Angry Words Softly Spoken

A Comparative Study of English & Arab Women Writers

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Acknowledgements

This thesis is dedicated to my wonderful parents, a tribute to the way they raised me; to M.S. who taught me how to read, and to M.M.S. who believed I could write.

Abstract

This thesis will be a comparative study charting the emergence of feminist consciousness in the novels of English and Arab female writers. The tripartite structure that this evolution follows – Feminine, Feminist, Female – will be based to some degree on the theory presented by Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own*. The work of three English novelists will be compared and contrasted with that of three modern Arabic novelists, which would fall into the same stage of development. The outline for this is as follows:

1. Feminine stage: the development of female consciousness during this phase was still being directly influenced and affected by a repressive patriarchal society. This manifested itself in the adoption of male pseudonyms by women writers, and the writing was generally oblique, displaced, ironic and subversive. The English author representative of this stage is Charlotte Brontë, and the Arab author Laylā al-ᶜUthmān.
2. Feminist stage: the distinguishing characteristics of women writers' work in this stage were vocal protests against male government, law and medicine, and the quest for a female utopia. The English author Sarah Grand will be the example of development in female consciousness at this level, and for the Arab author Nawāl al-Saᶜdāwī.
3. Female stage (which runs up to the present time): achieved by the authors through the redefinition of internal and external experiences, and determined by forays into the imprisoning and liberating aspects of female consciousness. For the purposes of this thesis, the English author Virginia Woolf will be representing this stage, and the Arab author Ḥanān al-Shaykh.

In presenting an overview of the development of female literary consciousness through the novels of English women writers, this thesis will attempt to assess the development of contemporary Arab female writers, and uncover the trajectory of softness and anger in their work.

Contents

Feminist Endeavours and the Arabic Novel

1.1 Introduction

As a discipline, feminism involves many other "feminisms", from social reform and suffrage campaigns through to academic feminist theory, all of which are not indistinct. Feminism questions our understanding of "men" and "women" and the social structures which maintain their differences. As a term, it encapsulates the diversity of feminist views – about race, sexuality, language and creativity, politics and class – and the many challenging questions about the subordination of women.

Feminism is generally viewed as a Western concept and in its application it is usually imported "as is", and then applied to the model in question. The problems that arise from this are often compounded by the very ethnocentric nature of feminist consciousness. The self-reflexive questioning inherent in any feminist discourse means that it must be immersed totally within the national framework that it is (simultaneously) attempting to disengage from. As a way of sidestepping this dilemma one must examine the feminist discourses of each culture and issue new, relative meanings of "feminism". Comparative literature allows the researcher to delve into both national circumstances that are unique to the experience of a specific writer in her geographical area, and those inter-textual relations unique to the female experience that transcend both national and historic boundaries.

Through the careful examination of a British tripartite model of the emergence of feminist consciousness and the comparison of that with a model of the development of Arab feminist consciousness, a universal understanding of the emergence of feminist consciousness can be reached through the close study of subjective and personal novels penned by women authors of both cultures. This thesis is concerned with the development of female consciousness through the exploration of the roles and contributions of female authors to the novel form. The structure of this thesis will be loosely based on the work of Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own,* her research on English women writers, in which she suggests that there are three phases in the evolution of the novel as a form of female artistic expression. These phases are called the Feminine, Feminist, and Female stages, and each phase has some defining characteristics that are unique to it, and others which it shares with one or more of the other phases. Using these female writers as examples it will be demonstrated that Arab women writers display at simultaneous or overlapping intervals many of the characteristics that were generally confined to certain periods in the work of English women writers. This is due to a number of factors that will be discussed, one of which being that these women writers come from different parts of the Arab world, countries which entertained varying degrees of liberation. However, all the English authors discussed are indigenous to the United Kingdom, and are therefore part of a collective historical experience. There will also be various points at which the two literatures will fail to show similarities, owing to factors that would be indigenous to each of the two cultures, like the political rights that English women enjoyed following the Suffragette movement, or polygamy being a divine right of Muslim men.

In this thesis the work of three English novelists will be compared and contrasted with that of three modern Arabic novelists, which would fall into the same stage of development. The outline for this is as follows:

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In short, this thesis aims to present an overview of the development of female literary consciousness through the novels of English women writers, and from that will attempt to assess the development of contemporary Arab female writers.

1.2   Feminism and Feminist Theory

Modern feminist thought can be divided into first- and second-wave feminism, and though there is a chronological history to the two, they are often found to overlap and coexist. In first-wave feminism there is a demand for equality and the need to establish space for women and for their ideas to flourish. Second-wave feminism gives voice to the women whose liberation was made possible through first-wave feminism, by articulating their hopes, fears and dreams, and focusing on gender differences. It involved the writing of a new language, like the *écriture féminine* of French feminists Hélène Cixous[1] and Luce Irigaray,[2] which is detailed in section 1.2.1. In the view of most second-wave feminists, women's inequality is not simply the result of social restrictions but stems from a controlled and organised network of meanings, not all of which are visible. The belief that patriarchal power is invisibly as well as visibly sexist, that it is engineering electoral politics, underlies the dynamics of current feminism. Yet what is constant through both waves of feminism is the idea that women are unequal to men because men create the meanings of equality. It is not that "difference" is an intrinsic part of gender identity so much as that difference is an intrinsic effect of that identity's construction.

Feminist theory is a broad umbrella under which a number of competing and co-operating approaches converge. This is mainly due to the alacrity with which feminism has interacted with other critical discourses, both influencing, and being influenced by them. The term "feminist theory" in itself is problematic, considering that there is a widespread suspicion of theory in feminism. Many feminists see theory as an innately male tool, male-

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[1] Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clement, *The Newly Born Woman* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1975); trans. B. Wing (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1986).
[2] Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

dominated in its practice and masculinist in its methods and therefore oppressive to women. One critic wrote: "Under patriarchy, Method has wiped out women's questions so totally that women have not been able to hear and formulate our own questions to meet our own experiences."[3] Another, in reference to men's reaction to the emergence of feminism, said: "Men must learn to be silent. This is probably very painful for them. To quell their [men's] theoretical voice, the exercise of theoretical interpretation...They [men] activated the old language, enlisted the aid of the old way of theorizing, in order to relate, to recount, to explain this new situation..."[4] Feminists argue that the impersonality and objectiveness of theory is misleading, since it masks the needs and partiality of the theoretician, thus, it partakes in the kind of hierarchical binary opposition[5] to which Cixous refers: "theory is impersonal, public, objective, male: experience is personal, private, subjective, female."[6]

However prudent feminism may try to be in its use of theory there remains a certain discomfort about the effect of "a long apprenticeship to the male theoretician" and a conviction that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."[7] On the other hand, feminists who are engaged in debates with other critical theories, particularly Marxism, post-structuralism, and psychoanalytical theory, believe they have no alternative. How can one be "outside" theory? What agitates the pro-theorists is the refusal

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[3] Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1973), pp.11-12.

[4] Marguerite Duras, "An Interview", in: (eds.) Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, *New French Feminisms: An Anthology* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1981) p.111.

[5] In post-structuralist usage, binary opposition is the opposition of two terms in a hierarchical relationship. The first term is seen as positive, normative or prime, the second as negative, deviant or subordinate; for example, activity/passivity or rational/irrational.

[6] Hélène Cixous, "Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Way Out/Forays" in: Cixous and Clement, *The Newly Born Woman*, p.93.

[7] Elaine Showalter, "Toward a Feminist Poetics", in (ed.) Elaine Showalter, *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory* (London: Virago Press, 1986) p.130. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" is an essay title from Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York: Crossing Press, 1984).

of the anti-theorists to analyse their own theoretical position. In Moi's criticism of Elaine

Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own*, one of her complaints is that "Showalter's

theoretical framework is never made explicit."[8] This lack of awareness, this belief in

straightforward authenticity of statement can encourage feminism into a duplicitous grey

area. As Spivak puts it: "Unless one is aware that one cannot avoid taking a stand,

unwitting stands get taken."[9]

It was during the 1970s[10] that feminist critics, for example Kate Millet and Maud Ellman,

began to expose the misogyny of the literary establishment and its adherence to a literary

tradition which has "canonised" only the texts written by male authors. Feminist writers

such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Ellen Moers and Elaine Showalter went on to

make chronicle an extensive history of women's writing which helped women's literature

mature into a specific field. Subsequently many branches of feminist criticism, including

Marxist, black, lesbian, psycho-analysis and linguistics, developed sophisticated analyses

of cultural and linguistic forms and the links between these.

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[8] Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary History* (London: Methuen, 1985) p.16.

[9] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "A Response to Annette Kolody": unpublished essay, quoted in Jane Marcus, "Storming the Toolshed", in: (eds.) Nanner O'Keohane, Michelle Rosaldo, Suzanne Gelpi, *Feminist Theory: A Critique of Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) p.218.

[10] Certain texts of the period prior to the 1970s led to the prolific explosion of feminist literary studies and sustained a growing interest in this rapidly expanding field. There are determining voices that have contributed greatly to its development, namely: Betty Freidan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963); Mary Ellman's *Thinking About Women* (1968); Eva Figes's *Patriarchal Attitudes* (1970); Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970). Although feminist literary criticism in America and Britain did not begin with the publication of Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970), it can be argued that the book's wide circulation (an international bestseller reprinted three times in the first four years of appearance in Britain alone) could be viewed as representing the first general acknowledgement of the issues involved.

1.2.1   Anglo-American vs. French Feminist Theory

The most distinct of all dialogues in modern Feminist literary theory seems to be the back-and-forth banter that existed between French and Anglo-American feminist thought in the period directly prior to, and during, the 1970s. The heightened antagonism between the two led to a propagation of inter-feminist debates, perhaps because of their clearly established positions on certain literary aspects of feminist writing. The term French or Anglo-American feminist criticism does not represent a nationalistic viewpoint, but a school of thought. It does not necessarily indicate the critic's birthplace or nationality. These generalised terms disguise the multiplicity of critical practices co-existing within each tradition.[11] Finally, the terminology suggests an adversary position, which is misleading in that in many areas these two overlap and are constantly feeding on each other to perpetuate new paradigms and rationales. The different meanings that Anglo-American and French feminist critical theory give to the terms "women", "woman" and "feminine" are crucial to understanding this interchange.

Anglo-American feminism centres on "women" – real, biological entities who, at this moment in history, are forging a politics based on shared experience and needs. When Anglo-American critics use the term "feminine" they are usually referring to the cultural stereotype which patriarchal society dictates as the appropriate form of behaviour for women. Anglo-American criticism since the mid-1970s has been dominated by the specificity of women's writing, a tradition of women authors and an exploration of women's culture. Elaine Showalter has named this trend "gynocriticism".[12] The gynocritic

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[11] Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (eds.), *The Norton Anthology, Literature by Women* (2nd edn, New York and London: Norton, 1996).
[12] Showalter, "Toward a Feminist Poetics", p.128.

searches for an understanding of female identity in her authors and their characters – the struggle towards a realisation of selfhood and identity, all eventually leading to the achievement of autonomy. The author presents the reader of the text with an objective reality based on her personal experience as a woman. Then the reader appropriates this writing and relates it to her own life. In this sense author, character and reader are united in the exploration of what it means to be female, a collective "female" identity is asserted, and the reader is gratified by author and narrative's confirmation of her anger, experiences or hopes.

French feminists believe that differences between men and women are products of socially constructed gender identities rather than products of biological truths, and many of these critics, in particular Kristeva and Cixous, consider that art and literature offer important evidence of the ways in which these differences effect the way male/ female thought is structured. French critics have their own term for the literary experience of women:

> ...Gynesis – the putting into discourse of 'woman' as that *process* diagnosed in France as intrinsic to the condition of modernity; indeed, the valorization of the feminine, woman, and her obligatory, that is historical connotations, as somehow intrinsic to new and necessary modes of thinking, writing, speaking.[13]

Jardine suggests that this can only be achieved through

> a reincorporation and reconceptualization of that which the master narrative's own 'nonknowledge', what has eluded them, what has engulfed them. This other-than-themselves is almost always a 'space' of some kind (over which the narrative has lost control), and this space has been coded as *feminine*, as *woman*...[14]

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[13] Alice A. Jardine, *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1985) p.15.
[14] Ibid.

French interest converges not on women but on "woman" who, as Jardine points out, is not a person but a "writing effect". Jacobus makes the same distinction:

> ...The French insistence on *écriture féminine* on woman as a writing-effect instead of an origin asserts not the sexuality of the text but the textuality of sex. Gender difference, produced, not innate, becomes a matter of the structuring of a genderless libido in and through patriarchal discourse.[15]

By "*l'écriture féminine*" French feminist critics are not referring to the traditions of women's writing that Woolf and Showalter have laboured to uncover, but a certain mode of writing which unsettles fixed meanings. Jacobus in her writings displays the French favouring of textuality over sexuality. This school of thought fears that to rely on signature is to risk biologism. Nancy Chodrow suggests that the process of individualism differs for men and women: "The girl comes to speak tentatively from outside the prevailing framework of individuality: she brings a different kind of voice to her narrative."[16] Women tend to speak in a distinct voice, and use an alternative "language of fluid, plural subjectivity". As a result, women have a gender-specific blueprint which reflects itself in their writings. Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous have identified a difference between men and women in their use of language. It is a mode of speech and writing, which Irigaray calls "womenspeak", and Cixous calls "*écriture féminine*". By writing herself in the discourse of women, the woman writer returns to the body, and so, language becomes closely bound to sexuality.[17]

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[15] Mary Jacobus, "Is There a Woman in This Text?" *New Literary History* (Autumn 1982), 14 (1). Reprinted in Jacobus, *Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1986) pp.83-109.

[16] Nancy Chodrow, *Reproduction of Mothering, Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (California: California University Press, 1978), taken from Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) p.12.

[17] Catherine Besley and Jane Moore (eds.), *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism* (London: Macmillan, 1989) p.14.

Although both gynesis and gynocriticism would agree that the master narratives are bankrupt; gynesis does not want to substitute it with mistress narratives. That strategy, gynesis would argue, changes nothing at the structural level; it simply replaces the typically male figure at the centre of the "humanist" endeavour with a woman. Therefore gynesis does not give special emphasis to female authors and characters; many of the examples of "feminine" writings it considers are by men. It is not necessarily preoccupied with women's achievement in history or with women's groups; on the contrary, Jardine stresses that what concerns gynesis is a space, or an absence. Gynocriticism's belief in the control of the author, finding her unique voice, is refuted by gynesis. The author is ignored, made redundant, as all focus is diverted to the text – and the reader. Under the influence of Roland Barthes and Derrida, gynesis favours a textual free play of meaning which authorial intention or critical analysis cannot bind. According to French criticism, Anglo-American critics are sometimes unaware of the need to interrogate one's own position,[18] though the latter would deny that they are so fixed in the existing social order that it renders them incapable of doubting its concepts and terminologies. For gynocriticism, liberation is to find one's true self; for gynesis, liberation is to abandon one's true self.

Gynesis is not simply looking for an account of female experience – that is dangerously close to biologism. In gynesis, belief in the individual as a fully conscious, rational, secure identity gives way to a "subject" which is an unstable and constantly reformed. Kristeva

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[18] Mary Eagleton, *Feminist Literary Criticism* (New York: Longman, 1992) p.9.

uses the phrase "subject in process" to convey how "our identities in life are constantly called into question, brought to trial, over-ruled".[19]

French criticism has been accused of adopting a position that is "obsessively self-centered."[20] The French would deny that they are ignoring the historical predicament of women: to attack such notions as "the natural", "the real", "the human" is in the interest of feminism, for it destabilises the very order which keeps women oppressed. Furthermore, their emphasis on female desire is both woman-centred and potentially deconstructive. Though doubts about the definition of "woman" are widespread, French feminism's questioning of realism as a literary form and its insistence on reality as a "construct" would not be supported in the Anglo-American concern for "true-to-life", "realistic" portrayals of female characters. While feminists in general will dispute a phrase such as "the human condition", indicating how frequently women are lost within this seemingly all-embracing term, most will not go along with the fundamental attack on humanism offered by gynesis. For gynocritics, or more widely, for many that hold the political program of feminism as central, gynesis contains a troubling potential for anti-feminism. Just at the moment when women are discovering a sense of identity, history and the credibility of their experiences, gynesis tells them that it is illusory, and that the extensive work on the woman author, the female tradition, the uncovering of female imagery, is a subsidiary activity.

The boundaries between Anglo-American and French critical thought are often blurry and many critics find themselves compromising between the ideals of both to reach their own

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[19] Julia Kristeva, "A Question of Subjectivity", *Women's Review*, 12 (October, 1986) p.19.
[20] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism" in: (eds.) Besley and Moore, *The Feminist Reader*, pp.175-6.

conclusions. Many critics do not appreciate the pigeonholing that occurs when they are classified as belonging to either the Anglo-American or the French critical school. Black critics have rightly pointed out how establishing the debate in this way presumes that, theoretically at least, most of the world has nothing to offer. Some critics locate themselves differently; though they subscribe to the ideologies of one critical school, they do not necessarily agree with all its aspects. Miller, who is usually associated with French critical thought, is such an example. Using the anonymous *The Portuguese Letter*,[21] she comes to believe that the sex of the author matters. Yet she is well aware of the pitfalls in some branches of Anglo-American criticism: she rebukes any form of prescriptive feminism or any belief in the ethical superiority of reading works by women, and she is attentive to the arguments of gynesis. The inclusion of politics urges Miller to two conclusions. Firstly, though involvement with the woman author "may betray a naïve faith in origins, humanism and centrality", it also makes visible the "marginality, eccentricity and vulnerability of women" and challenges "the confidence of humanistic discourse as universality".[22] Secondly, Miller considers how, for people without power, questions about the speaker's identity and about authorship and authority are of daily relevance. The deconstruction of identity is only possible for those with a firm psychological and political hold on who they are and the status they have attained. In defence of her position, Peggy Kamuf highlights the need to engage with the "political-social distribution of effects that shapes our institutions", though she stresses that any liaison with "patriarchal meaning structures" must always "keep in view its own contradictory disengagement of that meaning."

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[21] Nancy K. Miller, "The Text's Heroine: A Feminist Critic and Her Fictions" originally formed part of an exchange with Peggy Kamuf at the Symposium on Feminist Criticism held at Cornell University, October 1981 (reprinted in *Diacritics*, 12, no. 2 [Summer 1982] pp.48-53).

The many other schools of Feminist Critical Theory usually take their positions from both schools' ideas, whilst simultaneously attacking their weaknesses. However, it must be kept in mind that though these two schools may have established the groundwork for inter-feminist debate, there are other schools of thought which have contributed a great deal to the feminist issue.

1.2.2   Other Schools of Feminist Theory

Black feminism, which challenges the Eurocentrism of white feminist theory (whether in Europe or in the USA), has a different relationship to dominating social policies. Black feminists argue that race, class, and gender are interlocking systems of oppression and not additional variables to the basic placement of women within the system. From this perspective there are continuities between Asian and Black British and Black American and writing by women of non-European origins. Black feminists have been deeply engaged with debates on the nature and significance of identity and many would agree with Miller that a sense of identity and a valuing of personal experience could be lifelines for the invisible woman. Furthermore, Black feminists have attacked the implicit racism in many texts written by white Anglo-American women. Alice Walker believes "that naming our own experience after our own fashion (as well as rejecting whatever does not seem to suit) is the least we can do – and in this society may well be our only tangible sign of personal freedom".[23] Closely related to Black feminism, and often an offshoot from it, is Asian feminist criticism, which explores many of the same topics, and feels similarly excluded from mainstream feminist debates. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, an American

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[22] Peggy Kamuf, "Writing Like a Woman", in: (eds.) Sally McConell-Ginet, Ruth Borker, Nelly Furman *Women and Language in Literary Society* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1980).

critic of Indian origin, has been acerbic in her criticism of Anglo-American feminism and its reproduction of "the axioms of imperialism": "A basically isolationist admiration for the literature of the female subject in Europe and Anglo-American establishes the highest feminist norm."[24]

The pioneering essay "The Woman-Identified Woman" (1970) by the New York Radicalesbians introduced a new angle to feminist thought: a "lesbianism" characterised by desires, experiences and self-perceptions rather than simply social categories. The Radicalesbians argued that "lesbianism" is shaped by ideological and political preferences as much as by explicit sexual practices. In this sense lesbian desire could be viewed as a general feminist condition. The Radicalesbians gave second-wave feminism a reconstructed "lesbian" free from pejorative connotations. It could contain many meanings, for example a socio-political concept of community and recognition that traditional heterosexuality was, as Charlotte Bunch argued, a "cornerstone of male supremacy".[25]

Contemporary psychoanalytic feminism begins with the rejection of Freud by critics such as Kate Millet and Phyllis Chesler, and then the reinterpretation of his ideas into new (feminist) psychoanalytic theories. In the period from 1970 to 1980, critics such as Dorothy Dinnerstein and Nancy Chodrow focused on the psychosocial relations of mothering, and others, such as Jean Baker Miller and Adrienne Rich, examined women's relatedness and empathy. In recent feminist literary history psychoanalysis has been an

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[23] Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (London: Women's Press Limited, 1984) p.82.
[24] Spivak, "Three Women's Texts", pp.175-6.

essential tool in demonstrating how the "feminine" is produced and organised in language. For example, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), draw on object-relations theory to investigate relationships between women. From a feminist viewpoint, the problem with a psychoanalytical reading of a text is that it requires the reader to focus as much on what the text does not say as what it actually says, which could detract from the focus of the cross-gender debate, and invite ambiguity.

