the likes are first and foremost up against the consequential effects that occupation has had on their community as well as the unforgivably swift pace at which Bedouins have had to adjust to modernity in contrast to the predominately agrarian lifestyle they had hitherto led—an abrupt transition that has rendered women's former responsibilities within and outside the house, such as “collecting water and wood, taking care of the livestock and setting up the family tent”,<sup>20</sup> obsolete and undervalued in present-day society.

*Sidreh's* founders, Khadra and Hanan Elsana, are therefore quick to point out how the organization's mission as well as its tangible effects on the lives of women living in Lakiya align in virtually all respect with the fight for Palestinian autonomy and justice for the community as a whole (Kloosterman). Their project's historical roots in Bedouin weaving methodologies, traditional floor looms, additional services offered to women at *Sidreh's* center<sup>21</sup>, and gender/religious considerations all reveals the level of intentionality the organization possesses in establishing a space for Negev Bedouin women that empowers while simultaneously respecting the

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<sup>19</sup> Journalist and founder of Green Prophet—an independent media company whose mission is “to build a cleaner, brighter, and better future for the Middle East and beyond...[and] celebrat[e] the unsung heroes looking to change the Middle East and the world”; <https://www.greenprophet.com/about/>.

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.greenprophet.com/2008/12/bedouin-project-interchange/>

<sup>21</sup> Services include courses in reading and writing in Arabic and Hebrew, preparation in earning a high school diploma, and entrepreneurial instruction.

cultural and religious sensitivities that might otherwise deter them from becoming involved. The positive yield, both economically and societally, is undeniable as evidenced by Khadra's remarks—current executive director of the organization—who remarks that, in less than just one generation, women of Negev are now enjoying a far wider range of freedoms including fewer restrictions on their movement in public spaces as well as with regard to their entrepreneurial and educational aspirations while maintaining tight and loyal bonds to family and their national political cause.

Take, for example, Yeela Ranaan, who administers *Sidreh's* "Bedouin Experience travel agency," a branch of the organization that sheds additional light on yet another of their vital strategies through which they intend to foster fundamental change in Negev and beyond. She reports that in exchange for a modest fee, *Sidreh* upholds an "open-tent" policy by which visitors from both Israel and the world at large are welcomed into the "joys and hardships of being a Bedouin woman".<sup>22</sup> This includes demonstrations of their weaving processes, dialogues, sharing of the women's ambitions, as well as business pitches to potential international collaborators for future projects, all of which help in reshaping the narrative perpetuated outside the community on Bedouin women such that outsiders' perceptions of "Bedouinness," as well as the possibilities of feminist advances within it, become increasingly less influenced by falsely preconceived beliefs and instead etched out by the voices of Bedouin women themselves.

Insisting on the rejection of the myopic lens through which such endeavors and successes by Negev women are typically viewed in Israeli and world media, which exaggerates the value of entrepreneurship in resolving the obstacles that indeed do impede the liberation of Bedouin women, cannot be overstated; such a lens fundamentally neglects addressing the implications of Israeli occupation and suggests that the influx of capital suffices in rectifying structural injustices

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.greenprophet.com/2008/12/bedouin-project-interchange/>

most viscerally felt by Arabs living under Israeli control—a presumption (or often purposeful dismissal) that propositions such as Trump’s “deal of the century” frequently make. By appreciating, as Khrais does in her characters, the non-economic functions of *Sidreh*, *Tātīz al-Bādiya*, *Al-Sanabel*, and so many more organizations like it in the lives of Bedouin women, it becomes quite evident how the group has come to be a place of communion as well as means by which women of Negev are “weaving tradition into their future.” Hence, these women’s aspirations to retain their cultural identity and tradition cease to be portrayed as conflictual with the demand for additional rights, but rather can be seen as complementary requisites for justice patently coherent and consistent one with the other.

The success of these women in Negev is most certainly no anomaly. In fact, similar enterprises can be found throughout the entire Arab world. Moreover, despite the tendency of garnering significantly less media and scholarly attention than the high-profile cases in Negev and its surrounding occupied regions (meaning less external financial support), the women who lead these organizations are far from deterred and produce astonishing results—a testament to their resourcefulness and self-sufficiency. Hamda Abu Tayeh stands out as one just example. From a remote village in Jordan’s ‘Badia’ (i.e., Jordan’s desert), Hamda presides over the Women’s Association in Al-Jafr. Alongside the group’s 42 members, Hamda, an illiterate and once poverty-stricken Bedouin, is creating new means of livelihood for her community in the wake of climate-change related land degradation which has rendered their predominant form of occupation, herding, unsustainable (The World Bank). These women’s vision and insistence on achieving it have been what has drawn support, both local and foreign, most notably from the Hashemite Fund for Badia Development<sup>23</sup>, chaired by Jordanian Princess Basma bint Talal.