A central concern of socialist and Marxist feminism therefore has been to determine the ways in which the institution of the family and women's domestic labour are structured by, and "reproduce", the sexual division of labour. By limiting the definition of sexual roles in these terms, the integration of Marxist theory into feminist theory gave rise to an untapped premise in feminist consciousness: that the pursuit of social and economic representation is dependent on the possession of a feminist consciousness, which can then create new social and economic images of women, thus inducing cyclical improvement.

In Britain, Juliet Mitchell, Sheila Rowbotham and Michele Barret undertook the first important feminist assessments of Marxist theory. The key questions in their writing centre on whether Marxist concepts can be applied specifically to women's situation, for example whether women did form a distinct sex-class, and how patriarchy continues to reproduce itself in a similar way over time. Rethinking the relation between paid work and domestic labour meant that the socialist feminists could emphasize many of the covert implications of the sexual division of labour, for example by pointing out that (even working) women did the majority of the work at home. The "domestic labour" debate discussed the

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[25] Quoted in E. Freedman et al., *The Lesbian Issue* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985). Reprinted in

economic and cultural significance of women's unpaid domestic work. Another crucial socialist feminist debate concerned "the reserve army of labour", a term used to explain gender inequality at work. This debate discussed the ways in which women (and ethnic minorities of both sexes) were a "reserve" workforce, one which can be used and discarded according to capitalist requirements. The ideas and issues discussed in these debates contributed a great deal to the way that literary theory views the socio-economic factors that prescribe what roles women play in the literature of both sexes.

This is not to say that feminist theory is divided into rigid subcategories. It is a fluid movement that is being constantly influenced by changes in the mainstream. Feminist theory has changed from the 1970s when it minimised differences between women to celebrating in the 1990s the electric charge of racial and sexual "difference" and woman-centred perspectives. That change liberated women from the homogenised inclusion into a single, universal experience to a world of multiple and mobile racial class differences, and sexual preferences. Feminist politics and feminist theories of the 1990s have a set of priorities which includes those of the black women's movement, of women from non-Western countries, the peace movement, and by a renaissance of feminist culture in the media and in teaching. New developments in feminist thought are constantly emerging such as eco-feminism (environmental) and e-feminism (technological), and these in turn will surely have an impact on feminist literary theory.

(ed.) Maggie Humm, *Feminisms: A Reader* (Wheatsheaf Harvester, 1992) p.163.

1.2.3 The Evolution of Feminism in the Arab World

Contrary to popular thinking, feminist debates did not begin in the Arab world with the publication of the Egyptian lawyer Qāsim Amīn's book *Taḥrīr al-Mar'ah* (translated as *The Liberation of Women*) in 1898,[26] nor did they emerge with Hudā Shaʿrāwī's demonstrations for equality in the 1920s. The roots of these debates belong to a much earlier era. Abu-Lughod suggests that the arguments that started at the turn of the last century, through desired or imposed contact with colonial occupation, sparked off what would later be labelled "feminist" debates: redefining women's rights, clothing, and roles in and beyond the family.[27] These arguments, Memissi suggests in *The Veil and the Male Elite*, were started long ago in a Medina rife with suspicion and insecurity in the *hijrī* year 5 (627CE): "Paradoxically, fifteen centuries later it was colonial power that would force the Muslim states to re-open the question of the rights of the individual and of women".[28]

To this day the colonial powers' call for reform is viewed with suspicion, rather than as just a humanitarian progressive campaign; suspicion that was not always unfounded as colonials were often preaching what they did not practise. Lord Cromer, the British governor of Egypt in the early years of the twentieth century seemed to champion the emancipation of Egyptian women while condemning the women suffragists in England.[29]

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[26] Qāsim Amīn, *The Liberation of Women* (1898) trans. Samiha Sidham Peterson (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1995).
[27] Leila Abu-Lughod (ed.), *Remaking Women; Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press) p.4.
[28] Fatima Memissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (Perseus Books Publishing LLC, 1991) p.188. This issue is discussed in more depth in chapters 5-10 in the book.
[29] Abu-Lughod, *Remaking Women*, p.14.

The colonial obsession with elevating the nation may have stemmed from their desire simply to have more efficient government workers.[30]

The effect of Europe on the various Middle Eastern campaigns concerned with "remaking women" is undeniable. However, the extent of this European influence varied from one region to another according to specificities of the local area. The overall result of this influence was that many of the feminist emancipation projects were often enmeshed within the larger battle for national liberation – "the messy situations of state building, anti-colonial nationalism, changing social orders, and the emergence of new classes",[31] and not just from patriarchy.

1.2.3.1 Colonialism, Modernity and the New Mother

One of the many side effects of colonial occupation was the introduction of Western ideals and social practices into traditional Arab societies through the medium of literary translation.[32] Contemporary European debates on the role of women in society and their definitions of "modernity" were translated into Arabic and circulated, deeply affecting the way reformers in the Middle East viewed themselves and their own society.[33] Abu-Lughod summarises that modernity "is identified with the rejection of women's feminine domestic roles and the support of their education. The latter presumably transformed their gender roles and increased their options."[34]

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[30] Discussed in Timothy Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt* (Cambridge: CUP, 1988) p.111-13.
[31] Abu-Lughod, *Remaking Women*, p.9.
[32] See §1.4.1.
[33] Abu-Lughod, *Remaking Women*, p.9.
[34] Ibid., p.79.

The colonial powers occupying the various regions of the Middle East at the turn of the century greatly emphasised how Arab women were mistreated and abused by their men, and how their educational, social and political rights were being ignored. The nationalists and reformers of that period were also highlighting these issues; they too had observed the women of the occupying culture and were drawing unfavourable comparisons between them and their own women. However, since both were calling for essentially the same thing, the nationalists were put in an awkward position, which they had somehow to justify; "Rhetorical efforts were made by those one could broadly call nationalists to put distance between their proposals and the West, often by arguing for an Islamic modernism."[35] These reformers had to focus on issues such as what was the best way to become modern, and what role should be given to Islam in this modernising project, and how much of the West they should emulate.[36] The accumulative effect of all these factors was a general relaxing of the rules governing the social behaviour of upper middle-class women in nineteenth-century Egyptian society, the modernisation of which was "identified with the emergence of enlightened patriarchs, modernizing upper-class elites and liberal families."[37] Presumably it was these liberal families who pioneered the advocacy of women's education and allowed them to appear on the public scene.

The central concern of the reforming, modernising movement when it came to the new roles for women was how to induce a radical change while remaining true to their conservative background. "Nationalism denied the alleged inferiority of the colonized people; it also asserted that a backward nation could 'modernize' itself while retaining its

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[35] Ibid., p.18.
[36] Ibid., p.8.
[37] Ibid., p.74.

cultural identity."[38] Both colonialists and nationalist reformers in early twentieth-century Egypt highlighted the importance of women's role as mother to the new generation. Thus a hardworking, sophisticated nation could only be achieved through educated mothers. All emphasis on changing the norms concerning the situation of Arab women centred on improving them so that they could serve patriarchy more efficiently: as more productive daughters, more interesting wives, and above all, more "scientific" mothers.[39] The discourses of Bāḥithat al-Badiyyah[40] and Qāsim Amīn both focus on the importance of *tarbiyah* (education or upbringing). Proper *tarbiyah* should aim to make women useful members of the nation, and prepare them for their roles as wives and mothers. Mothers were deemed ignorant of the principles of modern childcare, and explicit contrasts were set up against a scientific Western pedagogy, both to explicate the "reasons for our backwardness"[41] and to point the way to a modern post-colonial nationalist future. The question most pertinent to the development of female consciousness in the Arab world is whether the nationalist reformers' calls to educate women were little more than a general demand to train the population, thereby instilling a new disciplinary regime in everyday life.

The changes introduced by the reformers were crucial to women in developing a sense of their identity; the responsibilities that came with these new roles brought with them a fresh understanding of their own potential for contribution. The essays by Najmabadi and

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[38] Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (London: Zed Books, 1986) p.30.

[39] Abu-Lughod, *Remaking Women*, p.8.

[40] See Bāḥithat al-Badiyyah, "Tarbiyat al-Banāt fī 'l-Bayt wa'l-Manzil" in: *al-Nisā'iyyāt: Majmūʿat Maqālāt Nushirat fī 'l-Jarīdah fī Mawḍūʿ al-Marʾah al-Miṣriyyah* (2 vols, Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-Jarīdah, 1910) vol. 1, pp.18-21.

[41] Qāsim Amīn, *The Liberation of Women*, p.28.

Shakry in *Remaking Women*[42] discuss how even the calls to become a housewife and a mother at the turn of the century displayed signs of early (feminism and) modernity as the roles being prescribed to this new "wife" and "mother" differed greatly from the previous roles. While Najmabadi pays interest to the way that this new vision of wifehood and motherhood underwrote developments in the education of women and intersected with nationalist aspirations, Shakry shows how this new domesticity worked to enforce "a single bourgeois norm",[43] developing forms of marriage and family that had not previously existed. Both question whether these new domestic roles subjected Arab women to new forms of control and discipline, many self-imposed, even as they undermined other forms of patriarchy. Perhaps it was the call for women to become responsible for their homes and assume the role of "manager" which planted the seeds for autonomy that would later emerge as the call for independence outside the domestic realm. Abu-Lughod concludes that

> in shaping the distinction between the public and private realms, writers of the era could now problematize women's absence from the public (and thus encourage them to enter it) while enforcing new norms of the private, now elaborated as a unique and busy domain in which women should exert themselves.[44]

1.2.3.2   The Historical Progression of Feminism in the Arab World

Feminism and feminist thoughts progressed at different speeds and in different ways throughout the Arab world. While some areas witnessed progress in the areas of women's activism in the public arena and the amendments of women's rights, others remained

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[42] Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Crafting an Educted Housewife in Iran", in: Abu-Lughod, *Remaking Women*, pp.91-125; Omnia Shakry, "Schooled Mothers and Structured Play: Child Rearing in Turn-of-the-Century Egypt", in ibid., pp.126-170.
[43] Ibid., p.9.

adamantly stuck in the status quo, each according to its unique socio-political circumstances. There were, however, some common factors that can be traced chronologically which had an impact on the Arab women's movement as a whole, and it must be kept in mind that changes in one region would usually be closely monitored by other Arab countries, and therefore would tend to have an effect, if not on the government itself, at least on the mentality of its women citizens, in that where women in another country were able to stand up to the system and change it, they would be inspired to do the same.

The period from the 1860s to the early 1920s witnessed the evolution of "invisible feminism",[45] found in the literary expositions of middle- and upper-class women circulated in the harems and in women's journals such as *Al-Fatāh* (1892), *Anīs al-Jalīs* (1893), and *Fatāt al-Sharq* (1906), and in some men's journals such as Bāḥithat al-Badiyyah's articles in *al-Jarīdah*. The feminism of this period was centred mainly in Egypt, and it was mostly shy and hesitant, far removed from most Arab females by the barriers of illiteracy and social impotence. Its concerns and debates were those discussed in section 1.2.3.1, a gentle relaxing of the rigid rules that govern women's entrance into the public sphere, access to a more rounded education, and opportunity to express themselves, in mild-mannered expositions that did not, generally, inflame the sensibilities of their audience.

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[44] Ibid., p.12.

[45] In her work on Egyptian feminist history, Margot Badran makes a distinction between "visible" and "invisible" feminism. The former is public and explicit, while the latter is of a more suppressed and ambiguous nature, carefully encoded within the confines of what will not offend or inflame the male patriarch's wrath. Such a distinction allows a more comprehensive study of Arab feminist historical experiences.

The period from the 1920s to the end of the 1960s witnessed the rise of publicly organised women's movements, although they were mostly encompassed within a larger national struggle for independence. In hindsight, it is difficult to judge how restricting the agenda for national independence was crucial to the women's emancipation movement. On the one hand, the overthrowing of the status quo meant that women were for the first time encouraged to leave the domestic sphere, venturing out into the open space of public demonstrations and stand equal to men, demanding, insisting, chanting for change. This experience must have revealed to contemporary females that they could, indeed should, stand up to authority and create a difference. However, just as women realised their ability to wield power and coax changes into being, their own agendas were thwarted and usurped by the all-encompassing banners of nationalism. In newly liberated countries such as Egypt and Syria, women citizens were meant to fulfil their traditional domestic roles, just as they had before, except now with the added burden of sharing the cost of income provision with their male counterparts. In situations such as that of, for example, Palestinian women, women have been forced to sublimate their own concerns to those of liberating occupied lands.

There were active movements in Egypt between the 1920s and mid-1950s, in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq in the 1930s and 1940s, and in Sudan in the 1950s. In 1944, Palestinian women formed the Arab Feminist Union. Following the gaining of national independence, Egyptian women organised a public movement under the leadership of the Egyptian Feminist Union. In Sudan, women participated in the national independence struggle in the mid-1950s and continued as an organised feminist movement. At the same time, women in the Arabian Peninsula took advantage of new educational opportunities, and the recently

enforced state policies to reduce large foreign workforces opened up new possibilities for females to work outside the home.

It was Nasser who, in the 1950s and 1960s, introduced "state feminism", removing from the goals of women's education and employment the tint of foreign influence with his own impeccable nationalist credentials. However, his policies of mass education and employment for graduates regardless of sex, which were based on a conception of women as worker and citizen whose participation was essential for national development signalled a suppression of any institution that invited individualism, and so independent woman's organisations were buried. Furthermore, by the late 1960s a certain shift in attitude appeared in other Arab republics and independent feminist movements were discouraged or quelled, hampering, though not completely eliminating, women's newly found public feminist voices.

During the 1970s, many other Arab countries which had just recently gained independence and were setting up the mechanics of rebuilding national identities experienced their first wave of feminism, while countries such as Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq witnessed a resurgence of feminist expression. In Kuwait women took advantage of a more tolerant society to express controversial views, so that feminism and feminist concerns became premier issues on the public agenda. However, in Saudi Arabia, where greater constraints were imposed upon women (and freedom of expression in general), the hope for open

feminist debate was, and remains, bleak.[46] This period was fuelled to some extent by the United Nations Decade of Women (1975–1985). Outside stimulus encouraged Arab states to support limited public debate on the woman question, but this was countered by internal pressure from Islamic fundamentalist groups to quell these feminist movements, which greatly inhibited their promotion and sustenance. The 1980s witnessed a particular thriving of Islamic fundamentalist groups, who were gaining popularity and forming political strongholds in countries such as Algeria, Egypt, and parts of the GCCC. The effects of this were twofold on the progression of feminism in the Arab world in that, on one hand, these groups appealed to a large number of women[47] who modified their objectives to suit the Islamic framework. On the other hand, these political groups reacted violently to any "outspoken" women who did not accept the boundaries that these groups' vision of Islam stipulated, and in Algeria this translated into open physical abuse and intellectual terrorism. It was during this period that outspoken feminists, such as Nawāl al-Saᶜdāwī, were labelled "political dissidents" and jailed. Elsewhere in the Arab world, the fight for female emancipation was being won in stages, with women rising through the ranks of government and taking up more visible political roles, as MPs in Jordan and Oman, undersecretaries in Egypt, and ambassadors in Kuwait.

The early 1990s was a time of unmitigated disaster in the Arab world, when Iraq, financially exhausted after an eight-year war with Iran, invaded Kuwait on August 2nd

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[46] The laws in Saudi Arabia place a great deal of emphasis on the segregation of the sexes. No government workplace, other than healthcare (specifically hospitals), allows both sexes to work side-by-side and interact. This segregation policy is equally enforced in the private sector. Furthermore, by law, women are required to don the ᶜabāyah (black cloak) and head cover when in public, they are not allowed to drive under any circumstances, and need their male guardian's written permission to travel abroad alone. The introduction of a national council (majliss shura) for women in 2003 has given some hope that reform in the treatment of women will be forthcoming.

[47] For reasons discussed in §1.2.3.3.

1990. Women's movements all over the Arab world were paralysed as sides were taken, and all pan-Arab issues came down to a position that was either pro-Iraq or pro-Kuwait. This was a huge setback to the campaign for female emancipation in that under these extreme circumstances, women (especially in the Gulf)[48] were berated for being concerned with their own rights in times like these. Most of the 1990s were spent dealing with the aftermath of this invasion and the psychological scars of the on-off deliberations with Israel that were the result of the peace process. Women of the Gulf region who were given new hope by the closer scrutiny their countries were exposed to through the presence of American forces, and their countries' promises of more freedom for its female citizens, were disappointed to see that little materialised. Even Kuwait failed to carry out the emir's decree to give women the right to vote in 1999, when the decision was overturned in parliament.

This is not to suggest that Arab women are waiting for the dust to settle and peace to break out in the region before beginning pursuing their own agendas. All over the Arab world there are groups and individuals who are struggling to bring pertinent issues into the limelight, and to change divorce and employment laws so that they are fairer to women. In the workplace, glass ceilings are being broken and more interest is being taken and credibility given to women's rights in academic circles and the media than ever before.

1.2.3.3   Islam and Feminism

It is important to note in respect of our discussion of the Arab world that not all Muslim states should necessarily be termed "Islamic". Sizeable Christian communities also come

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[48] The attempt by Saudi women to draw attention to their plight by driving their cars on the streets of Riyadh

under examination in comparisons between religion and secular laws concerning women.[49] There is also the fact that when it comes to points of law, there is no uniformity in what aspects of *sharīʿah* (Islamic law) are practised across Muslim countries. Women's rights are often restricted because of social and traditional norms, and in many societies a woman's freedom is circumscribed by social conventions (such as the idea of shame), which are marginal to the legal system, be it Islamic or otherwise.

However, when discussing feminism in the Arab world it is difficult to avoid enshrining it within the larger framework of feminism in Islam. As Cooke and Badran put it: "From the start, women grounded their feminism first in Islam and later in nationalism."[50] They suggest that with the instigation of Islamic modernism in nineteenth-century Egypt and the use of *ijtihād* (independent inquiry) to reinterpret the Qur'ān, women discovered that practices such as veiling, segregation and seclusion were not necessarily ordained by Islam as they had been led to believe. Even when men used the Qur'ān as a point of reference, women learnt not to take their arguments at face value. As Fatima Mernissi puts it: "Not only have the sacred texts always been manipulated, but manipulation of them is a structural characteristic of the practice of power in Muslim societies."[51] These women found that the basic rights guaranteed to Muslims were irrespective of gender.[52] Mernissi believes that "in Islam, there is no such belief in female inferiority. On the contrary, the

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in November 1990 is one notable example.

[49] Mai Yamani (ed.), *Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1996) p.12.

[50] Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke (eds.), *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing* (London: Virago Press, 1990) p.xxvii.

[51] Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, p.8.

[52] Cooke and Badran reinforce this view by stating that Huda Shaʿrawi's memoirs "reveal the existence of women's debates on Islam and veiling in Cairo's harem salon of the 1890s. Nazira Zain al-Din extends this argument in *Unveiling and Veiling* (1928)". (Badran and Cooke, *Opening the Gates*, p.32.)

whole system is based on the assumption that women are powerful and dangerous beings."[53]

Many women writers in Arab-Islamic cultures have been misunderstood in their criticism of the so called "Islamic" practices within their traditions. In most cases, they are not rejecting the Islamic religion in its totality, but the ignorant and exploitative misinterpretations of the Qur'ān and sayings of the Prophet (*ḥadīth*)[54]. As a result of challenging the religious, social and political status quo, these women are penalised not just for their views, but for their sex as well.

In societies such as Egypt where economic malaise has led to fundamental political reassessment, the answer for many men and women lay in an Islamic orientation, a return to orthodoxy (*al-madd al-uṣūlī*), and a refusal to subscribe to all things deemed un-Islamic. This kind of argumentation, pitting Islamic culture against Western culture, is crucial to the call for the veiling of women.

The emergence of politicised Islamic groups marked a new stage for women across the Middle East, who are increasingly taking part in Islamist political movements in their respective countries. All political participation in this context is presented under the Islamic umbrella, and this has brought a new angle to Islamic feminism, which manifested itself in a common concern with the empowerment of women through a rethink of Islam. The *ḥijāb* is central to this Islamist movement. In general, women who choose to wear it

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[53] Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* (London: Al-Saqi Books, 1985) p.19.
[54] However, it must be kept in mind that numerous female literary figures in the Arab world have taken a public, and distinctly un-Islamic stance that distances them from the religion itself, as well as its practise.

are aware of its social and economic advantages. These range from greater marriage opportunities[55] to low-cost dressing to a general feeling of social and spiritual superiority. Ironically, the wearing of the *ḥijāb* can sometimes offer women more freedom in that they are less likely to attract scrutiny and, therefore, gossip, with its inherent reputation-wrecking mechanism, is averted.

1.2.3.4 Problems with "Feminism" as a Concept

Feminism in the Arab world, much like its Western counterpart, is based on one or more of the following: an awareness by women that as women they are systematically placed in a disadvantaged position; some form of rejection of enforced behaviour and thought; and attempts made by women to interpret their own experiences, which they could then use to improve their position in life. Arab women's feminist discourse has addressed universal issues such as education and work, rights concerning marriage and suffrage, while simultaneously confronting more culture-specific issues such as breaking out of gender segregation. Like women in many other third-world countries, and unlike Western women, Arab women have typically had to pioneer their feminist expression in rural societies which were only recently experiencing modern urbanisation, societies where religion has remained a cornerstone of everyday life and a source of identity. These Arab societies were typically experiencing European colonial rule and/or Western imperialist hegemony at the very time when the first feminist yearnings of Arab women were being articulated. However, feminism has not managed to shake off its image as a Western import, and, as Leila Ahmed puts it:

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[55] The *ḥijāb*, with its implications of piety, assures Muslim men that they are getting a faithful wife, unsullied by exposure to male eyes. The fact that she is ready to embrace God's will and don the *ḥijāb* suggests that she will be more likely to obey her husband's wishes as well.

Colonialism's use of feminism to promote the culture of the colonizers and undermine native culture has ever since imparted to feminism in non-Western societies the taint of having served as an incident of colonial domination, rendering it suspect in Arab eyes and vulnerable to the charge of being an ally of colonial interests.[56]

Feminism is typically viewed with suspicion as a Western concept, a seed planted by imperialism to destabilise local society and destroy indigenous cultural identity. Riffat Hassan summarises that "while 'modernization' is considered highly desirable, 'Westernization' is considered equally undesirable...They see 'emancipated' Muslim women as symbols of 'Westernization' which is linked with the colonization of Muslim peoples by Western powers in the not-too-distant past."[57] Arab women's feminist voices have always run the risk of being discredited as anti-nationalist or anti-religious, which has made their battles more complex and their positions more fragile than those of their Western sisters. The colonial legacy of feminism and its implications is inescapable – something that women in the West do not have to struggle with.

Notably, in the many works investigated in the course of this research, it was interesting to observe that many authors when dealing with the Arab world and the Middle East would only refer to the word "feminism" between inverted commas, so that they themselves are distant from it, symbolising its position as explosive, pejorative and imported. It is as if the author was reluctant to use such a word had it not been for absolute necessity. Badran concluded that professional Egyptian women resist the "feminist" label because of this

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[56] Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) pp.7, 243.
[57] Riffat Hassan, "Feminist Theology: The Challenges for Muslim Women", in *Journal for Critical Studies of the Middle East*, no. 9 (Fall 1996) p.57.

"taint".[58] Many Arab women writers refuse to classify themselves as "feminists" for fear of the pejorative connotations that the word entails. Miriam Cooke, aware of the pitfalls of using the "feminist" label, devises the term "Islamic Womanism" (*al-niswiyyah al-islāmiyyah*) in order to avoid "the race, class and north-south problems inherent in the controversial term Islamic feminism" (*al-unthawiyyah al-islāmiyyah*).[59] McKee views it thus: "They [several Arab women writers] complain of not wanting to be known as 'feminist writers', but just as writers, not wanting to be renowned for their stance on women, but for their general outlook on life as well as the calibre of their prose".[60]

Another reason, unique to Arab women writers, that has caused them to reject the "feminist" label is the male critic:

> While progressive male reformers read works by women, most men did not. The most effective means of keeping the silence was contemptuous neglect. In the view of most men, women were not writing important texts. How could they when they did not have important roles in society?[61]

The main criticism directed at the work of modern Arab women writers is that women's fiction is too personal in its content and thus is thinly-masked autobiography, or that it deals with mundane and gossipy day-to-day trivia and is therefore not artistic or creative enough. Salwa Bakr complains that reviewers are too subjective and sexist in their reception of women's fiction, and that they assume that the writer's gender disqualifies it

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[58] M. Badran, "Gender Activism: Feminists and Islamists in Egypt" in Valentine M. Moghadam (ed.), *Identity Politics and Women: Cultural Reassertions and Feminisms in International Perspective* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1993) p.206.

[59] From Miriam Cooke's essay on Zaynab al-Ghazālī, "*Ayyām min Ḥayātī*: The Prison Memoirs of a Muslim Sister", in *Journal of Arabic Literature*, vol. xxvi, nos. 1-2 (March-June 1995) p.149.

[60] Elizabeth McKee, "The Political Agendas and Textual Strategies of Levantine Women Writers", in Yamani, *Feminism and Islam*, p.134.

[61] Badran and Cooke, *Opening the Gates*, p.xxxiii.

from serious analysis: "male criticism does not pay attention to women's distinctive creativity...women's creativity is seen, first and foremost, through male eyes".[62]

1.3   Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own*

In any feminist reading of a text, it is hard not to incorporate most, if not all, of the topics covered in the plethora of feminist critical theories, especially when examining the socio-political nature of them. However, some theories are more malleable than others, and are easier to extract from their unique ethnic contexts, thereby lending themselves more to comparative literary studies.

Elaine Showalter is considered one of the most renowned critics in the field of feminist theory; her work has sparked off much debate and discussion. Her seminal work *A Literature of Their Own*[63] is a response to Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), where Woolf initiates the idea of establishing a women's tradition in literature. Showalter's brand of Anglo-American feminist critical theory, gynocriticism,[64] is ideally suited for the purposes of this thesis, since it is based on an exploration of the process through which female autonomy is achieved, by closely examining the female identity of the authors whose work she analyses, and their characters. In this sense, the gynocritic, author and character collaborate to uncover trends that maybe applicable to any collective "female" identity.

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[62] Salwa Bakr, "Writing as a Way Out", in: (ed.) Fadia Faqir, *In the House of Silence* (Reading: Garnet, 1998) p.38.
[63] Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977 [reprinted 2000 with new introduction]).
[64] §1.2.1.

The tripartite structure implemented in *A Literature of Their Own* is ideal for the comparative aspect of this thesis, since it allows for a close engagement with the texts of the authors, representing the different stages while still respecting the "ethnocentric" nature of these dialogues, as delineated in §1.1. The chronological approach diffuses the risk of a history that is sometimes associated with studies of this sort.

Though Showalter's model offers a great deal of flexibility and is easier to apply than some other models, it is still fairly entrenched in its own socio-cultural context. Elaine Showalter's book was written in the 1970s, after the women in her native country (USA) had achieved many, if not all, of their emancipatory objectives. Hers was a strictly white Anglo-American take on the question of women's rights and liberty, as examined through the work of equally white Anglo-Saxon females. This means that in many ways the patterns she uncovers are unique to her specific background and that of the writers she examines, and although they are usually applicable to Arab women writers, they are often lacking in particular insights that would only be valid in an Arab-Islamic context, which causes certain problems that are to be discussed in detail in chapter 5. That, along with other factors, means that her work in itself is not broad enough to cover all the aspects necessary for this particular research, and other theories must be considered as well, notably the work of feminist social critics such as Gerda Lerner.[65] Marxist feminism's emphasis on the sexual division of labour is integral to a culture that until the last half of the twentieth century confined its women to the domestic scene. The work of French critics, particularly Kristeva, is also important in that it adds other aspects unique to the

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[65] Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness* (Oxford University Press, 1994).

situation of Arab women writers, the examination of the "master narrative" unique to their experience.

In *A Literature of Their Own*, Showalter traces a tradition of women's literature in England by examining the works and lives of female novelists from 1840 to the present. In her introduction she stresses that the study concerns itself only with women who were "professional" novelists (i.e. were paid for their publications and thus wrote to this end) in her search for repeated patterns, themes and images in literature by women. Showalter shows how women's literature has evolved, starting from the Victorian period to modern writing, breaking down the movement into three stages: the Feminine, a period beginning with the use of the male pseudonym in the 1840s until 1880 with George Eliot's death; the Feminist, from 1880 up to the winning of the vote in 1920; and the Female, from 1920 to the present day, including a "new stage of self-awareness about 1960".[66] From her research she comes to the conclusion that "a special female self-awareness emerges through literature in every period".[67]

In discussing the characteristics of each of these phases, she looks at other literary subcultures ("such as black, Jewish...or even American")[68] to see how they developed. A female solidarity always seemed to exist as a result of "a shared and increasingly secretive and ritualized physical experience...the entire female sexual lifecycle."[69] Women writers always wrote with this commonality and feminine awareness in mind; therefore their

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[66] §1.1.
[67] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.3.
[68] Ibid., p.6.
[69] Ibid., p.9.

writing and experiences "implied unities of culture".[70] Showalter finds in each subculture, and thus in women's literature, first a long period of imitation of the dominant structures of tradition and an "internalisation of its standards of art and its views on social roles."[71] This Feminine phase includes women writers such as the Brontës, Elizabeth Gaskell, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Harriet Martineau, George Eliot, Florence Nightingale, and the later generation of Charlotte Yonge, Dinah Mulock Craik, Margaret Oliphant, and Elizabeth Lynn Linton. These women attempted to integrate themselves into a public sphere, traditionally a male space, and many of them felt a conflict of "obedience and resistance"[72] which appears in many of their novels. Oddly enough, during the Victorian period women flooded the novel market and comprised a healthy segment of the reading public – still, women writers were left "metaphorically paralysed".[73] The language with which they could fully express their experience as women and their sufferings was limited as they still identified themselves within the confines of Victorian bourgeois propriety.

In the second stage, the minority – or rather, the subordinate – lashes out against traditional standards and values, demanding their political, social and economic rights be recognised. In this Feminist phase women's literature had varying angles of attack. Some women wrote social commentaries, translating their own sufferings to those of the poor, the labouring class, slaves, and prostitutes, thereby venting their sense of injustice in an acceptable manner. They expanded their sphere of influence by making inroads into social work. In a completely different direction, the 1870s sensation novels of Mary Braddon, Rhoda Broughton, and Florence Marryat, "explored genuinely radical female protest

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[70] Ibid., p.6.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid., p.7.
[73] Ibid.

against marriage and women's economic oppression, although still in the framework of feminine conventions that demanded the erring heroine's destruction."[74] Their golden-haired doll-like models of womanhood ridiculed contemporary expectations of Angels in the House[75] by turning out to be mad bigamists and would-be murderesses.

Militant suffragists also wrote prolifically during this protest phase of literature. Women such as Sarah Grand, George Egerton, Mona Caird, Elizabeth Robins, and Olive Schreiner made "fiction the vehicle for a dramatization of wronged womanhood... demand[ing] changes in the social and political systems that would grant women male privileges and require chastity and fidelity from men."[76] On the whole, Showalter does not find these women's writings examples of fine literature. Their projects concerned themselves more with conveying a message than with the creation of art, though their rejection of male-imposed definitions and self-imposed repression opened the doors for the exploration of female identity, feminist theory, and the female aesthetic.

The third period, then, is characterised by a self-discovery and some freedom "from some of the dependency of opposition"[77] as a means for self-definition. Some writers ended up turning inward during the subsequent search for identity. The early half of the Female phase of writing, "carried...the double legacy of feminine self-hatred and feminist withdrawal...[turning] more and more toward a separatist literature of inner space."[78] Dorothy Richardson, Katherine Mansfield, and Virginia Woolf worked towards a Female aesthetic, elevating sexuality to a world-polarising status. Moreover, the Female

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[74] Ibid., p.10.
[75] Ibid., p.113.
[76] Ibid., p.29.
[77] Ibid., p.31.

experience and its creative processes held "mystic" implications, encapsulating both transcendental and self-destructive vulnerability. These women "applied the cultural analysis of the feminists [before them] to words, sentences, and structures of language in the novel."[79] However, Showalter criticises their works for its androgynistic nature. For all its concern with sexual connotations and sexuality, the writing avoids actual contact with the female body, disengaging from people into "a room of one's own". This changed when the Female novel entered a new stage in the 1960s. With twentieth-century Freudian and Marxist analysis and two centuries of female tradition, writers such as Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark, Doris Lessing, Margaret Drabble, A.S. Byatt and Beryl Bainbridge began to access women's experiences. Using previously taboo language and situations, they transformed traditional expectations of women's literature, so that "anger and sexuality are accepted...as sources of female creative power".[80] Showalter's analysis charts the progress of women's writing leading up to this phase, and articulates the many conflicts and struggles still influencing the current of women's literature. Although her theory contributes enormously to a sense of continuity, and establishes a progressive pattern to English women's literature in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, contemporary critics have attacked the validity of her work, contending that placing women writers into a separate literary tradition further isolates them from a literary culture in which they are already marginalised because of their gender.

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[78] Ibid., p.32.
[79] Ibid., p.33.
[80] Ibid., p.33.

1.4　　　The Development of the Novel Form in the Arab World

Women have long played an important part in the development of Arabic literature. They were heroines, narrators, muses, and occasionally the actual creators of fiction. However, it was not until recently, in the second half of the twentieth century, that Arab women's literary contribution was powerful enough to dent the steady outpourings of the traditional male scribe. In the past fifty years Arab women have introduced a new discourse, an innovative way of using the Arabic language to express themselves and the changing world around them. Arab women writers used poetry, drama, and short stories to topple the old strongholds of patriarchal creativity, but it was through the medium of novel writing, and perhaps because of aspects unique to the novel in the Arab world, that their impact was felt more strongly.

1.4.1　　　The Origin of the Arabic Novel

In the past, there were two established schools of thought on the origins of modern Arabic fiction. Essentially, one suggested that modern Arabic fiction had its roots in the earlier forms of Arabic fiction, particularly the *maqāmah*; this is sometimes called the "traditionalist" view. The other, no less extreme, idea is that modern Arabic fiction is a direct and spontaneous result of contact with the West and imitation of the Western genre. However, many critics now believe that modern Arabic fiction, although apparently drawing its inspiration from the Western narrative tradition, has actually been derived from a traditional Arabic form which originally inspired the Western literary form. Salma al-Jayyusi suggests an idea that amplifies certain aspects of both of the two opposing theories: Cervantes' Don Quixote, considered by many to be a pioneering attempt at the novel form in the West, was in fact based on the Arabic *maqāmah*, which Cervantes was

exposed to during his exile in Algeria.[81] She is one of many Arab critics who draw analogies between the *maqāmah* and certain European literary styles, particularly those of Spanish origin. "Shawqi Dayf...asserts that the *maqama* was introduced into Europe, along with other Arab works, because of the intellectual interrelations between east and west in medieval times...Dayf attempts to link the Spanish novella picaresca (rogue novel) with the *maqama*..."[82]

Nevertheless, more recent research appears to advance the theory that the novel as a genre emerged in the Arab context through a combination of the two factors, whereas most Western critics are adamant that the novel "clearly constitutes an imported genre in the world of Arabic."[83] The viewpoint of Arab critics is ambiguous at best. Some, like Shākir Muṣṭafā[84] and the novelist ᶜAbd al-Raḥmān Munīf, are willing to acknowledge that "the Arabic novel has no heritage",[85] yet others vehemently oppose this reductionist view. Salma al-Jayyusi, for example, writes:

> it is therefore erroneous to refer all changes and additions in modern Arabic literature
> simply to Western influences. These were certainly crucial in giving the example and
> demonstrating the possibilities, but one has to see that the forms of modern fiction were
> the natural response to the needs of the time in any language, and just as the Western
> writers found their way to the form and structure of fiction, I think that writers from
> other cultures would have. The encounter with the West hastened this process.[86]

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[81] Personal encounter with Salma al-Jayyusi (Kuwait, January 2001).
[82] Matti Moosa, *The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction* (London: Lynne Rienner, 1997) p.123.
[83] Roger Allen, *The Arabic Novel; An Historical and Critical Introduction* (2nd edn, Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1995) p.6.
[84] Shākir Muṣṭafā, *al-Qiṣṣah fī Sūriyā ḥattā al-Ḥarb al-ᶜĀlamiyya al-Thāniyah* (Cairo: Maᶜhad al-Buḥūth wa'l-Dirāsāt al-ᶜArabiyyah, 1957) p.44.
[85] Interview with Munīf in *al-Maᶜrifah* (February 1979) p.193.

Roger Allen states that the development of the novel in the Arab world is essentially one of "catching up",[87] and we see that the latter, alongside the tensions between the quest for the expression of the modern and the desire to remain linked to the past, are constant themes in the development of the modern Arabic novel.

1.4.1.1   Contact with the West

Before looking at the influence of Western contact on the emergence of the novel as a genre in the Arab world, one must discuss the preceding social scenario. On the one hand, there is the state of decline that the Ottoman Empire was descending into, and on the other, the emergence of "a new urban class structure",[88] and the establishment of literary salons that enabled the Egyptian population to amass a critical consciousness capable of appreciating the wealth of opportunities for improvement that emerged through contact with the West. Sabry Hafez points out that the French could not have entered the cultural vacuum that was widely suggested, since in that case, "their impacts would not have produced the same results either in form or in direction".[89]

The Syrian and Lebanese communities had been in contact with the West, especially Rome and France, long before most of the other Arab countries, mainly because of the large Maronite and Catholic communities. In the nineteenth century, missionary and educational activity intensified when Protestant missionaries (mostly from the USA) began to arrive, and they set up the 1866 Syrian Protestant College (later to become the American University of Beirut). One result of this was the reinvestigation of the great works of

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[86] Salma al-Jayyusi, unpublished introduction to *The Arabic Short Story*.
[87] Allen, *The Arabic Novel*, p.7.
[88] Sabry Hafez, *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse* (London: Saqi Books, 1993) p.41.

Arabic literature from the past, with the *maqāmāt* having a distinct influence on the chosen prosaic style of the era. The strict Ottoman control of the area, coupled with the civil war and the Christian massacres of 1860, led a great number of Christian families to leave, many to Europe and America, forming the basis of the *mahjar*, or émigré, school of modern Arabic literature.

Further south, with Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798, the Egyptians were brought face-to-face with European advances in technology and military science and culture and scientific knowledge. This was the first serious European excursion into the vast oriental Islamic Empire that had survived almost intact from the Middle Ages, and even then it was displaced by local uprisings. The importance of the Napoleonic expedition into Egypt lay not only in its awakening a nationalistic fervour, and the internalisation of the French revolutionist mantra "liberty, equality, fraternity",[90] but more fundamentally in the fact that it heralded the beginning of the study of the European languages, particularly French and English. The resulting translation of European literature introduced into the Arab world new literary forms such as drama, the novel and the short story, and ushered in a new period in the development of Arabic literature.

1.4.1.2   Translation of Western Fiction

The activities of the American and Jesuit schools in Syria in the nineteenth century caused a literary revival that was not matched in Egypt until the time of Muḥammad ʿAlī (reigned

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[89] Ibid.

1804–1849), who rose to power after the French had left. The schools he established and the educational missions he sent to Europe in the first quarter of the nineteenth century were the main channels through which Western ideas and culture began to trickle down into Egypt. Particularly instrumental in the spread of Western ideas was Madrasat al-Alsun (the School of Languages), established by Muḥammad ᶜAlī in 1835, under the leadership and supervision of the pioneer Egyptian intellectual Rifāᶜah Rāfiᶜ al-Taḥtāwī (d.1873), who, with his students, translated many books into Turkish and Arabic.[91] This meant that numerous European texts were translated into Arabic, such as works by Voltaire, Montesquieu and Fenelon.[92] Muḥammad ᶜUthmān Jalāl (1829–1898) set in motion an important facet in the development of an indigenous fictional tradition by giving his stories a more Egyptian flavour through changing the plots and characters of some of the translated works, thus paving the way at first for attempts at imitation and later for the development of an incipient novel genre.

The emergence of nationalist newspapers that published works of fiction included early experiments composed in Arabic as well as translated works. The renowned Cairo newspaper, *al-Ahrām*, founded in 1875, provided novels published in a serial form for a growing Arab readership, and in this way the press played a vital role in the nineteenth century in the revival of Arab cultural awareness throughout the Arab world.[93] Additionally, the influx of Syrian immigrants to Egypt around 1860, who brought with them translated journals and periodicals, also contributed a great deal to this movement. Furthermore, the concentration of the new British occupiers on matters of finance and

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[90] See ibid., p.43; Moosa, *Origins*, p.3.
[91] Ibid., p.5.
[92] Allen, *The Arabic Novel*, p.21.
[93] Ibid., p.22.

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administration rather than on culture and education, unlike the French in the Maghreb states, also contributed to this revival in Egypt.

While audiences in the Arab world seemed to have received translations of fiction from European authors well, many critics felt that this posed a danger to morals and language. At the same time, other Arab writers expressed their rejection of the old fictional genres, particularly the tales of jinn, ogres, spells, and incantations such as those of *The Arabian Nights*, and asserted that people discarded those stories because they came to "seek reality".[94]

1.4.2 The *Nahḍah* and the Revival of the *Maqāmah*

Contemporary Arabic literature is the result of a long, arduous journey with short accelerated bursts, which has its roots in "*al-nahḍah*", the movement of cultural revival or renaissance which began in earnest during the nineteenth century, although some of it can be traced back to an earlier period. This process varied widely in its course and impact within the different regions of the Arabic-speaking world, but in every case the particular local development was the result of a process which involved two principal forces: the encounter with the West, its sciences and culture, and the rediscovery and stimulation of the great classical heritage of Arab-Islamic culture.

Both Syrian and Egyptian fiction writers either followed traditional themes and techniques or tried to produce fiction patterned after Western models. The latter involved the imposition of domestic themes and settings to make the works look like translated Western

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[94] See Jāsim al-Mūsāwī, *al-Riwāyah al-ʿArabiyyah: al-Nashʾah waʾl-Taḥāwwul* (Cairo, 1988) p.50.

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novels, which the reading audience regarded as "more sophisticated than indigenous works".[95] Most of these works of fiction tended toward the romantic because of the author's contact with European romantic fiction. However, traditional narrative themes and techniques took their inspiration from the classical *maqāmah*, a short narrative usually concerning the adventures of an imaginary hero or rogue, through the medium of an external narrator or *rāwī*. As Hafez put it: "There was hardly any significant writer of talent who did not try his hand at *maqāmah* writing."[96] The genre also invoked the rhymes and cadences of *saj'*, which meant that the work was highly stylised, sometimes at the expense of content. It was one of the few prose genres to remain in favour with the reading public by the time *al-nahḍah* took place, thus affording the perfect medium for the writers of the renaissance; it allowed these pioneers to address issues of the day in a manner that revived the language and style of their cultural heritage.