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<sup>23</sup> For more information on fund see: <http://www.badiafund.gov.jo/en/node/36>

### 3.4 Conclusion

A parallel reading of Nawāl al-Sa‘adāwī’s *Woman at Point Zero* and Samīha Khrais’ *Tree Stump* should offer a number of insights into the notions of gender and identity among Arab women—if nothing else, that the hypernym of Arab, or even worse Middle Eastern, literature on the two subjects does terrible injustice to the immense diversity in thought and approach among women throughout this region. By briefly covering key events and a contextualization for these two female authors, I hope to have made evident, albeit a mere scratch to the surface, how not only the different historical paths that Egypt and Jordan have traversed have resulted in fundamental divergencies between Khrais and al-Sa‘adāwī style and messages, but also their personal histories and family stories.

Despite this, such comparative analyses call to attention exciting similarities and areas for mutual collaboration between these two perspectives. Firstly, both Khrais and al-Sa‘adāwī challenge the stereotypical notions of Arab women whether it be from an Orientalist viewpoint or one by Arabs themselves vis-à-vis women. Firdaus’ unorthodox and subversive stance on gender and its place in society and identity formation aggressively spurns those who use religion and tradition as justification for her subjugation and definition. In essence, she is fighting for the right to exist in the way that she decides is suitable, and on her terms. While the characters of ‘Alia, Mizna, and ‘Amsaḥ gravitate toward their cultural roots in forging their selves as calm, reserved, yet undeniably powerful figures, their author chooses to have them do so with the intention of reimagining the possible modes of femininity all while reconciling them with ancient traditions within her own community.

No less important is the authors' firmness on rejecting their protagonists' status as victims. Firdaus, despite much literary criticism, which has often interpreted the antagonism of men and society toward her, is by no stretch of the imagination victimized by the end of the novella. She has risen above the attempts to imprison her, figuratively when all else fails, and thus transcends the fate of her misfortunes. On these matters, *Tree Stump* shares much common ground with al-Sa'adāwī's novella in its objection to victimhood and reaffirmation of liberation through embracement of one true self.

Chapter one laid out the myriad ways in which feminism, gender, and identity have been draw upon with explicit intentions of manipulation and political gain. Through an examination of Khrais, al-Sa'adāwī, and the work (both recent and historic) of women living in Arab societies, however, one can be certain that not only have Arab women succeeded in reclaiming these issues as their own, but will continue to forge a path, whatever the direction may be, for those to come so that they may shape both their lives and the fate of the communities in which they inhabit.

## CONCLUSION

One of my initial missteps in preparation for this comparative analysis between *Tree Stump* and *Woman at Point Zero*, particularly as I sketched out the arc that I had hoped it would take, was thinking I somehow had to conclusively reconcile what appeared to be disparate views between the two authors. Whereas one, an outspoken trailblazer, is said by some to taut problematic beliefs verging on something akin to home-grown Orientalism, albeit reformulated, the other's virtue is subtly in depicting the Oriental woman, yet assertive departure from tropes and stereotypes from both the West and East alike. In truth, this wish to harmonize was misguided and in fact quite unnecessary in obtaining the larger objective I sought: that of finding common ground for disparate views on gender and identity inside the Middle East on which to build transversal coalitions. Uninterested in how these two authors' views were perceived, or rather misperceived, beyond the confines of the Arab world, instead I pursued a reconciliation knowing that their stances do in fact roughly represent schools of thought to which scores of Arabs subscribe. It soon became apparent, however, that less important was it that there be an agreement on *how* a woman ought to be than there be consensus that she decide *what* to be. Otherwise stated, the fundamental conclusion this analysis has yielded is that the indelible marks Khrais and al-Sa'adāwī have

indisputably left on Arab literature with their respective novels argue that women are *already* defining (and defying) the terms and conditions of their gender and identity.

Unapologetically advocating for a radical break from how women are expected to act and live both from a Western and Eastern viewpoint, Khrais and al-Sa‘adāwī propose models in whom certain characteristics at times appear to us as jarring given our assumptions about them. While much has been written on the convention-smashing Firdaus, less can be read on the women of *Tree Stump* despite their similar unorthodoxy. Through her characters, Khrais defines what it means to be a well-mannered, “passive,” and/or traditional Arab woman even by Arab standards. They are self-fulfilled, in possession of full agency, and yet inextricably linked to their Bedouin communities thought to be regressive at times by certain Arabs. For this reason, much remains yet to be explored within Khrais’ works, which demand immediate attention and inclusion into the conversation on gender and identity.

As for this modest attempt of exploration, it can be said then that this comparative study attests to the possibility of multidirectional yet synergetic coalition across views on gender and identity as diverse as those held by Khrais and al-Sa‘adāwī. Moreover, such possibilities offer exciting invitations to proponents of Western feminism and/or those still under the influence of Orientalism to reconsider what Arab women are putting forth as an alternative to the kind of autonomy “progressivists” often claim exclusive rights to. In short, both Khrais and al-Sa‘adāwī as novelists provoke a near-identical conversation that is no less relevant and urgent as it was decades ago.

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