1.4.3   The Arabisation of the Novel

One of the most notable magazines to promote Arabic fiction at the end of the nineteenth century was *al-Jinān* ("The Gardens"), established by Buṭrus al-Bustānī (d.1883) in Beirut in 1870. Its scope included social and political matters, and its popularity, which to no small degree stemmed from the name and fame of its founder, helped to attract contributions from many renowned writers. One of them was Buṭrus al-Bustānī's son Salīm, whose voluminous output of stories of varying length marked the "beginning of modern Arabic prose fiction".[97] Al-Bustānī was the first Arab writer who attempted to write a novel in the modern sense and to incorporate some originality into his work, which

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[95] Moosa, *Origins*, p.252.
[96] Hafez, *Genesis*, p.109.
[97] Moosa, *Origins*, p.157.

provided a bridge between the traditional Arab tale and the modern novel, in that he not only incorporated a Western theme and a Western style, but real events and lively characters that depicted a world beyond his own country. Hafez reports that "he started by translating and adapting French narrative works and soon realized the need to create indigenous narrative attempts free from the manacles of the *maqāmah*".[98] Al-Bustānī was the first Arab in the nineteenth century to have a true understanding of the instructional possibilities of the novel. Matti Moosa considered Salīm al-Bustānī to be the rightful father of the modern Arabic novel, despite the "many artistic and technical handicaps which prevented him from creating the first 'pure and artistic novel'."[99]

1.4.4 The Arabic Historical Novel

The novels of Jurjī Zaydān and others written in the historical romantic and philosophical genre around the turn of the twentieth century played an important role in the development of a discerning readership for the Arabic novel. These novels, according to the Egyptian critic ʿAbd al-Muḥsin Ṭaha Badr, were a mixture of "education and entertainment."[100] Zaydān was eager to acquaint his readership with aspects of the history of the Arabs and Islam as a means of encouraging and fostering a new cultural awareness, while at the same time providing works of fiction that would entertain in the same way as some of the more melodramatic historical novels, which had been serialised in the press. Zaydān's main concern, as Matti Moosa sees it, "was to relate history as it really was within the context of the novel form. He asserted that the historical 'facts' he related in his novels could be

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[98] Hafez, *Genesis*, p.112.
[99] Moosa, *Origins*, p.183.
[100] ʿAbd al-Muḥsin Ṭaha Badr, *Taṭawwur al-Riwāyah al-ʿArabiyyah al-Ḥadīthah fī Miṣr* (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1963) p.93.

relied upon as authentic."[101] His novels consist of two aspects: history and romance, with the latter always integrated into actual historical events. These episodes from Arab-Islamic history were the ideal way to rouse and foster an emerging Arab nationalist consciousness that was at the core of the concerns of *al-nahḍah*.

1.4.5 The Progress of Arab Fiction and the Growth of the Egyptian Novel

Unlike Syria, which was under the direct rule of the Ottoman government, Egypt enjoyed autonomous status and more freedom, especially of the press, under the British occupation, which began in 1882. Egypt's contact with the West further created a healthy climate for literary ideas and institutions. Egypt appears to have been more prosperous than Syria, and the better economic opportunities attracted more Syrians, including a host of writers and translators. The establishment of Cairo University in 1908 with its concentration on the humanities, particularly literature, produced a host of new native Egyptian writers. While mastering their craft, these writers gradually began to break with the traditional forms of Arabic fiction and create a native Egyptian novel.

A failed revolution and growing opposition to foreign occupation provided fertile ground for the socially and politically critical body of work that was to emerge in Egypt at the start of the new century. These works attempted to depict real Egyptians in authentic Egyptian settings and served as a transitional phase for the novel, from a far-removed historical background to a more contemporary setting with its commentary on societal change. One genre that clearly thrived in this period was the short story, which was well suited to the

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[101] Moosa, *Origins*, p.198.

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new medium of the press, not to mention its unique ability to deal with smaller segments of life in society in intense and often allusive detail. But it was not until the first quarter of the twentieth century that a native Egyptian novel was born, "when conditions to its emergence finally were more favorable."[102]

1.4.6   The Influence of Realism and Nationalism

By the turn of the century Arabic fiction in Egypt[103] had moved slowly towards realism and the use of contemporary Egyptian themes and settings. Thus, by the 1930s Arabic fiction in Egypt had attained a great deal of sophistication in both form and content.

There has been a great deal of discussion concerning the status of Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal's novel *Zaynab* (1913), ever since H.A.R. Gibb and others identified it as the first "real novel" in Arabic.[104] It is perhaps better to designate *Zaynab* as an extremely important step in what was a continuous process. Haykal chooses the Egyptian village society as a realistic background to his novel, with the protagonists serving as symbols of a constrictive and oppressive social regime, and the female heroine, Zaynab, being a symbol of the newly liberated motherland. *Zaynab* introduced a theme that, as its title suggested, revolved around a female protagonist and her life choices and their consequences. Although Haykal was not the first Arab author to do so, he may have been the first to imbue his heroine with a sense of daring (she distributes her kisses as freely as she

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[102] Ibid., p.21.

[103] The progressions in the Egyptian novel of this period were particularly important because they tended to reflect a general trend of changes which had taken place in the novel form for the entire region. Egyptian writers, and their work, tended with few exceptions to be at the heart of literary and philosophical discussion all over the Arab world. That is not to diminish the contribution of Arab writers of other nationalities, it is simply easier at this point to focus on Egypt as an illustration of the progressions that were taking place in the novel form throughout the Arab world.

[104] Moosa, *Origins*, pp.147, 157.

desires), and valid feelings of ambiguity (she respects her husband though clearly she doesn't love him). It is only in the (inevitable?) death of Zaynab at the end of the story that there is a sense of patriarchal victory, the crushing of the female spirit. However unrealistic the portrayal of Zaynab (it is difficult to believe that a rural woman of Zaynab's age had so much freedom of movement, and so little regard for accepted social norms), it was, and remains, living proof of the viability of a female heroine: a "feminine" plot.

Hafez states that it is only "natural...that the historical novel and romantic fiction with their nationalistic call for recognition and passionate adoration of the country's captivating beauty (e.g. Haykal's *Zaynab*) were the two major fictional types during the early period of the Arabic novel."[105] What is also interesting is that Haykal chose to have his characters speak in the colloquial dialect as a means of demonstrating realistic communication. This was, and remains, a highly controversial issue, summed up by Najīb Maḥfūẓ's expression of an opinion common to many Arab writers and critics: "I consider the colloquial one of the failings of our society; exactly like ignorance, poverty, and disease".[106] The problem of diglossia would plague Arab critics and literary historians for several decades of the twentieth century, with the Arab fear of losing their hold on their eloquent *fuṣḥā* (high Arabic) which was the language of their great poetry and prose heritage, and above all, the language of the Holy Qur'ān and of the traditions of the Prophet.

In the period between the two world wars (1918–1939), Arabic fiction underwent substantial changes in both its themes and its techniques. There were strong nationalistic

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[105] Sabry Hafez, "The State of the Contemporary Arabic Novel: Some Reflections", in *The Literary Review Supplement: The Arab Cultural Scene* (London: Namara, 1982) p.17.
[106] Quoted in Pierre Cachia, *An Overview of Modern Arabic Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990) p.71.

feelings, and the movement for political independence was accompanied by a cultural upheaval that affected many facets of Arab life, especially in Egypt. The revolution of 1919 symbolised the Egyptians' national struggle for political, social, and economic freedom and independence. Young Egyptian writers tried to create an indigenous fiction which would realistically reflect Egyptian life and society. They tended to portray their society as truthfully as possible, regarding the romantic outlook of their predecessors as outmoded. Among the pioneers of the new realism were ᶜĪsā ᶜUbayd, Maḥmūd Taymūr and Maḥmūd Ṭāhir Lāshīn. To create a genuinely Egyptian fiction, writers like Lāshīn strove to portray the faults of their society, concentrating on the impact of this society on the behaviour of its characters. This trend of social realism progressed, culminating in the work of Najīb Maḥfūẓ.

The 1930s was the decade when several self-imaging novels were published. Al-Ḥakīm utilised his own personal experiences at this time of great upheaval to depict life in his novels, as did the authors of other works in this particular genre, such as *al-Ayyām* by Ṭāhā Ḥusayn (first volume 1929, second volume 1940), *Ibrāhīm al-Kātib* (1931) by Ibrāhīm ᶜAbd al-Qādir and *Sārā* (1938) by al-ᶜAqqād. These novels combined fiction with biography, the latter retaining some of the characteristics of the historical novel in that the author knows what has already happened. Pure fiction in the novel form, with only a few exceptions, would mature later on.

1.4.7 Egyptian Modernists: Najīb Maḥfūẓ

By 1951, Maḥfūẓ had already published eight novels, gradually helping to establish the form in Arabic. However, it was the publication of his famous trilogy, a family saga in three volumes (*Bayn al-Qaṣrayn, Qaṣr al-Shawq, al-Sukkariyyah* [1956/1957]) that was the turning point in contemporary Arabic fiction. This trilogy described the intimate life of

a middle-class family in Cairo over three generations, spanning the time from nearly the end of the First World War in 1917 through to 1944. The trilogy was an immediate success, being hailed as a great literary event and Najīb Maḥfūẓ was acclaimed the greatest novelist in Egypt and the Arab world. The award of the Nobel Prize to Najīb Maḥfūẓ in 1988 was not simply a recognition of a single author's achievement, but an acknowledgement of the fact that the Arabic novel had reached distinction on a global scale. After the publication of the trilogy, many Arab writers would take to novel-writing, creating ever-new forms, and venturing into areas denied to poetry. The novel became an ever-more desirable form and people now read the novels of Arab writers from the Atlantic to the Gulf with the feeling and faith that it is "the literature of one people, of one general culture, of one basic Weltanschaung."[107]

1.4.8 The Contemporary Arabic Novel

After the Second World War, the Arabic novel began to come into its own, reaching new levels of maturity as it let go of the shackles of viewing itself as a direct product of, or in direct opposition to, the Western novel. The 1960s emerged as the decade where the different revolutionary regimes of the Arab world moved from the initial flush of successfully throwing off the yoke of the colonial oppressor, to establishing a system of law and order in fledgling nations unsure of how to define the perimeters of authority while remaining true to the ideological visions that were the bases for these revolutions. Unfortunately, the majority of the newly formed Arab states failed to remain true to their revolutionary principles, which in turn meant that the writers and intellectuals of this era faced severe persecution should they voice their socio-political criticisms overtly. The

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[107] Salma al-Jayyusi, *The Rise of the Arabic Novel in Modern Times* (unpublished MS) p.67.

heavy use of symbolism in this period was as much an artistic phenomenon as a means of self-preservation.[108]

The June 1967 war, "*al-naksah*", was a defining moment in modern Arab history, and was a recurring theme in much of the literature of the time. The Lebanese war, the occupied territories of Palestine and most recently the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait have all influenced the themes preoccupying contemporary Arab novels. As Halim Barakat summarises:

> Contemporary Arab writers have been preoccupied with themes of struggle, revolution, liberation, emancipation, rebellion, alienation. A writer could not be a part of Arab society and yet not concern himself with change. To be oblivious to tyranny, injustice, poverty, deprivation, victimization, repression, is insensitively proper. I would even say that writing about Arab society without concerning oneself with change is a sort of *engagement* in irrelevances.[109]

1.4.9   The Birth of the Feminist Novel

Although women's contribution to Arab literature extends back to pre-Islamic Arab society, it was *al-nahḍah*, the same geminating ground for men's literature, and its radical ideas concerning the equality of the sexes and women's education that allowed the literary contributions of women to surface. Not surprisingly, Arab women writers were scarce until fairly recently, and what writings they did produce "usually imitated the norms

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[108] Sabry Hafez, "The Egyptian Novel in the Sixties", in *Journal of Arabic Literature* 7 (1976) p.77.

established by the existing male-dominated literary traditions",[110] much like the way earlier male writers imitated the work of Western authors.[111] By forming their own literary societies and establishing salons and journals, a number of privileged Arab women writers were able to bring some mainstream cultural activities to their normally isolated domains, and they could gain at least some exposure to the outside world and to literary criticism and discussion. Overall, the work produced by these early women writers remained meagre; however, considering their educational levels, their lack of mobility, and the lack of attention and credit given them by literary critics of the time, their work stands as a symbol of female talent and determination.

The first example of a truly "feminist" novel did not emerge in the Arab world until the late 1950s.[112] There were many writings by women prior to the 1950s, but they tended to be essays and articles on female rights and emancipation rather than novelistic endeavours. This was a natural progression of the fact that as the individual Arab states won their independence and looked for ways to strengthen themselves nationally, education became more widely available for girls. In the wave of redefining identities that tends to follow struggles for national independence, Arab women writers approached their work from individual perspectives and produced literature that greatly resembled that of earlier Western feminists. They began writing about their own lives often in first-person narration and soon, for Arab female authors, novels, poetry and short stories were the preferred genres after journalistic article writing. Fiction and poetry, with the requisite suspension of

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[109] Halim Barakat, "Arabic Novels and Social Transformation," in: (ed.) R.C. Ostle, *Studies in Modern Arabic Literature* (Warminster, England: Arris and Philips, 1975) pp.126-127.

[110] Joseph T. Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists: The Formative Years and Beyond* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995) p.5.

[111] See §1.3.

[112] "Feminist" here is defined as a novel dealing with feminist issues written by a woman.

disbelief, retain a safety screen of distance between the authors and their heroines; intimate and critical ideas could be expressed in a manner that draws attention to itself rather than to the author and her message. These were powerful vehicles for feminist thought, especially when invisibility was needed or sought. However, Moussa-Mahmoud believes that "it is only in the second half of this century that we get any significant fiction written by Arab women",[113] and it was not until the 1960s and 1970s that women's feminist voices found wider published literary expression. Many Arab women's novels of this period (such as Laylā Baᶜalbakkī's *Anā Aḥyā* [1958], or Nawāl al-Saᶜdāwī's *Mudhakkirāt Ṭabībah* [1959]) have been described as an autobiographical narration of a middle-class woman's revolt against social conventions. This label of autobiography has until recently been a common tool for diminishing women's literary voices. However, what it was called, autobiography or novel, mattered little. The call to women to refuse the acceptance of their social fate was a message so strong that it unleashed a wave of feminist literature. Their writing was characterised by protest against male domination and by an insistence that men be held accountable for the situation. Most female writers had to come to terms with their ambivalence towards their own bodies as symbols of their individual existence which were also constructed as objects by their culture and therefore simultaneously limiting them as individuals. Many of them paid a high price personally for pursuing a career in writing. Harsh critics attacked not only women's writing, but also the writers themselves in a manner "they would never have done had the writers been men".[114] Fortunately, general acceptance of women's writing became more widespread as more

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[113] Fatma Moussa-Mahmoud, *Little Guide to Arab Women's Writing* (Higher Council of Culture, 1999), extract from *International Guide to Women's Writing* (Bloomsbury and Prentice Hall, 1992).
[114] Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists*, p.6.

women were published, evidenced by the increased demand for, and discussion of, women's literature, which is enjoying a certain vogue in the Arab world at the moment.

2

Feminine

2.1   Elaine Showalter's Feminine

Although English women wrote fiction before 1840, Showalter begins her study with this date because women who wrote during and after this time wrote professionally, i.e. for publication. The first group she examines is from the time period 1840–1880, and she asserts that at that time, women in England shared a subculture through the physical experience of the sexual life cycle, which could not be openly discussed. This situation created a close sisterly bond among women writers, and between women writers and their audiences. She calls the writers of this period "Feminine" novelists.

The Feminine novelists are divided into three groups; the great innovators, such as the Brontës, Elizabeth Gaskell, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and George Eliot, who became role models for later women writers; their imitators, such as Charlotte Yonge, Margaret Oliphant, and Elizabeth Lynn Linton; and the sensation novelists and writers of children's books, who may have more easily consolidated domestic and professional roles.

Feminine novelists were predominantly upper-middle class, less educated than their male counterparts, and they wrote to support themselves. Showalter defines three areas in which the career patterns of nineteenth-century female writers are differentiated from those of their male counterparts: "education, means of support, and age at first publication".[115] Men

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[115] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.40.

were generally more educated, had access to better jobs because of this education, and were therefore more financially independent. Often, the male writers' income from writing was supplemented by their income from other, regular jobs. Showalter also concludes that male writers, perhaps because they did not face as many obstacles as women, managed to publish works at an earlier stage in their lives. She points out how these female writers' careers usually sprang out of "a recommendation from a doctor or a husband (a kind of permission from male authority)."[116] This was similar to the start of Laylā al-ʿUthmān's writing career, when she says her husband "allowed her" to pursue what her father never did.[117]

Feminine novelists often used pseudonyms to circumvent objections by their families and to prevent gender-biased criticism of their work. Showalter calls the male pseudonym "the height and trademark of female role-playing", observing that women "devised a number of strategies to deal with male hostility, jealousy, and resistance within the family...if the man in question could not be placated by such tactics, women simply published in secret."[118] This was not the only reason that Victorian women writers used a pseudonym; Geraldine Jewsbury explained her reason for using it: "I had rather not have my name stuck to the thing. First, because there are many things said in it that I don't want to walk about amongst some of my reputable friends as being guilty of holding."[119] Naturally, a man wouldn't feel such guilt, so by pretending to be a male author the feminine novelists not only deflected spousal and/or societal anger, they elevated their own guilt. Unfortunately, this is still the attitude in much of the Arab world today, where woman writers are

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[116] Ibid., p.55.
[117] Personal interview with al-ʿUthmān (March 1999).
[118] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.57.
[119] Ibid., p.59.

persecuted much more harshly than men for writing sexually explicit material (this phenomenon is discussed in more depth in the conclusion to this thesis).

Showalter notes that a hostile response was provoked by women's desire to write, and that "when women had managed to resolve the conflicts between obedience and resistance, womanhood and vocation, for themselves, they discovered that they faced a critical standard that denied them both femininity and art."[120] The feminine writers took their domestic roles seriously and tried to integrate their personal and professional lives. No matter how professional they tried to be, however, feminine novelists had to deal with the Victorian double critical standard that judged them as women, rather than artists; women's literature was deemed inferior to men's literature because women were supposedly physically and biologically subordinate to men, and because women's experience, the basis for their fiction, was limited. "To their contemporaries, nineteenth-century women writers were women first, artists second. A woman novelist, unless she disguised herself with a male pseudonym, had to expect critics to focus on her femininity and rank her with the other writers of her day, no matter how diverse their subjects or styles."[121] It was believed that women's writing was compensatory; they wrote because they could not fulfil their "natural" destiny as wives and mothers. This double critical standard caused Charlotte Brontë to publish *Jane Eyre* (1847) and George Eliot to publish *Adam Bede* (1857) under pseudonyms. Interestingly, Laylā al-ᶜUthmān, and Arab women writers in general, did not turn to the relative shelter afforded by the male pseudonym, although they certainly suffered the tyranny caused by the "female" novelist stigma too. Perhaps it was because they wrote at a much later historical time. Maybe the work of these English

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[120] Ibid., p.72.

pioneers made it easier for women writers in different cultures to reveal their identities as well as for the generation of female authors that followed them. It certainly seems that they became more comfortable with their sexuality, as Showalter notes: "Later in the century women expressed their romantic fantasies of self more explicitly in female pseudonyms like 'The Duchess', 'Ouida', and 'Sarah Grand'."[122] Arab women writers have a similar tendency, from first-wave feminists, such as Bāhithat al-Badiyyah, to contemporary poetesses such as the Saudi Rīm al-Bawādī.

Elaine Showalter points out how "gentleman reviewers had patronized lady novelists since the beginning of the nineteenth century".[123] This was very much the case (and in some cases still is) in the Arab world. But by 1855, even before the appearance of George Eliot, the emergence of the women's novel was so striking that most readers and reviewers would have agreed with Margaret Oliphant in linking it to other synonyms of social progress: "This, which is the age of so many things – of enlightenment, of science, of progress – is quite as distinctly the age of female novelists."[124] Though it is difficult to assess to what extent the emergence of the Arab female novelist was a "symptom of social progress", it is hard to deny that the evolution of the feminist movement in the Arab world certainly had its roots in the desire to achieve some sort of "social progress". Showalter surmises that the Victorians found the "new questions of women's *place* in literature...endlessly fascinating, and [they] approached them with all the weight of their religious commitments and their interest in the sciences of human nature."[125] It could very well be that the question of what exactly "women's place in literature" is to Western

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[121] Ibid., p.73.
[122] Ibid., p.58.
[123] Ibid., p.74.
[124] Oliphant, quoted in ibid., p.75.

academics has not been resolved, it is a question that has plagued Arab intellectuals as well. Some, such as Elias Khouri,[126] suggest that women should not have a separate space in literature, that their contribution should just enter the general literary arena without the need to place it in subheadings and categories. Though this suggestion is commendable for its lack of discrimination, it does run the risk of denying the validity of a "unique" female experience. Showalter points out that another explanation given by critics for the inferiority of female literature was women's limited experience, as vast preserves of masculine life, such as schools, universities, clubs, sports, businesses, government, and the army, were closed to women.[127] In much of the Arab world many of these fields still aren't open to women; one could suppose that this affects the quality of their work. Perhaps this lack of access for both the Victorian and the Arab female novelist did not so much limit the scope of the locations available for these women to explore, as focus their energies into one specific arena. "Denied participation in public life, women were forced to cultivate their feelings and to overvalue romance. In the novels, emotion rushed in to fill the vacuum of experience, and critics found this intensity, this obsession with personal relationships, unrealistic, and even oppressive."[128] Elaine Showalter juxtaposed this tendency against issues covered in a "man's" novel:

> In men's novels some kind of philosophy, some general idea, dictated the artistic composition of the narrative. The characters were placed in this broad intellectual framework, like Waverly of Scott's contrasts of past and present, or Becky in Thackeray's satire. Women's novels on the other hand, concentrated on the characters

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[125] Ibid., pp.75-76.
[126] Workshop on "al-Mar'ah wa'l-Adab" at Mi'at ʿĀm min Taḥrīr al-Mar'ah conference (Cairo: 23-28 October, 1999).
[127] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.79.
[128] Ibid., pp.79-80.

themselves. Reader identification with the characters gave those novels a special intensity, but one that was transitory since it was intellectually limited.[129]

To what extent is this true? It is dismissive to suppose that the female novelists' concentration on their characters and their endeavours to create empathy between them and the reader deducts from the quality of their writing. Some would argue that it is this very creation of empathy that is the reason that these writers became so successful, that this fairly new concept of immersion in emotion is their unique contribution to the field.

There was another factor that was lacking in the Victorian Feminine novelists' life that because of the factors previously mentioned must have made life doubly difficult. Victorian women lacked the support networks that their male counterparts had immediate access to, and, as Showalter notes, "They were much less likely than male novelists to have personal contact with other professional writers."[130] It is not just that they were not mingling with other professionals in their fields and swapping experiences gleaned from being in similar situations, but that they had limited contact with anyone outside their immediate families: "Women through most of the nineteenth century were barred from the universities, isolated in their own homes, chaperoned in travel, painfully restricted in friendship. The normal literary life was closed to them."[131] These same sentiments could be applied to first-wave Arab female novelists; their movement was restricted, they were relegated to the domestic sphere for most of their lives, and did not have much contact with other professional woman writers or any support system as such. Laylā al-ᶜUthmān, who lived under these circumstances for the first half of her life, complained of this very fact in her interview, in fact, she went one step further, to suggest that when she did meet

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[129] Ibid., p.88.
[130] Ibid., p.100.

other female professionals, they were even more hostile to her than the men.[132] "Thus the feminine heroine grows up in a world without female solidarity, where women in fact police each other on behalf of patriarchal tyranny."[133] This negative experience bleeds into their characterisations; Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, *Villette*, and al-ʿUthmān's *The Woman and the Cat* and *Wasmiyyah Emerges from the Sea* all have this theme in common.

The Feminine novelists found themselves in the dilemma of wanting to achieve, but not wanting to appear unwomanly in doing so. This problem was compounded by traditional Victorian gender roles that separated men into public life and women into domesticity. Writing was a self-centred, public act; women's duty was supposed to be private and centred on serving others. Victorian women were also denied a language with which to express themselves; rigid social expectations undermined their ability to write about sexuality or strong feelings. This in turn caused them to fill their writing with symbolism, innuendo, and hints at what may or may not be happening without committing itself to the actual words. This frustration and social isolation found an outlet in the work of the next generation of Victorian Feminine novelists. They found a way to subvert this domestic ideal to their advantage: "For the Victorian woman, secrecy was simply a way of life. The sensationalists made crime and violence domestic, modern, and suburban; but their secrets were not simply solutions to mysteries and crimes; they were the secret of women's dislike of their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers."[134] The degree of violence witnessed in these novels was phenomenal, as was their popularity. The Feminine writers had unwittingly stumbled on a formula that proved financially rewarding beyond their

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[131] Ibid., p.101.
[132] Personal interview with al-ʿUthmān (March 1999).
[133] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.117.
[134] Ibid., p.158.

expectations. "All the commercial, competitive, self-promoting aspects of literary life that had been played down or ignored by the first two generations of nineteenth century women writers were conspicuous in the careers of the third generation."[135] These late Feminine writers, with their taste for grisly details, their pandering to sensationalism and what society deems shocking and taboo, knowing that this translates into better sale figures, are similar to some of the contemporary Arab women novelists, such as Nawāl al-Saʿdāwī, and Laylā al-ʿUthmān. In both cases this success meant that the level of hostility facing these women was multiplied, as they metamorphosed from a trivial subject of scorn into a genuine threat to their male peers' livelihood. "The business skills and the unflagging energy of this generation made them formidable competitors, and their popularity, as well as their aggressiveness, antagonized many of their male contemporaries."[136]

2.1.1 Feminine Heroes and Heroines

Showalter concludes that the Feminine writers were seeking two types of heroines: "they wanted inspiring professional role models; but they also wanted romantic heroines, a sisterhood of shared passion and suffering, woman who sobbed and struggled and rebelled. It was very difficult for the Victorians to believe that both qualities could be embodied in the same woman."[137] A lot has been made of the bi-polar tendencies of heroines in the work of Victorian novelists, which was a product of this very failure to merge these two conflicting concepts of what, ideally, a heroine should be. One effect this had on the typical Feminine heroine was that she sometimes seemed not to be as well formed a

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[135] Ibid., p.154.
[136] Ibid., p.155.
[137] Ibid., p.103.

personality as she possibly could have been. Emotions were often stunted and dealt with in alternate fits of hysteria and repression. As Showalter points out, "Anger is internalized or projected, never confronted, understood, and acted upon. Again and again the heroines reach the brink of self-discovery only to fall back."[138]

This shortcoming of incomplete characterisations was not applicable only to the female heroines, as Showalter observed:

> Charlotte Brontë lamented to her friend James Taylor: 'In delineating male character, I labour under disadvantages; intuition and theory will not adequately supply the place of observation and experience. When I write about women, I am sure of my ground – in the other case I am not so sure.' As Brontë explained, women had to build their heroes from imagination, since so many areas of masculine experience were impenetratable.[139]

Showalter argues that the heroines and heroes of the feminine novelists tended to reflect the writers' desire for a merging of Victorian gender roles:

> There is good reason to suppose that a male *persona* was a part of the fantasy life of many of these women from childhood; they could use a masculine name to represent everything in their personalities that transcended the cramping feminine ideal. In the Angrian chronicles the Brontës had a dozen male alter egos; Charlotte used several male aliases as a child, including Charles Thunder, Charles Townsend, and Captain Tree.[140]

Feminine novelists such as Brontë and Eliot created heroines who combined male qualities of strength and intelligence with female qualities of domesticity and sensitivity. Their heroes, who tended to be either impossibly good, or improbably monstrous, projected their authors' desire for male power and freedom, in a sense; they were their male alter egos.

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[138] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.180.
[139] Ibid., p.132.
[140] Ibid., p.58.

The unavoidable conflict between female fantasy and the actual situation of the women novelists also produced some curious convolutions in the fiction. Model heroes, while frequently ridiculous, are rarely boring. They are more devious than male versions of the manly ideal. In women's novels, model heroes are barred from the direct exercise of violence and power. They do not avenge themselves on their male benefactors by administering a good punch on the jaw or by winning elections; instead they win indirect and devastating victories with the tactics of guilt, another sign that they find their source in the female situation.[141]

In this sense the Victorian Feminine novelists have up-ended the Freudian idea of female "penis envy", they have added to the male body a new set of appendages; along with the penis, the Feminine male hero has a set of mammaries. He enjoys both intensely male and female qualities.

Thus Rochester's blindness, Tulliver's wounds, Moore's sickness, and Gregory's tranvestism are symbolic immersions of the hero in feminine experience. Men, these novels are saying, must feel helpless and are thus forced unwillingly into dependency. Only then can they understand that women need love but hate to be weak. If he is to be redeemed and to rediscover his humanity, the woman's man must find out how it feels to be a woman.[142]

In a sense, they created a creature that is an amalgam of feminine and masculine virtues. Interestingly, feminine novelists felt that the only way they could achieve this redemptive, "feminising" catharsis was through punishing their heroes, tormenting them, physically and psychologically.

2.1.2   Brontë and al-ᶜUthmān: Quintessential Feminine Novelists

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[141] Ibid., p.138.
[142] Ibid., p.152.

In *A Literature of Their Own*, Elaine Showalter deals with Feminine novelists throughout 115 pages, fourteen of which are devoted solely to discussing the work of Charlotte Brontë, who (along with George Eliot) is designated a place in the title of the chapter on "feminine heroines". There are many other points in the book where lengthy segments are devoted to Brontë's work. Brontë's significance to Showalter's work is clear, and that (along with the personal preference for Brontë's work) is why she was the obvious choice for this thesis. As was said: "Perhaps no other writer of her time has impressed her mark so clearly on contemporary literature, or drawn so many followers onto her peculiar path."[143] The choice of Laylā al-ᶜUthmān was made based on stylistic and environmental factors, discussed in the section on Laylā al-ᶜUthmān, that made her work display decidedly Feminine characteristics. There are other similarities between them that are discussed in more depth in the conclusion. Laylā al-ᶜUthmān is also arguably the most successful woman writer in the Arabian Gulf, and therefore makes a suitable comparison to one of the greatest English woman writers.

2.2   Charlotte Brontë

Born on April 21, 1816, the third child of Patrick Brontë, a clergyman of Irish descent, and his wife, Maria Branwell, Charlotte and her siblings would soon lose their mother to cancer just a few years later. In 1820, the family settled in the small Yorkshire town of Haworth, where the Reverend Brontë was curate of the local church, and that is where Charlotte remained until she went to the Clergy's Daughter's School at Cowan Bridge where her two eldest sisters succumbed to typhoid fever and consumption and died. Charlotte was sent to another establishment then, Roe Head, where she became a member

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[143] Margaret Oliphant, "Modern Novelists – Great and Small", *Blackwoods Edinburgh Magazine* LXXVII

of the teaching staff in 1835. In the summer of 1842, Charlotte and her younger sister Emily were sent to a finishing school in Brussels, the Pensionnant Heger, to acquire the skills necessary to open their own school in England. This dream never materialised, and instead Charlotte pored her energies into writing and getting her work (and her sisters') published. She married the Reverend Brontë's curate, Arthur Bell Nichols, in 1854, and died from pregnancy complications in 1855.

2.2.1 Charlotte Brontë's Work

Charlotte Brontë's literary output consisted of a collection of poems which she published with her sisters, Emily and Anne (*Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell* (1845)), and four novels: *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Shirley* (1849), *Villette* (1853), and the posthumously published *The Professor* (1857). Of these, *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, were, and still are, universally agreed to represent her most successful achievement. Moreover, *Jane Eyre* is ideal for the purposes of this study because the life of the protagonist could be viewed as a slow revelation of the emergence of feminist consciousness.

2.2.1.1 *Jane Eyre*

Out of all Charlotte Brontë's novels, *Jane Eyre* is undoubtedly the most well known and liked. It continues to enjoy popular and literary attention because of the skill of its first-person narrative, the brusque appeal of its larger-than-life hero, Mr Rochester, and the fairy-tale triumph of its governess-heroine Jane.

(1855) p.568.

The story opens with the orphaned Jane living in the care of her aunt, Mrs Reed of Gateshead. The ten-year-old Jane is high-spirited and resents being mistreated by her aunt and cousins so much that they eventually have no alternative but to send her away to Lockwood, a charity boarding school. For the next eight years, Jane's living conditions are terrible: the children at the school all suffer from cold, malnutrition and succumb in great numbers to typhus fever. This is the site of Jane's first real friendship, which ends with the poignant death of the angelic Helen Burns. When the school changes management from the religious hypocrite Brocklehurst to kinder, gentler folk who truly take an interest in the children, Jane's attitude changes and she becomes one of the best loved pupils.

Aged eighteen, Jane is uncomfortable with a job at a local girls' school in a rural area, and seeks a governess position in a private household. She ends up in Thornfield as governess to the ward of Mr Rochester. Despite differences in age and social standing, Rochester falls in love with Jane and wants to marry her. At the altar, the marriage is halted by the announcement that Rochester already has a wife, Bertha Mason, "the madwoman in the attic". Despite his pleas and protestations, Jane refuses to be Rochester's mistress and flees Thornfield.

Wandering across the countryside, penniless and starving, Jane stumbles across a house. The inhabitants take her in and nurse her back from near death and, in a strange providential twist, this turns out to be Jane's other family and the guardians of her inheritance which she insists on sharing with them. After a few months in their company, Jane's cousin St John proposes to her, and asks her to accompany him on a missionary trip to India. Just as she is being pressed by him to make a decision, she hears a voice in the night crying out to her in despair and decides to return to Thornfield. Jane finds the house

burnt to the ground, and Rochester blind and crippled, his mad wife having burnt to death in the fire. Jane and Rochester marry and the novel ends on the note of their happy existence together.

From its initial publication, there was no question about the popular success of *Jane Eyre*. It rapidly became a topic of conversation in literary circles, and a target for some "Christian" critics who (as guardians of public morality) warned against its "improprieties". Their misgivings centred on the coarse presentation of the main characters' love affairs, which were conducted in an excessively frank manner and in unconventional settings. As far as these critics[144] were concerned, it was disconcerting to find a heroine who was "plain, poor and little" but still passionate, and even more unsettling to find her living under the same roof as Mr Rochester, himself no genteel hero of conventional romance, in a situation that invited misinterpretation. It is hard to separate the reasons for these early misgivings about the book's moral values from those that made it so attractive to the majority of its readers, though there were other factors that contributed undeniably to the early success of the novel. For everyone concerned, *Jane Eyre* was "new". This "new" quality, namely the observation of everyday reality heightened by intense feeling, was thrown into relief by the freshness and immediacy of her autobiographical narrative. It was also unconventional in its choice of the provincial setting, down to the very speech and behaviour of Brontë's Yorkshire characters. It was also "new", and different, in the sense that it was lacking in dukes and upper-class heroines, and the usual background of London in season.

2.2.1.2   *Villette*

Villette was the third novel to be published by Charlotte Brontë. It is generally agreed upon

to be the most well known of her works after *Jane Eyre*, and the two seem to be in

constant competition as far as academics and critics are concerned as to which of them is

the best example of her writing. *Villette* was generally better received than *Jane Eyre*, in

that there were no doubts concerning its moral stance[145] and the sombre existence of its

young heroine. After the lukewarm success of *Shirley*, it was for many a welcome return

to Charlotte Brontë's autobiographical narrative.

In some senses, *Villette* and *Jane Eyre* are very similar:

> Lucy Snowe is Jane Eyre again, the friendless girl, fighting the word as best she may,
>
> her only weapon a strong and chainless will, her constant hindrances, the passionate
>
> nature that makes her the slave of sympathy, of the first kind look or word, and the wild
>
> poetic imagination that forbids her all reconciliation with her own lot, the lot of the
>
> unbeautiful and obscure.[146]

However, the intention of the novelist where the protagonist's destiny is concerned was

very different. It is well known that Brontë harboured no sympathy for Lucy Snowe, and

chose to make her story less blissful than that of Jane Eyre. Brontë herself wrote to her

editor prior to the book's publication that; "...I am not leniently disposed towards Miss

Frost [Lucy Snowe]; from the beginning, I never meant to appoint her lines in pleasant

places."[147]

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[144] See: Harriet Martineau, "The Early Reception of *Jane Eyre*: 1847-1848", in: (ed.) A.E. Dyson, *Charlotte Brontë: Jane Eyre and Villette* (London: Macmillan, 1992) pp.43-74.
[145] "The Early Reception of *Villette*: 1853", in ibid., pp.75-114.
[146] From "Introduction to *Villette*", in: (eds.) Mary Ward and C.K. Shorter, *The Life and Works of Charlotte Brontë and her Sisters* (The Collected Works of Charlotte Brontë, 7 vols, Haworth Press, 1900) p.16.
[147] Mrs Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (Penguin Classics Series, 1998) p.148.

The first chapters of the book are devoted to Lucy's visit as a recently orphaned teenager to her godmother Mrs Bretton, and to her observations of Graham Bretton, her godmother's son, and Polly Home, a little girl who stays with them for a while. The novel then leaps to young Lucy's service as a companion to an elderly lady, Miss Marchont. Following the old woman's demise Lucy decides to seek her fortunes in Belgium and presents herself to Madame Beck, the headmistress of the school at Villette.

After a short spell as governess to Madame Beck's children, Lucy is reinstated as a teacher at the school, which she finds lonely and oppressive. She daydreams about the school's physician Dr John sharing her feelings for him; he, however, is attracted to the shallow and flirtatious Ginevra Fanshawe. In a strange twist of fate, Lucy suffers a mental collapse while alone at school over the holiday period and is taken in by Dr John and his mother, only to discover them to be none other than her old friends the Brettons. Soon after, Polly Home is reintroduced to the story and she and Dr John fall in love and marry.

Meanwile, Lucy and M. Paul Emmanuel, a teacher at the school and a cousin of Madame Beck, have a series of emotionally charged episodes over a period of several months that culminate in an open declaration of affection. Madame Beck and the rest of M. Paul's family are appalled by this, and plot to separate the two; however M. Paul remains steadfast in his emotions.

The novel ends with M. Paul going overseas on family business, after setting Lucy up with a school of her own, fully intending to marry her when he comes back. It closes on the ambiguous note of Lucy awaiting his return, and the reader is left to draw his own conclusions.

2.2.2   The Victorian Principle: Setting Charlotte Brontë's Work in Its Socio-Historical Background

Showalter views *Jane Eyre* and *The Mill on the Floss* as the two major works which embody the Victorian female, as together they are "full and powerful descriptions of growing up as a female in Victorian England."[148] This notion of Victorian England is important in cementing the novel firmly in the topicality of the day; its arguments and needs would not be expressive of today's societies, especially not in England where the social and moral codes of conduct have changed dramatically. The irony is that its arguments would have more in common with the contemporary Arab world, which would more greatly appreciate its moral predicament. In an era when even the most sheltered people are constantly bombarded by images and bizarre stories of incestuous relationships, child molesting and openly homosexual relationships, the suggestion that a young girl could be corrupted by her rich employer no longer shocks the jaded Western palate, even less so if the employer's wife happened to be mentally unhinged, unable to fulfil his sexual needs; in fact, it might even win him their sympathy vote. In the modern Arab world, however, where crimes of honour are still carried out in rural societies, and an unwed girl's virginity matters a great deal, Jane's situation would have greater viability.

Even though the Industrial Revolution opened up new venues for lower-class women, offering them new factory jobs in place of household work, it did not do much good for the middle classes.[149] A single woman at this economic level still had only one option for respectable employment: working as a governess. Although a woman could maintain a decent living with this job, she could also anticipate "no security of employment, minimal

wages, and an ambiguous status, somewhere between servant and family member, that isolated her within the household".[150] If she did not marry and had no relatives to care for her, a governess would have to remain a governess all her life, which of course would mean moving from house to house. Even a woman as intelligent as Jane Eyre could not hope to leave the life of governess behind her, take a university degree, and pursue a better job. First of all, before 1848, no women's colleges existed, and even if they had, a woman could not have improved her professional prospects by attending one. The precarious lifestyle of the governess remained all that a middle-class, single woman like Jane Eyre could strive for.

Although characters like Jane are fictional, the situations they face and the motivations with which they act are given to them by real authors who must be influenced by their own societies. The morality identified in these books was a phenomenon of the nineteenth-century middle class, and not as evident in earlier novels like *Moll Flanders*, nor in later ones such as those by D.H. Lawrence. However, while it lasted it was extremely powerful and those writers who tried to portray an alternative faced widespread condemnation. Eventually, the recognition of the hypocrisy within Victorian society, and the death in 1901 of the queen with whom the moral regime had been associated, brought about its overthrow. In a sense the threat to society which the Victorians saw in liberated sexuality was a real one. The sex roles and class distinctions of the nineteenth century no longer exist; society is less structured and more informal. Perhaps this is one reason their recognition of the threat is of such interest to the twentieth-century reader.

2.2.3   The Autobiographical Novel

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[148] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.112.

Even though *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* are not written as autobiographies, both contain autobiographical elements – Brontë's experience at the Clergy Daughters' School is similar to Jane's years at Lowood, for example. Certainly Brontë draws on her own experience as a maturing young woman in describing the life of Jane Eyre, where each setting indicates a stage of growth for her. The smattering of North-Country phrases (a style adopted by Emily Brontë in *Wuthering Heights*) in *Jane Eyre* suggests that Charlotte Brontë intended it to be personal. She goes into great detail when describing the professional peculiarities that belong to the science of teaching; her heroines' manner was affected and influenced by her position: the consciousness of being under-valued, the longings for someone to take care of her which leads to some undignified results, the necessary self-reliance, the demure air of the heroines. "...We may take for granted that Charlotte's own experience as a governess has passed into the bitterness with which the rich and 'society' are described."[151] Although there are a few ways in which Brontë's life is directly reflected in the books, the correlations between Charlotte Brontë and Jane (or Brontë and Lucy Snowe for that matter) lie more in the way both heroines deal with a damaged self-concept through the development of their frank and passionate natures, and their determination to live according to their own moral principles. Roy Pascal suggests in "The Autobiographical Novel and the Autobiography"[152] that Brontë's experiences with M. Heger, her tutor in the pensionnat in Brussels, are the inspiration for Lucy Snowe's encounter with M. Paul Emmanuel in *Villette*. Her novels are autobiographies, not perhaps in the naked facts and circumstances, but in the actual suffering and experience, and this is why they are not stories of universal interest. In *Jane Eyre* she depicted her imaginative

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[149] E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964).
[150] Gilbert and Gubar, *Norton Anthology*, vol. 2, p.903.
[151] From "Introduction to *Jane Eyre*", in: Ward and Shorter, *TheLife and Works*, p.227.
[152] Roy Pascal, "The Autobiographical Novel and the Autobiography", in: *Essays in Criticism* (1959).

life, her fantasy coming true, while in *Villette* the portrayal was more concerned with the author's true moral life. As Cecil points out, "Fundamentally, her principal characters are all the same person; and that is Charlotte Brontë. Her range is confined...to a direct expression of Charlotte Brontë's emotions and impressions."[153]

2.2.4   Internal Dialogues: The Tool of First-Person Narration

It is apparent that the English novel until the mid-nineteenth century was mainly concerned with the "external", garnering credibility through the staunch representation of that external through plausible events and convincing characters.[154] Women introducing their own brand of writing, their own dialogue, which did not centre so much on action as it did on interacting with the inner scenario of the protagonist's ideas and feelings, was thus a breakthrough. Elaine Showalter discusses Charlotte Brontë's effect on the novelists that followed her, quoting Oliphant who suggests that *Jane Eyre* changed the direction of the female tradition of writing.[155] They were not the only critics to think so, as we see in Cecil's discussion of Brontë:

> Charlotte Brontë's imagination is stimulated to create by certain aspects of man's inner life as that of Dickens or Thackeray by certain aspects of his external life. As Thackeray was the first English writer to make the novel the vehicle of a conscious criticism of life, so she is the first to make it the vehicle of personal revelation. She is our first subjective novelist, the ancestor of Proust and Mr. James Joyce and all the rest of the historians of the private consciousness. And like theirs her range is limited to those aspects of

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[153] David Cecil, "Charlotte Brontë as Freak Genius", in: *Victorian Novelists* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985) p.129.
[154] Mariam Eliot, "Introduction", in: Dyson, *Charlotte Brontë*, p.9.
[155] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.106.

experience which stimulate to significance and activity the private consciousness of their various heroes and heroines.[156]

In so doing, Brontë affirms that women have made a unique contribution to the literary field.

The linear organisation of Jane Eyre's maturation process is attributed to the viewpoint of the narrator. The narrator is not the child, teenager, or young woman that Jane is during the course of the narrative, but the adult wife and mother who is recounting her story. With hindsight and from a mature perspective, Jane can recognise the pivotal, shaping events of her life. She takes account of her life, selecting events so that a pattern of personal development becomes apparent, as all people do in making sense of their past. The reader also senses Brontë's voice. The world she creates is the world of her own inner life; she is her own subject. "The main secret of the charm that clings to Charlotte Brontë's books is, and will always be, the contact which they give us with her own fresh, indomitable, surprising personality..."[157]

What makes Jane so easy to sympathise with is Brontë's adept use of the first person point of view. Often, when an author wishes to further his or her own cause, the identity of the speaker can either be lost in the course of an ideological tirade, or never even established outside of the plot. What sustains the believability and emotion of Jane's dialogue is that it is continually being referenced back to the character that the reader has bonded with through the course of the novel thus far. In the middle of her monologue, Jane refers to herself as "poor, obscure, plain, and little", reminding us of the disadvantages she faces,

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[156] Cecil, "Brontë as Freak Genius", p.127.
[157] Ward and Shorter, *The Life and Works*, p.26.

and thus, inviting sympathy and support. In recounting her story, Jane typically introduces a situation meant to provoke conventional associations on the part of the reader (to whom, as to a friend, Jane speaks candidly) and then, within a paragraph or two, deftly qualifies or refutes it. The narrative's dialectic, it might be said, constitutes a plot motion of its own, quite distinct from Jane's activities, for she is always in control of her narrative. The reader learns along with Jane, that what *seems to be* rarely *is*; even when Rochester disguises himself as a fortune-telling gypsy, improbably fooling his guests, Jane is keen enough to suspect "something of a masquerade".

One of the flaws of this style of writing is that Jane Eyre is made one thing in the eyes of her imaginary companions, and another in those of her actual readers; the reader is exposed to long self monologues on Jane's tact and her perceptiveness, but she is often offensive, and proves a lack of perceptiveness through her pedantry, and actions that verge on sheer stupidity. Granted, the author may have sometimes used this technique to illustrate Jane's own self-deception, but that is the exception rather than a deliberate writing technique. Even as a child, it was her circumstances that were interesting and not necessarily Jane herself, who was too dogmatic in her speeches, and too spiteful in her reasoning to illicit much love or sympathy. For one who knows so little of the world, Jane is never entirely innocent, and one has to wonder where Jane and Lucy get their righteous indignation. People in high society treat Jane as a nobody precisely because she is a nobody. Her aunt treats her with the natural aversion that anyone would a child with such a rebellious nature. Had Jane been sweet and obedient perhaps her adopted family would have taken a greater liking to her.

Her obviously disapproving portrayal of the behaviour of some of her secondary characters suggests that Brontë is conducting a biting social criticism behind the disarming

disguise of feminine confession. Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe take themselves so seriously that, although cynical and sarcastic at times, there is very little intentional humour anywhere in her books; Brontë's attempts at satire are too heavy-handed to be successful. The sardonic handling of such "upper-class" characters as Blanche Ingram and her mother in *Jane Eyre* is an example of this, so is her portrayal of the vacuous Ginerva Finshawe in *Villette*. The manner in which she dealt with Church matters and religion, whether she was exposing the hypocrisy of Mr Brocklehurst at Lowood, or the cool ambition of St John, or the many shortcomings of the Roman Catholic faith, betrays a coarseness, where the voice of the author overpowers that of the fictional narrator, that sometimes detracts from the enjoyment of the novel.

In comparison, the ill-looking and impassioned narrator of *Villette* stands out as an observer, which is the role she is relegated to in most of the first volume. It is only when she switches from this objective role to the subjective one of being at the heart of the action, that her narration, tinged with much self-pity and sermonising becomes tiresome. The plot itself lacks incident, contains few "situations", and is chiefly transacted in a girls' boarding school. Hence the work consists mainly of dialogue, often turning into monologue as the inner workings of Lucy Snowe's mind are gone over again and again with a fine comb.

Charlotte Brontë's work involves the fictionalising of personal experience. In *Villette* she uses her heroine to get nearer to the truth about her own character. In *Accents of Persuasion*, R.B. Martin explores how Charlotte Brontë uses the "self-reliant Protestant

ethic that so dominated her life".[158] His principal conclusions emphasise the maturation in each novel of the principal character, who eventually reaches the point where reason and passion can be reconciled, the technical importance for Brontë of sustaining a consistent viewpoint, and the major success of *Villette*, which he sees as a clear-eyed "autumnal" novel of acceptance and resignation.

2.2.5   The Language of Emotion

In Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), the chapter entitled "Justifications", in the second volume, deals with the way in which a woman compensates for her Otherness, for her relegation to inferiority in a world of male primacy or male orientation. The categories of compensation are narcissism; self-surrender in love, which amounts to accepting her enslavement to man as an expression of freedom to do so and to attempting transcendence of her situation as "inessential object" by total acceptance of it; and mysticism, a turning towards God. Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe exhibit all three traits delineated by de Beauvoir, and this compensation is essentially a Feminine phenomenon.

Charlotte Brontë had chosen a volcanic literature of the body as well as of the heart, a sexual and often supernatural world. She was thus seen as the romantic, the spontaneous artist who "pours forth her feelings...without premeditation."[159] There are many reasons for why the Feminine novelists seemed to concentrate on affairs of the heart, and in some sense both *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* are essentially love stories, but this was not just a frivolous pursuit. These women did not write about love solely for love's sake, since women novelists "came to take their role as the educators of the heart very seriously, so

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[158] R.B. Martin, *Charlotte Brontë's Novels: The Accents of Persuasion* (NY: Norton, 1966) p.25.

that 'while deferring from male knowledge and power, they subtly revise and undermine the world from which they are excluded'."[160]

Early critics of *Jane Eyre* were obsessed with discovering the sex of the author of the book, Currer Bell,[161] since "Who indeed but a woman could have ventured...to fill three octavo volumes with the history of a woman's heart?"[162] This was only relevant in as far as "the presentation of a female sexuality and human passion" in the novel disturbed and amazed readers in its frankness, so that they become uncomfortable with the idea of a woman writing in such a manner – and if it was indeed a woman then the general consensus was that she must be loose and experienced to write in such a way.[163] This was of great concern when later Mrs Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1865) was published and it proved Charlotte Brontë was not guilty of immorality in any way. In rejecting Austen and deciding instead to write about "what throbs fast and full, though hidden, what the blood rushes through, what is the unseen seat of life,"[164] Brontë forced her contemporary readers in Victorian England to face up to the uncomfortable idea that their assumptions about what women could write were incorrect.

2.2.6   The Feminine Male Ideal

> ...The prominent male characters are undeniably women's men; that is they are a
> woman's idea of what men are, mixed up with certain salient manly characteristics,
> which may have been conceived from observation, and are possible to us...Therefore

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[159] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, pp.103-104.
[160] Lorna Sage, quoted in ibid., p.84.
[161] Ibid., p.91.
[162] Anne Mozley, review in *The Christian Remembrancer* (April, 1848) quoted in: Dyson, *Charlotte Brontë*, p.167.
[163] Martineau, "*Jane Eyre*", pp.43-74.

women's men were all absurd, contemptible and unrealistic; all were either angels or devils.[165]

William C. Roscoe's article on the Brontës, written in 1857, is candidly bitter about the success of Charlotte Brontë's heroes, particularly Crimsworth, Rochester, and Louis Moore. He says that the men portrayed in Brontë's novels are "in their attachments utterly and undisguisedly selfish, and we...grudge them their easily won victories over the inexperienced placid little girls they lay siege to. It is not thus that generous men make their advances, or that women, worthy of the name, are won."[166] Rochester does not conform to the ideal of the model Victorian gentleman, at least, not as far as Newman description of what a gentleman should be:

> The true gentleman in like manner carefully avoids whatever may cause a jar or a jolt in the minds of those with whom he is cast; – all clashing of opinion, or collision of feeling, all restraint, or suspicion, or gloom, or resentment; his great concern being to make every one at their ease and at home. He has his eyes on all his company; he is tender towards the bashful, gentle towards the distant, and merciful towards the absurd; he can recollect to whom he is speaking; he guards against unseasonable allusions, or topics which may irritate; he is seldom prominent in conversation, and never wearisome.[167]

Rochester's aggressive questioning of Jane hardly seems tender and both he and M. Paul Emmanuel behave in an assertive fashion, which was uncharacteristic of gentlemen of the time. Both books show that arrogance and pretentiousness attract women much less than a

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[164] Cecil, "Brontë as Freak Genius", p.167.
[165] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.134.
[166] William Roscoe, *Poems and Essays* (vol. 2, 1860) quoted in: Dyson, *Charlotte Brontë*, p.131.
[167] John Harry Newman, *The Idea of a University*, ed. Martin J. Syaglic (University of Notre Dame Press, 1982) p.238.

modest reliable character and both Rochester and Emmanuel become likeable to the reader only after they have been humbled. When Rochester falls off his horse in *Jane Eyre*, Jane reacts positively to this vulnerable state; she helps the larger and stronger Rochester as now she sees him as a person rather than a threat. There could be another reason why this "arrogant" version was more appealing to the Feminine writer: "Thrilling the heroine with their rebellion and power, they simultaneously appeal to her reforming energies. As Mrs. Grogan put it in *The Roua Pass*, they are 'sardonic, sarcastic, satanic, and seraphic'."[168] Rochester, following the logic of the appeal of the "arrogant man", must be altered too in some respect, but it is probably incorrect to read his blinding as a type of castration, as that perennial cliché of Brontë criticism would have it. Not only is the blind and crippled Rochester no less masculine than before, but, more significantly, it was never the case that Jane Eyre, for all her inexperience, shrank from either her master's passion or her own: the issue was not Jane's sexual timidity but her shrewd understanding that, should she become his mistress, she would *inevitably* lose Rochester's respect. These were the hardly secret terms of Victorian mores, and Jane Eyre would have to have been a very naive young woman, as self-deluded as George Eliot's Hetty, to have believed otherwise. And Jane is anything but naive.

To Jane, Rochester represents the temptation of passion over reason. Significantly in thematic terms, Rochester offers Jane the temptation of finding romantic love and releasing the passions within her: "You are cold, because you are alone; no contact strikes the fire from you that is in you."[169] These words, spoken to Jane while he was disguised as a gypsy lady, were spoken with the specific intention of drawing Jane out and making her

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[168] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.140.

admit to her feelings for him. "At least one woman critic recognized the appeal of the rough lover. Mrs Oliphant, who personally tended to portray the safer, blander, clerical hero, shrewdly observed that the brute flattered the heroine's spirit by threatening her as an equal rather than as a sensitive, fragile fool who must be sheltered and protected."[170] The same is true of the hero of *Villette*: from the moment when M. Paul Emmanuel begins to insult Miss Lucy Snowe, Charlotte Brontë's reader can interpret the signs, and gives up Lucy's heart as gone. In contrast to Rochester, though, M. Paul Emmanuel is a calming influence in Lucy's life: he reins in her passionate side and introduces her to a gentler type of way of thinking, and reacting.

Throughout the novel, Lucy Snowe's and others' experiences in which the irascibility, narcissism, hostility and infantile behaviour of the taxing M. Emmanuel are displayed, these are nevertheless relieved by his honesty, simplicity, generosity and altruism. Brontë's hero is brought before us with a vividness and consistency rare even in male delineations of male characters so complex: "In scenes where the male society is shut out as it is in large female assemblies – in schools, convents, and, according to the satirist, old maid coteries – in all of which a very small amount of heroic qualities are often found enough to constitute a man a hero..."[171] The skill of Brontë's handling of the love affair is in the gradual melting of the dislike for Paul, until it is replaced entirely by esteem. This never feels forced, as it is not tumultuously evolved from character and circumstance. Without overt simplification, Lucy's feelings transform themselves from curiosity to fear to respect. With respect, mutual confidence can arise between the two and from that, affection which

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[169] Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1966) p.247.
[170] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.143.
[171] Mozley in *The Christian Remembrancer* (April 1853) quoted in: Dyson, *Charlotte Brontë*, p.107.

blossoms into love. Still, it can be argued that he is not a man's man; he is but the fulfilment of what a lonely women's wish for a man on her intellectual plane would be. M. Paul Emmanuel is at heart a true woman, austere, courageous, and tender, he forms unlikely sentimental attachments and is always earnest. A short, bustling, angry schoolmaster, between forty and fifty years of age; with a thick pair of spectacles that suit his defective eyesight, he seems an unlikely hero for romance. Compare this with Rochester, who, for all his drawbacks, still cuts a dashing figure. Yet, when loved, he too is past his prime; when wedded, Rochester is blind and fire-scarred. Why are all Charlotte Brontë's protagonists middle-aged? Paul has many other traits similar to Rochester, although Paul Emmanuel seems to be the more believable of the two. For someone who has led such a colourful life, Rochester lacks the cynicism of a nature turned suspicious by experience. He is supposed to be exceptionally masculine, in spite of that, in his entire conversation there is no macho bragging, all he does is converse about his feelings and his looks and his amorous condition to his admiring hearer.

It is interesting to note that the Brontë sisters – Charlotte, Emily, and Anne – began writing as children, creating a private mythology out of the exigencies of a motherless, isolated, and intensely private domestic life in Haworth Parsonage on the Yorkshire moor. In 1826, when Charlotte was ten,[172] her father Patrick Brontë gave her brother, Branwell, a box of twelve wooden soldiers, which seemed to awaken a fervour of creativity in the children: they began making up stories in which the soldiers figured as characters. In time, they created plays, mimes, games, and serial stories that were influenced by their father's storytelling and by their wide and eclectic reading: Scott, Byron, E.T.A. Hoffmann, and

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[172] From: Mrs Gaskell, *Charlotte Brontë*.

supernatural stories by James Hogg that appeared in serial form in *Blackwood's Magazine*. The romantically dangerous Rochester is most likely a remnant of the children's sensational world, the prosaic antithesis of the stultifying, bleak, monotonous existence in the confined world of Haworth Parsonage. Here is Jane's first sighting of the man she will adore:

> Something of daylight still lingered, and the moon was waxing bright; I could see him plainly. His figure was enveloped in a riding cloak, fur collared and steel clasped; its details were not apparent, but I traced the general points of middle height, and considerable breadth of chest. He had a dark face, with stern features and a heavy brow; his eyes and gathered eyebrows looked ireful and thwarted...he was past youth, but had not reached middle age.[173]

In some ways Rochester is similar to Emily's Heathcliff, that Byronic, doomed hero; yet unlike Heathcliff – who after all starves himself to death in his deranged attachment to the past – since, by the novel's end, after he goes blind, Rochester does become domesticated. The gothic has become tamed, and redeemed, by ordinary marital love, and *Jane Eyre* ends upon a note of conjugal bliss:

> I am my husband's life as fully as he is mine. No woman was ever nearer to her mate than I am: ever more absolutely bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. I know no weariness of my Edward's society: he knows none of mine, any more than we each do of the pulsation of the heart that beats in our separate bosoms; consequently, we are ever together...We talk, I believe, all day long: to talk to each other is but a more animated and an audible thinking.[174]

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[173] Brontë, *Jane Eyre,* p.119.

2.2.7 The New Gothic: A Tool for Feminist Exploration

R.B. Heilman, in his seminal work "Charlotte Brontë's New Gothic", in *Nineteenth Century Fiction* (1960), suggests that Brontë reduces the primitive gothic elements in her work, those which seek "a relatively simple thrill or momentary intensity of feeling". At the same time, she finds her own way of achieving the ends served by this "primitive" Gothicism, for example by the use of frightening symbolic dreams, surrealistic descriptive effects and the exploration of new expanses of feelings in the relations between men and women. When Jane first meets Rochester, she is alone in a twilight forest, "fancies bright and dark tenanted my mind," and the footstep of the approaching horse makes her think of goblins and sprites. It is the ideal setting for creating Gothic suspense. She suspects Rochester's dog to be the fabled spirit Gytrash, and the sight of a man on horseback is what brings her back to reality. Even as Rochester loses his seat and needs her assistance, he remains an object of mystery and fascination. Jane, however, "felt no fear of him, and but little shyness."

Foreshadowing through symbolic imagery is instrumental to the Gothic writer, perhaps emblematic of women's intuitive powers, and water imagery is the chosen tool in many cases in the novel. Mr Rochester draws Jane's attention to three paintings soon after they meet, which in fact, are very revealing of the coming drama. The "green water" in the first painting, warns of the torrents of passion that are about to engulf Jane, as the woman is drowning in the water and the ship is capsizing. The image of "a swollen sea" carries with it expressions and expectations of impending danger. This is significant to our understanding of the thematic structure of the novel, as Jane must necessarily come to

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[174] Ibid., p.402.

realise that while total reason without passion is undesirable, unregulated passion must be avoided as well. In *Villette,* the use of the gothic elements, especially in the clandestine trysts of Ginerva and her dissolute lover provides a direct correlation between sexuality and spirituality. To preserve the integrity of the novel's moral code, and indeed the heroine's innocence, the sensual must be shrouded in symbolism, and only suggested through macabre and elaborate paranormal signs. Lucy Snowe pays the price for Ginerva's looseness with a nervous breakdown induced by her very pure and virginal nature. Since she cannot fathom the physical except ciphered through the gothic, she is susceptible to the cruel suggestion of ghosts and witchery, and fails to reach the most obvious conclusion, that it is merely a lover's scheme.

Brontë incorporates fantastical elements into a realistic narrative structure by constantly alluding to fairy tales, prophetic dreams and plot twists in which the divine and the supernatural intervene. In part, she uses the fantastic to inform the reader of concealed emotional subtexts in the novel. Jane's prophetic dreams give the reader insight into her emotional status. The use of the fantastic is important in ensuring that *Jane Eyre*, or indeed *Villette*, is not reduced to being merely a parable or morality tale: Jane's success as a Bildungsroman heroine depends upon satisfying her emotional and spiritual needs, in addition to procuring the safe domestic environment essential for female survival at the time. As a Feminine writer Brontë's use of the gothic stretches the parameters of societal conceptions of what is acceptable in strictly "realistic" terms. In elevating the emotional status of her heroines through the tension and suspense afforded by the macabre, Brontë creates a Bildungsroman that is not exclusively rooted in mastery of the external world, but focused as well on the vitality of interior life, a Feminine domain.

2.2.8   Splitting the Psyche: The Mad Woman in the Attic

According to Gilbert and Gubar, the authors of *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*,[175] Charlotte Brontë tried to bury her early fascination with Miltonic themes, elaborately disguising her rebellion against misogynistic myths in "realistic" stories. From *The Professor* to *Villette*, she oscillated between nightmares and parables, Byron and Goethe. Under their meek and unassuming facades, her heroines harbor monstrous ambition and an almost desperate hunger for freedom. In the chapter "A Dialogue of Self and Soul: Plain Jane's Progress", Gilbert and Gubar examine this duality in *Jane Eyre*, a novel that exposed a range of uncomfortable subjects; female confinement, orphanhood, and physical and emotional starvation. Bertha Mason, the "madwoman in the attic" represents the rebellious Jane – imprisoned by both her unbridled passion and the dictates of society. While Jane escapes this extreme, she must also reject the submissive extreme before she can be united with Rochester, for she can only be with him after achieving wholeness.[176]

Bertha embodies unleashed, untamed passion, wholly unrestrained by control or reason. When she goes to Rochester's room the night before his departure to the Leas, she torches his bed and curtains. The destructive image presented here is designed to make the reader appreciate the grave danger of uncontrolled passion; also, the idea of Rochester being unaware of the hell that is surrounding him (and that would surely be awaiting him in the afterlife): "in the midst of blaze and vapour, Rochester lay stretched motionless, in deep sleep". This is effective as Rochester oblivious to the dangers of allowing his passions to

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[175] Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).
[176] Ibid.

rule untamed, "In the midst" of his passion, he fails to recognise that he has come to resemble the degenerate Bertha by keeping the truth about her from Jane. Jane's act of dousing the flames with water is significant in affirming her role as the guardian of morality in this novel. Later, when she decides that she cannot marry Rochester, she in fact repeats this act of dousing the flames of passion, as she is making a choice to seek reason and control. Jane's words, "get up, do, you are quenched now", are reminiscent of countless biblical references, where Jesus Christ commanded the people he healed to "get up and walk". Jane, by pouring the water of reason and control on Rochester she heals him of his dangerous passionate excesses. And she does, too, as seen in her strict adherence to social bonds, by refusing to be Rochester's mistress.

The legends of mad women incarcerated in attics express, in Showalter's words, "a cultural attitude toward female passion as a potentially dangerous force that must be punished and confined."[177] In *Woman and Madness* (1972), Phyllis Chesler finds that women are allowed a much narrower margin of deviation from their role than men before society labels them "mad". "Madness", according to Chesler, may consist in either going too far in acting out the devalued female role (passivity, indecisiveness, frigidity, or depression) or in rejecting one's sex–role stereotype altogether and venturing to show traits that are considered appropriate to the other gender. Showalter reminds us that "Brontë herself, alluding to the latest developments in Victorian psychiatric theory, attributed Bertha's behaviour to 'moral madness'."[178] *Villette* may be regarded as an elaborate psychological examination – the anatomy of a powerful but pained intellect – of exuberant emotions watchfully and vigilantly curbed, where madness is a result of

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[177] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.119.

excessive and overzealous repression. The fear of loosing control, of allowing one's true emotions to surface is represented in Lucy Snowe as a survival tactic. The emotional annihilation she is subjected to shields her from further hurt in a cruel and uncaring world, and yet it also seals her off from the emotional exchanges that buoy up the human spirit. This kind of isolation leads to unhealthy ruminations and a hyper-nervous personality that is susceptible to disintegration at the slightest provocation.

Charlotte Brontë excels in the natural depiction of the feelings born of spiritual terrors, the superstitions of solitude and the hallucinations of despair; she brings infinite art to the rendering of these intense and irresistible emotions (a factor she has in common with Laylā al-ʿUthmān). Elaine Showalter suggests that Charlotte Brontë's biggest achievement is in dividing the Victorian female psyche into its "extreme components of mind and body",[179] with Helen Burns representing one extreme, and Bertha Mason representing the other. It is only through annihilating those two bi-polar aspects of Jane's personality that her "psychic dilemma" is resolved, and an integrated, fully developed woman can emerge.

2.2.9 The Role of Religion: Subverting the Male God

In both her novels Charlotte Brontë veers from Gothic melodrama to a work of deep religious conviction. The author metamorphoses from an isolated, naive cleric's daughter with a penchant for fantasy worlds, into a passionate campaigner determined to break free from the restrictions imposed upon an intelligent, articulate mid-Victorian female without wealth or influence. As previously established, *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* could be viewed as a record of the author's existence, in which case each in its own way becomes nothing less

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[178] Ibid., p.119.

than the story of a pilgrimage, a journey through life by a young Christian woman. During the course of this pilgrimage, she will be exposed to hypocrisy, deceit and spiteful condescension. Jane will be offered both an unchristian marriage, and then a loveless marriage. Lucy Snowe will not be offered that, so much as trials and tribulations, and is put through so much mental anguish as to question her own faith, and her sanity. Only the belief in God's teachings will save Brontë's protagonists from losing their minds and their honour.

However, both *Jane Eyre* and *Villete* contain other evocations of God as well. In *Jane Eyre* the patriarchal God who guides Brocklehurst and St John is both socially determined and determining. Brocklehurst has appropriated God for the purposes of social control and class oppression. Although an extreme case, his practice reflects an historical reality: the subordination of the emotional and spiritual energies of religion to the utilitarian needs of nineteenth-century English society. St John is a more complicated case; he is not a hypocrite, but theological dogmatism causes him to view female sexuality as a threat. He uses a blend of guilt and flattery to render Jane submissive; his selective praise of her as "docile, diligent, disinterested, faithful, constant..."[180] expresses his desire to subdue her to his needs. Brontë's decision to end the novel with St John's story rather than Jane's shows that both characters are on parallel life-paths, each of which is equally valuable in the sight of God.

In the quasi-Providential world of *Jane Eyre*, God seems repeatedly to intervene in Jane's life, whether to aid her in her quest for fulfilment or to protect her moral integrity. The

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[179] Ibid., p.113.

fairy that suggests she advertise for a governess position; the voice of Rochester calling her

back to him after Bertha's death, all seem to have the touch of the divine about them.

When Rochester urges Jane to stay with him despite his marriage to Bertha, and the voice

of feeling within her asks "who in the world cares for you? or who will be injured by what

you do?", a deeper voice answers "I care for myself. The more solitary, the more

friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself. I will keep the law

given by God..."[181] this spirit comes to resemble Jane's higher reason. The same voice can

be seen guiding Lucy Snowe in *Villette*. This reaches its zenith in the scene where Lucy

Snowe tries time and again to explain to M. Paul her conviction that the spiritual banner of

Christianity remains uncorrupted no matter how men try to compartmentalize it and split it

into warring factions, Jesuit and Protestant, etc.:

> Now, it happened that I had often secretly wondered at the minute and unimportant
>
> character of the differences between these three sects [Presbyterian, Lutheran and
>
> Episcopalian] – at the unity and identity of their vital doctrines; I saw nothing to hinder
>
> them from being one day fused into one grand Holy Alliance, and I respected them all,
>
> though I thought that in each were faults of form; encumbrances, and trivialities. Just
>
> what I thought, that I did tell M. Emmanuel, and explained to him that my own last
>
> appeal, the guide to which I looked, and the teacher I owned, must always be the Bible
>
> itself, rather than any sect, of whatever name or nation.[182]

This is brought home more strongly when the Jesuit "spy" M. Paul comes round to

agreeing with her towards the end of the novel. In both texts, God empowers women to

exercise their own moral judgement apart from male expectations. The fact that both her

heroines do manage to find their salvation in the end of the novels proves that when

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[180] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p.355.

[181] Ibid., p.279.

[182] Brontë, *Villette* (London: Penguin Books, 1985).

women choose to internalise the male God, they can access through Him their own meanings for spiritual growth separate from the patriarchal dictates of prescribed religion.

2.2.10 Families and Marriage: A Double-Edged Sword

Belonging to a family is a major theme in *Jane Eyre*. Family was extremely important to a woman in the Victorian period; it provided emotional and financial support to her as a child and as an unmarried woman. Jane encounters increasingly rewarding versions of family which coincide with her personal maturation. The miraculously realised "family" of Diana, Mary and St. John Rivers is a revised and improved version of the original household in which Jane was raised at the novel's start. Eliza, Georgiana, and the despicable John Reed have been transformed in the wish-fulfilment fairytale mode of *Jane Eyre* into the perfect family, who love and help her in direct proportion to how much the former loathed and hindered her. Therefore, the strange coincidence of Jane ending up on the doorstep of Moor House should not be seen as a rupture in realism, but a thematic device. If not supported by a father or husband, an educated, middle-class woman was likely to be forced to become a governess, a position of lifelong servitude and repression of personal desires. In *Villette* it is precisely because Lucy Snowe has no family that she seems to be free-floating from one situation to another, always an outsider attempting to fit in, without foreignness, but also a projection of her own estrangement from a family unit, and her inability to find one to fit into. Looking at Charlotte Brontë's novels in terms of its depiction of family, one could argue that Brontë's difficulty in dealing with the authority issues implicit in family relationships is reflected in the absence of mothers and fathers in the novel.

Critics such as Adrienne Rich[183] argue that Jane Eyre has to choose between the "temptation" of following the rule of passion by marrying Rochester, which would have made her dependent on him and not his equal, or of living a life of complete renunciation of all passions, by marrying St John Rivers. Marriage, however, was no saving grace. Jane expresses the very modern fear, practically unheard of in the nineteenth century, of losing her identity in marriage. When Rochester is maimed and socially ruined, essentially bringing his physical strength and social position equal to that of Jane, the threat of domination no longer exists, and it is at that point that she agrees to marry him. Also, the reforming energies of Jane Eyre are motivated by instincts of self-preservation more than altruistic love. Rochester is presented at the beginning as being rather lax in respecting the full weight of marriage, and has no trouble mistreating his wife (insane though she may be), and desecrating the sanctity of marital bonds. Jane acts as an example to him by refusing to enter into a sham marriage and, by the end of the novel, the reader sees Rochester respecting these bonds, the perfect companion in his conjugal bliss. The same is true of *Villette,* where the wild, impetuous nature of the beast must be tamed, and curbed, so that M. Emmanuel can soften, and be presented as husband material.

2.2.11 The Socialist Implications of the Novel

In *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë, who expresses strong sympathy for the working class and the poor, forcefully condemns upper-class exploitation and arrogance. Jane's own struggle makes clear the integral relationship between wealth and survival, though her position is actually less precarious than other characters in the novel. *Jane Eyre* emphasises the magnitude of the suffering in rural England endured during Brontë's day. With the

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[183] Rich, "Temptations", pp.89-106.

exception of Jane's early days at Lowood, Brontë limits herself primarily to alluding to such stark social realities without depicting them, until briefly focusing on rural village life when Jane begins teaching at Morton. Here, the harsh realities of country living in northern England creep into the novel, albeit very briefly. Jane's ambivalence about her career as a schoolteacher is clear; it undermines the social ethic of equality that she invokes throughout the novel. Her antipathy primarily stems from her own unfulfilled passions. Yet, in light of the hardship and deprivation she experiences, her mixed emotions towards these girls conveys a great deal about her own sense of obligation to those "below" her. She reflects upon her new position, "I felt–yes, idiot that I am–I felt degraded. I doubted I had taken a step which sank instead of raising me in the scale of social existence. I was weakly dismayed at the ignorance, the poverty, the coarseness of all I heard and saw round me."[184] The limits of her compassion alter Brontë's portrait of Jane's lifelong rally against injustice. Here, Jane identifies the nature of her quest not as a struggle against injustice, and strives for the elevation of her own social standing. Ironically, then, in *Jane Eyre* Brontë simultaneously fosters democratic attitudes while perpetuating a rigidly class-based system of social relations. The tone of her work, inspiring in its compassion, disturbing in its traces of elitism, reflects a striking contradiction in the intellectual and moral sensibility of British society at mid-century.

Throughout *Jane Eyre* Brontë shows that two moral creeds exist: one for the lucky few and another for everyone else (and this same sentiment is echoed by *Vilette's* Lucy Snowe). What becomes apparent towards the end of the novel is that Jane herself endorses the social caste system and the tone of her words reveals this contradiction. From reading

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[184] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p.93.

the text in such a way, it becomes immediately apparent that *Jane Eyre* is not the revolutionary text that many revisionist scholars – particularly feminist scholars – have recently claimed it to be.

2.2.12 The Controversy of Social Convention

Though fresh in its choice of subject matter and in its presentation of this material, it is very hard to assign a "revolutionary" label to Brontë's writing. One great aim of the writing, explained in the preface of the second edition of *Jane Eyre*, is a protest against conventionality; when in fact, as demonstrated in the previous section, the author herself seems to be adhering to those very conventions. "Charlotte Brontë's main *stuff* in English, Protestant, law-respecting, conventional, even...No judgment was ever more foolish than that which detected a social rebel in the writer of *Jane Eyre*."[185] Though this statement could be true when applied to the person of Charlotte Brontë, it cannot be applied to her novels, which always raise controversy in their subject matter; bigamy, interfaith relationships, she always attacks the conservative views of marriage. *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, though at first not so obviously traditional, present heroines struggling between their love of God and their passionate natures, never exercise the potential to become someone truly controversial. Jane and Lucy never question their limited career choices or their subservient roles, and although both believe in self-determination neither is New Woman enough to reject conventional morality. In refusing to be Rochester's mistress, Jane is upholding the very rules she was meant to flaunt, and becomes a tool, reinforcing social conventions. The fact that she returns to him only after the fire, and the

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[185] Ward and Shorter, *The Life and Works*, p.162.

administration of suitable punishment for his crimes (intended and real), proves this further.

2.2.13 Claims to Feminism

"I resisted all the way," Jane Eyre states at the beginning of chapter 2, and this attitude, this declaration of a unique and iconoclastic female rebelliousness, strikes the perfect note for the entire novel. That a woman will "resist" the terms of her destiny (social or spiritual) is not perhaps entirely new in English literature up to the publication of *Jane Eyre* in 1847: we have, after all, the wilful heroines of certain of Shakespeare's plays, and those of Jane Austen's elegant comedies of manners. But Jane Eyre is a young woman wholly unprotected by social position, family, or independent wealth; she is without power; she is without advantage. More than that, both Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe are, as Charlotte Brontë judged herself, "small and plain and Quaker-like" – lacking the most superficial yet seemingly necessary qualities of femininity. ("You are not pretty any more than I am handsome,"[186] Rochester says bluntly.) There are many reasons to label the work of Charlotte Brontë feminist; her novels defy patriarchal convention in the heroines' unmistakable hatred of oppression and determination to be free, and also in her choice of physically unattractive women. "Reader, I married him," Jane announces boldly in the novel's final chapter. The tacit message is that *she* married *him* – not that *he* married *her*. What greater triumph for the orphan, the governess, the small, plain, and "Quaker-like" virgin?

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[186] Ibid., p.229.

n 1966, R.B. Martin stated that *Jane Eyre* was the first major feminist novel, "although there is not a hint in the book of any desire for political, legal, educational, or even intellectual equality between the sexes."[187] Rather, Martin supports the idea that Jane / Brontë merely wants recognition that both sexes are similar in "heart and spirit". Nowhere in the novel is this sentiment more obvious than in the passage in chapter 23 where Jane responds to Rochester's callous and indirect proposal:

> Do you think I am an automaton? a machine without feelings?...Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong – I have as much soul as you, – and full as much heart...I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh; – it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal, – as we are.[188]

But, as Martin points out, this is not a plea for equality on anything but an emotional level. He comes to the conclusion that *Jane Eyre* (and this applies to *Villette* too) is pre-feminist:

> The novel is frequently cited as the earliest major feminist novel, although there is not a hint in the book of any desire for political, legal, educational, or even intellectual equality between the sexes. Miss Brontë asks only for the simple – or is it the most complex? – recognition that the same heart and the same spirit animate both men and women, and that love is the pairing of equals in these spheres...The famous plea that women ought not to be confined 'to making pudding and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags' [chapter 12] is not propaganda for equal employment but for a recognition of woman's emotional nature. The condemnation of women to a place apart results in the creation of empty, capricious women like Blanche Ingram, who tyrannize over men whenever possible, indulge in dreams of Corsair

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[187] R.B. Martin, *Accents of Persuasion*.
[188] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p.252.

lovers, and can communicate only in the Byronic language of outdated romantic fiction. Only equals like Jane and Rochester dare to speak truth couched in language of unadorned directness.[189]

Villette, described by Tanner as "a study of how a human being attempts to constitute herself in a society largely indifferent to her needs",[190] is, according to Gilbert and Gubar, Brontë's most overtly and despairingly feminist work. The protagonist, Lucy Snowe, is, from beginning to end, outside society, without parents or friends, lacking physical or mental merits, without wealth or confidence or even good physical and mental health. Lucy creates an identity for herself against overwhelming odds, and as "author" of this identity, mirrors Brontë's creation of a literary self that is able to subvert patriarchal art, and supersede it. Lucy/Brontë moves from being a victim of a patriarchal master narrative to the creator of her own story/destiny, regaining a measure of independent control over both the narrative, and the literary space allotted to the women writer. For these reasons, Brontë sets a powerful precedent for woman writers. Essentially, both works of the artist are filled with "hunger, rage and rebellion"[191] which is the essence of any feminist manifesto.

2.2.14   Defeating the Feminist Agenda

"Miss Brontë was a great upholder of the privileges of her sex, yet no writer in the world has ever so uniformly represented women at so great a disadvantage..."[192]

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[189] Martin, *Accents of Persuasion*, pp.93-94.
[190] Tony Tanner, "Introduction" to Charlotte Bronte, *Villette* (London: Penguin Books, 1985) p.10.
[191] From "A Letter to Mrs Foster" by Matthew Arnold (14 April 1853) in: Dyson, *Charlotte Brontë*, p.93.
[192] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.140.

The contemporary reviewer Harriet Martineau thought that the obsessive concern of the female characters with the need for love didn't serve to further the cause of women – women, she argued, do have other interests.[193] The moral that these stories inculcate is that there can be no real happiness for a woman, at least independently of the exercise of those affections that her nature readily moulds itself to. Women need love, need to be loved, in order to be happy. Having reduced their needs of existence to the practise of this one art, as a feminist project, the novels fail.

Pauline Nestor argues that Jane does not control her own actions; this work of new feminist criticism rejects previous estimations of Jane as a feminist hero.[194] The same can be said to be true of *Villette*. In *Villette* there is the removal of free will, all is preordained, written in the stars. It falls to the lot of only a few exceptionally lucky people, upon whom fortune or Providence has delighted to shower its gifts. To all others life is either a wretched grovelling business, an affair of making money and gratifying sensuality, or else, as in Lucy Snowe's case, a prolonged martyrdom. This is the unhappy formula that runs through *Villette*, and whilst it gives rise to great pathos, it leaves the reader with a sense of something morbid and unsatisfactory. Even in the happily ending *Jane Eyre*, there is no reprise from this pain; Jane's impulses are continually warring against each other, she is somewhere between the opposite poles of duty and happiness, and cannot see how to reconcile them. The strongest sympathy of the author goes with the heroic self-conquest of the heroine under temptation. She triumphs at the cost of a determined self-sacrifice and undoubtedly we are meant to sympathise with the martyr.

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[193] Martineau, "*Jane Eyre*", p.74.

Showalter concludes that "Both [novels] contain a few explicit feminist passages, but they are classic feminine novels. They realistically describe an extraordinary range of women's physical and social experiences, but also suggests experiences through the accumulation of images and symbols."[195]

Charlotte Brontë is preoccupied with the "master-pupil" relationship, and this impressed even early readers as an important component in her treatment of the passionate relationships between her male and female characters. This is the clearest example of how, though progressive and daring, *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* cannot be considered "feminist" novels, for in the end, they only assert that men and women are not equal; men are more knowledgeable than women, and women can only learn from them and better themselves.

In *Villette*, Charlotte Brontë defeats the feminist agenda by choosing a heroine who behaves in such an erratic and irrational manner as to reaffirm the suspicion that women left to their own devices will only flounder and fail. There are other ways for a woman of squaring accounts with trial than that of rushing about the world when the homeland becomes wearisome, of taking midnight rambles through a foreign city when the sense of agony drives off sleep, of ambushing the chosen one in a disclosure of mutual affection when intriguers try to set the two lovers apart. In the end, it is the man who rescues her, who shows her the way to reason, who redresses the balance in her schizoid and unhappy person. The problem with the plot of *Villette* is that it is essentially a patriarchal master narrative with the female protagonist superimposed on the traditional male role of a young man going out in the world to seek his fortune. *Jane Eyre* is no portrait of a lady but the

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[194] Pauline Nestor, *"Jane Eyre"*, p.54.

story of a young woman in a "heroic" mould, as susceptible as any man to restlessness and

ennui when opposition fails to provide a cause against which to struggle. Grown bored at

Thornfield, for instance, before the arrival of the master, Jane longs for a power of vision

that might transcend the limits of her sequestered life, pastoral as it is. Very like the

nameless governess of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*,[196] Jane walks agitatedly

about, alone, "safe in the silence and solitude", and eager for adventure, which is to say,

romance, and it is as if Jane's romantic imagination summons forth her master, Fairfax

Rochester.

When, later, Jane is brought into Bertha Mason's presence and mockingly introduced to

Rochester's wife, she is naturally repulsed – she feels no kinship with *this* creature. And

though Jane charges Rochester with cruelty towards Bertha who cannot help her condition,

and his callousness in springing his made wife on Jane in such a manner, she cannot really

identify with the woman; and rather too readily forgives Rochester his atrocious (and

ungentlemanly) behaviour.[197] That Rochester had intended to marry her dishonestly, and,

in the most fundamental sense, "deflower" her, matters less to Jane than the reader

anticipates. But the legitimate Mrs Rochester, along with Thornfield Hall itself and all it

represents of a diseased past, will soon be destroyed in a refining fire. Both stories end

with a sense of unfinished business, issues that were brought up and then not resolved, a

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[195] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.112.

[196] Henry James's fated governess has visions of "a castle of romance...such a place as would somehow, for diversion of the young idea, take all colour out of story-books and fairy tales. Wasn't it just a story-book over which I had fallen a doze and a dream?" Just before her initial encounter with the sinister Peter Quint, she thinks "that it would be as charming as a charming story suddenly to meet someone. Someone would appear there at the turn of a path and would stand before me and smile and approve." Jane Eyre's romantic imagination summons forth, as it were, her "master" Fairfax Rochester; James's governess, wishing for her "master", initiates disaster.

[197] For a very different account, from a Modernist perspective, of the doomed love of the West Indies heiress and her English husband, Rochester, see Jean Rhys's haunting and hallucinatory prose-poem of a novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1966).

sense of unsolved discord. What would Jane Eyre have done and what would our sympathies have been had she found out that Mrs Rochester was not burnt in the fire at Thornfield? And what of Lucy Snowe had Madame Beck and her ilk succeeded in dissuading M. Emmanuel from marrying her? Duty and virtue were rewarded with the arbitrary removal of the obstacles that made it unpleasant.

Part of the reaction to the conclusion of *Jane Eyre* derives from our view of Rochester, since, as Martin points out, "The modern temptation in reading this novel is to forgive Rochester for his life of dissipation on the grounds that the failure of his first marriage is not his fault. Clearly, this was not the view of Miss Brontë, for she goes to considerable trouble to indicate that he marries in accordance with the conventions of society, and 'the prurience, the rashness, the blindness of youth'."[198] Moreover, the marriage is arranged for financial gain, and wealth gained from the West Indian slave economy is hardly politically correct. He at least represents a challenge that Brontë's heroine can rise to, which is denied to the female protagonists of Laylā al-ᶜUthmān's novels.

2.2.15   Literary Merits: Soft Anger

Though it is difficult to find fault with one of the great classical writers of the English language, there were some areas that did indicate weakness from a literary feminist point of view. Perhaps because the topics she deals with are mostly grounded in the author's personal experience, Charlotte Brontë's deficiency as an author emerges when she tackles subjects in which she has had very little personal experience, i.e., the portrayal of men and high society. The confidence between Jane Eyre and Rochester is much too sudden and

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[198] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, pp.94-95.

excessive: there is too little attractiveness in the heroine to account for violent passion in such a man. Why should so much fondness be lavished upon this demure, keen-eyed little woman? This perhaps could be attributed again to Brontë's lack of exposure to life outside her immediate environment, and so her tendency to over-sentimentalise, which is a general Feminine tendency.

Brontë's overriding desire to imprint her own experience caused some derailment in the logic of her writing, which is at its most transparent in *Villette*. The novel begins on a note out of key with the remainder of the composition. In its first chapter all emphasis is placed on little Paulina, a character who disappears during the large part of the story, returning only briefly as a secondary figure. Towards the middle of the first volume, the narrator steps into the part of heroine, with an inconsequence and abruptness that almost suggests a change of plan after the writing of the tale was undertaken. From this point, we are once again invited to follow the struggles and sufferings of a solitary woman, to listen to the confessions of a heart yearning for excitement and sympathy and, as in *Jane Eyre*, again finding love amongst controversy and contradiction.

Charlotte Brontë is foremost among those who have suffered unresolved emotional conflicts, have felt passionately "the necessity of consolation",[199] and have drawn their readers to them by their powerful expression of human desires. Her characterisations are weak because of the substitution of meticulous observation for sympathetic intuition. While character is Brontë's forte, she never comes to grips with it; even in her liveliest figures, not excluding Jane Eyre and Paul Emmanuel, there is a certain dislocation and a

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[199] Gaskell, *Charlotte Brontë*.

general want of progression and development. In much of the book we have intense emotion without cause:

> Her heroines do not try to disentangle the chaos of their consciousness, they do not analyse their emotions or motives. Indeed, they do not analyse everything. They only feel very strongly about everything. And the sole purpose of their torrential autobiographies is to express their feelings. *Jane Eyre*, *Villette*, *The Professor*, the best parts of *Shirley*, are not exercises of the mind, but cries of the heart; not a deliberate self-diagnosis, but an involuntary self-revelation.[200]

Being still in the Feminine stage, even though there were instances when Brontë's heroines were able to express anger and defy their socially prescribed roles, these were generally masked by such emotional effusion that the anger was watered down into limp protestations. Her immersions in the land of emotion, and her reliance on the eloquence with which these emotions were depicted, meant that her work was found lacking in other areas. These include a lack of coherence in her plots (for example the derailment of logic discussed in 2.2.3 The Autobiographical Novel), a uniformity in her characterisations, and the crucial flaw in her process of thinking and feeling, which led her to protest against conventionality while adhering to society's conventions.[201]

2.3 Laylā al-ᶜUthmān

Born in 1945 in the al-Mirgab neighbourhood of Kuwait, Laylā al-ᶜUthmān grew up in a literary family. Her father, ᶜAbdallāh al-ᶜUthmān, was a well-known poet and a philanthropist, and her mother (who was divorced from her father soon after Laylā's birth)

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[200] R.B. Martin, *Accents of Persuasion*, p.167.
[201] See §2.2.12.

was of Syrian descent. At twelve years of age, her father decided that Laylā was too old to continue going to school and put a halt to her education. This meant that according to Kuwaiti custom Laylā was not allowed to leave the house unless chaperoned and for special occasions as decreed by her elders. This restraint however did not necessarily impede Laylā from making her own life decisions, her refusal to get engaged to her first cousin, and her subsequent marriage to a Palestinian man, caused a scandal in her conservative family. She joined the journalistic sector of the Kuwaiti writing establishment in 1965 and began writing a regular column in a national daily newspaper (*al-Qabas*) and a weekly magazine (*al-Yaqaẓa*). In 1974, she left her first husband, with whom she had four children, and has remained single ever since. Hers is one of the, if not the, most outspoken voices among the women prose writers of the Gulf, and undoubtedly the most well known.

2.3.1   Laylā al-ᶜUthmān's Work

Her first published work was a collection of poems, *Hamasāt (Whispers)*, in 1972. This was followed by her collections of short stories in periodicals all over the Arab world, which include *Imra'ah fī Inā'ah* (*Woman in a Jar*) published in 1976 and *Fi'l-Layli Ta'tī al-ᶜUyūn* (*The Eyes Come out at Night*) published in 1980. Her first novel *al-Mar'ah wa'l-Qiṭṭah* (*The Woman and the Cat*) was published in 1985. The following year, *Wasmiyyah Takhruj min al-Baḥr* (*Wasmiyyah Emerges from the Sea*) was published, and since then there has been a prolific outpouring of fictional novels and short story collections. Laylā al-ᶜUthmān's work has been translated into Russian, German, Serbo-Croat, Albanian, Dutch, English, Polish, Georgian and Chinese.

2.3.1.1   *The Woman and the Cat*

Al-ᶜUthmān's first attempt at novel writing did not make a big splash in the Arab literary

world. It did not open with the eloquent and encouraging introductions, written by some of

the most respected literary figures in the Arab world (for example Ḥannā Mīna wrote the

introduction to *Fi'l-Layli Ta'tī al-ᶜUyūn*),[202] that were a mainstay of her widely successful

short story periodicals.

The story of *al-Mar'ah wa'l-Qiṭṭah* ("The Woman and the Cat") deals with a young man

(Sālim) who has gone insane under the stress of living in a traditional Kuwaiti household,

lorded over by an interfering, domineering aunt, under whose invasive presence his

parents were divorced, his own marriage arranged, and ultimately ended. The novel begins

with Sālim's arrest and his mentally unstable state, and then charts his unhappy life, from

his mother's ignominious departure from the house, to his being forced to leave school and

to work at his father's shop, to his aunt's murder of his cat Danah, and finally to his

marriage to Hessa. The storyline is punctuated at short intervals with a return to Sālim in

his jail cell and his delirious ramblings. Sālim's marriage signals the beginning of the end

for him, as he suddenly finds his wife pregnant though he had been unable to make love to

her, and the events that quickly follow to culminate in her death. The ending of the story is

ambiguous in that it is unclear who actually murdered young Hessa, the protagonist's wife;

however, there is no question about the allocation of responsibility for her death, which

falls on the oppressive practices of Kuwaiti society.

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[202] Layla al-ᶜUthmān, *Fī al-Layli Ta'tī al-ᶜUyūn* ("Eyes Come at Night") (Beirut: Dār al-Adab, 1980).

2.3.1.2   *Wasmiyyah Emerges from the Sea*

The premise of *Wasmiyyah Takhruj min al-Baḥr* ("Wasmiyyah Emerges from the Sea") is

that of a doomed love story between two teenagers (ʿAbdallāh and Wasmiyyah) in the pre-

oil seafaring society of Kuwait. The novel begins and ends with ʿAbdallāh, alone on a boat

in the middle of the sea, fishing and waiting for his beloved Wasmiyyah to appear, and as

the story progresses the focus shifts back and forth through time, juxtaposing the present

day hero, alone at sea, with his recollections of the events of the past. The pair met as

children but the differences in their social classes, and the staunch segregation policy of

traditional Kuwait meant that they were separated at puberty. A fateful meeting arranged

by the protagonist claims the girl's life, and the story deals with the hero's loss, guilt and

disillusionment, until it closes with his death at sea,[203] whereby the couple are

symbolically reunited.

The novel is widely regarded to be Laylā al-ʿUthmān's best work, and has received a lot of

critical and academic attention in the Arab world, and among those involved in the field of

modern Middle Eastern literature. Moussa-Mahmoud summarises: "...She excels in

imaginatively recreating Gulf scenery in pre-oil times. The little villages of seafaring

fishermen and pearl fisheries against the background of desert sands and a few palm trees

are the scene of age-old romances and tragedies of love and death. Her novel *Wasmiyyah*

Emerges from the Sea (1986) is exemplary, a tragedy of star-crossed lovers against a

background of desert and sea."[204]

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[203] Although it is not stated that the hero would drown, the entire momentum of the story has been leading up
to this point. His death is only logical inference.
[204] Fatma Moussa-Mahmoud, "Little Guide", p.113.

2.3.2   From Camels to Cadillacs: Setting Laylā al-ʿUthmān's Work in Its Socio-Historical Background

Laylā's world is that of the Kuwaiti woman and, by extension, the Gulf woman; it carries the values of the past, and juxtaposes them with the materialistic struggles of the present. Her stories are very loco-centric, enmeshed with the dialect of the Kuwaiti people, their poetry, and their singers.[205] Both novels discussed here revolve around two states of denial: nostalgia and the refusal to accept social reality. As Rahmer notes, "Many of these difficulties [that the writer deals with] concern changes that have taken place in Kuwaiti society during the last fifty years, particularly the transformation from a traditional Bedouin tribal society and maritime-mercantile structures to an industrialized capitalist welfare state."[206] Al-ʿUthmān is not unique in being attracted to this subject in her writing. According to Salma al-Jayyusi many other writers from the Arabian Peninsula suffer from "deracination" (meaning both change and separation), which is a social phenomenon that has "social implications which gave a certain poignance, akin to poetry", to their stories.[207] A common theme in such literature was how life in the area changed in the mid-twentieth century (especially in the socio-economic sphere), due to the sudden affluence of the people and the rulers after the discovery of huge reservoirs of oil and gas. This was often accompanied by social criticism of the spiritual emptiness that the new capitalist developments generated. Hafez observes that "the association of the innocent love of childhood with the nostalgic past of pre-oil Kuwait, with a simple existence of fishing and

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[205] ʿAwadh al-Dūkhī, *Wasmiyyah Takhruj min al-Baḥr* (Kuwait: al-Rubayān, 1986) p.4.

[206] Angelika Rahmer, "The Development of Women's Political Consciousness in the Short Stories of the Kuwaiti Author Layla al-ʿUthmān" in: (eds.) Roger Allen, Hilary Kirkpatrick and Ed de Moor, *Love and Sexuality in Modern Arabic Literature* (Saqi Books, London, 1995) p.175.

[207] Salma Khadra Jayyusi (ed.), *The Literature of Modern Arabia: An Anthology* (Columbia University Press, 1998) p.36.

tribal life, is posited as paradise lost".[208] Until the late 1950s Kuwait was a tiny

sheikhdom, with a small population, its economy based on boat-building and pearling, and

trade with India, Iraq and Iran, hence the great affinity with those respective cultures. With

the advent of the oil-based economy, the traditional industries declined dramatically,

paving the way for a new economic era. Nevertheless, traditional hierarchies remained, as

al-Mughni argues: "Despite the drastic economic changes, many features of the traditional

tribal organizations, such as the kinship system and emphasis on patrilineal descent,

continued to be firmly entrenched."[209]

In the years following the discovery of oil, the lives of women gradually changed. Those

who initiated such changes and radically transformed the lives of women were the newly

educated Kuwaiti men, all of whom came from well-established merchant families.[210] The

kind of nationalism that these men of the merchant class espoused replicated that of other

nationalistic bourgeois Arabs of the *nahḍah* period.[211] Like Qāsim Amīn and many other

Westernised Arab intellectuals, they set themselves the task of lifting their societies from

what they saw as a state of *rajʿiyah* (backwardness) to a state of *nahḍah* (progress) and

civilisation. Central to the realisation of *nahḍah* was the emancipation of women. There

could be no *nahḍah* without women's emancipation, just as there could be no progress

without dismantling existing traditions and customs. These two kinds of progress were

regarded as firmly interrelated. The emancipation of women was part of a struggle in

which they were engaged, defined as "between knowledge and ignorance, between

progress and backwardness, between modern lifestyles and retrograde traditions and

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[208] Sabry Hafez, "Women's Narrative in Modern Arabic Literature: A Typology" in: Allen et al., *Love and Sexuality*, p.164.
[209] Haya al-Mughni, *Women in Kuwait: The Politics of Gender* (2nd edn, London: al-Saqi Books, 2001) p.20.
[210] Ibid., p.53.

customs".[212] Henceforth, they claimed, "being [in a state of] *sufūr* (unveiled) is safer for women than wearing the *ḥijāb* [veil]". It was safer because it would make women more identifiable, and such identification could in itself act as an instrument of social control, preventing them from speaking to unrelated men on their way to the *sūq* simply for fear of being seen.[213] Ironically it was this same argument, viz. making women more identifiable and thus safer, that was used in Medina by ꜤUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb to convince the Prophet that his wives should wear the *ḥijāb*.[214] Al-ꜤUthmān was part of the generation that witnessed this transition in the role of women in society and the greater level of freedom that women were awarded. This caused unease in the way in which the past was being eradicated to make way for the demands of this liberated, consumer-orientated society. It also meant that as a writer, al-ꜤUthmān was more aware than perhaps other Kuwaiti women writers of a younger generation of the terms under which this "freedom" was being granted, and how very little of the intrinsic nature of social and gender relationships in Kuwait had changed.

2.3.3   The Autobiographical Novel

Unlike the Western ideal of art for art's sake, the work of a female Arab novelist represents her attempt to describe her social reality, come to terms with it, and so ultimately transcend it. Al-Ali asserts in her work on Egyptian women writers that

> All the writers interviewed emphasized the close relationship between their personality,
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> their personal experiences, and their social environment and the content of the literary
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> works. In defining their roles...Third World writers in general – place great importance

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[211] As discussed in §1.4.2.

[212] Editorial, *al-BaꜤathah* (February, 1954).

[213] Editorial, *al-ShaꜤb* (13 March 1958).

[214] See Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*.

on the social dimension of literature. Authorship then becomes the centre of criticism of social reality and the vision for a better world... With women writers, authorship becomes even more significant. For women, writing itself constitutes an act of defiance. More so than for male writers, women's self-assertion, their life histories, and their writings are intertwined and difficult to untangle. Consequently, an interpretation of their texts gains deeper significance by considering the authors behind them.[215]

The stories of both novels carry within them aspects of al-ʿUthmān's life experience and her personality. In *The Woman and the Cat* the absent mother in al-ʿUthmān's own life is mirrored in the protagonist's relationship with his mother (her birth mother remarried soon after her divorce and was an absent figure from her daughter's life, not even asking after her),[216] and one can sense the author's own longing for a mother's touch in his laments, and the heartfelt descriptions of loss. Even at the end of the novel, when he finally receives solace and advice from his mother it is too late, and her words cannot prevent the tragedy from taking place. Al-ʿUthmān was raised in a large household by a varying number of aunts and half-sisters, not all of whom were kind to the young girl. The aunt in *The Woman and the Cat* is obviously an amalgam of the young Laylā's traumatic experiences under those circumstances.

In the hero's family's thwarting of his education and his escapism through books,[217] is a direct parallel to al-ʿUthmān's own experience with schooling. In her first published book *Hamasāt* ("Whispers"), a collection of poems, she speaks of a school trip in 1956 to the

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[215] Nadje Sadig Al-Ali, *Gender Writing/Writing Gender: The Representation of Women in a Selection of Modern Egyptian Literature* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1994) pp.113-114.
[216] Interview with Layla al-ʿUthmān (March 1999).
[217] Laylā al-ʿUthmān, *Al-Mar'ah wa'l-Qiṭṭah* (Beirut: Dār al-ʿArabiyyah li'l-Dirāsah wa'l-Ṭibāʿah, 1985) p.38-40.

seaside port of al-Aḥmadī that sparked her first interest in writing.[218] Pleased with the positive reaction this received, and fortified by the enthusiasm and the encouragement of her teacher, she was turned on to writing from an early age. When, soon after, her father decided she was too old to leave the house and terminated her education, she poured out all her frustrations into keeping a journal and did not abandon her love of writing.

2.3.4   Internal Dialogues: The Tools of a Feminine Author

Both *The Woman and the Cat* and *Wasmiyyah* are structured as six or seven mini-stories (or "scenes"), all tied into the narrator's theme, culminating finally in a climactic "scene", where the reason for the hero's current state is made clear. This cyclic motion of both stories, beginning with the present time, fading in and out of the present to the past (the location of most of these "scenes"), and ending with the present again, is made possible only through the clever manipulation of a story-telling technique that is a collaboration between the author and the fictional narrator.

Feelings and emotions of the protagonists are related in the first person, and the narration of the story happens in the third person for both *Wasmiyyah* and *The Woman and the Cat*, and the jumps between them are so sudden that it can be confusing at times. This has a disorienting effect on the reader that mimics the protagonist's troubled state of mind:

> By using the techniques of flashback and first person narrative, al-ʿUthmān manages to depict effectively the acute suffering of her heroes and heroines, who are often young girls or children. Theoreticians of narrative suggest that the use of a first-person narrative is of existential relevance to the first-person narrator. Within such a narrative

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[218] Laylā ʿAbdallāh al-ʿUthmān, *Hamasāt* (Kuwait Government Press, 1972) p.5.

framework the reader is directly confronted with this existential relevance and, through a sense of deep sympathy for the protagonist, comes to condemn the social circumstances described. It is that condemnation which is part of the author's intention.[219]

The use of this technique is essential in establishing a firm bond between the reader and the first person narrator. "None of the...stories are seen through the oppressor's eyes, but always from the viewpoint of the victim. Reality is depicted by the victims; it is presented to the reader from their perspective, the 'inner perspective'."[220] The repression and perversion of the hero's character in *The Woman and the Cat* do not detract from the empathetic rapport between the reader and the protagonist. The author is so successful in her depiction of the anguished mind of the young man that even at the close of the novel, when the ambiguous ending leaves his guilt hanging in the balance, all that the reader feels is an overwhelming sympathy for the excruciating suffering and pain the hero had to go through.

In the words of Hitchcock: "I believe in giving the audience all the facts as early as possible",[221] and so for al-ʿUthmān. It seems that there was another factor forcing the reader to invest his emotions in the protagonist's fate. The author gives it all away at the beginning; the reader knows that Hessa is dead in *The Woman and the Cat*, and that Wasmiyyah is no longer a part of ʿAbdallāh's life in *Wasmiyyah*. "Suspense is usually a curious mixture of pain and pleasure. Most great art relies more heavily on suspense than

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[219] Rahmer, "Development of Women's Political Consciousness" p.183.
[220] Ibid., p.180.
[221] Alfred Hitchcock, quoted in "Pete Martin Calls on Hitchcock" in: (ed.) Henry Geguld, *Film Makers on Film Making* (Bloomington, 1971) p.128.

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on surprise."[222] As Hitchcock suggests, the web of suspense and frustration that al-ʿUthmān weaves in her novels is made more acute by the reader's knowledge of the outcome, and by the shared sense of doom between reader and protagonist. Having the story narrated in the first person makes the reader feel like s/he has walked in the character's shoes, so to speak, and thus the engagement with the text on that level is greater. The reader's anxiety stems from the fact "that we know what is going to happen but we cannot communicate that to the characters, with whom we have come to empathise."[223]

2.3.5   The Language of Emotion

Al-ʿUthmān's heroes are women parading as men (a concept which we will elaborate on in the next section), therefore their language is that of emotion and passion, and their realm is not the natural male realm of the rational, but that of irrational desire, intuition, and so on. In both novels, the hero opens most of his narrative excerpts with the word "aah", the Arabic equivalent of a deep sigh, which is something that is usually associated only with women, either to denote their powerlessness, or when they are in love and completely overwhelmed by their emotions. Her heroes are in both of these states throughout the two stories.

The heroes' speeches are punctuated with pauses, hesitations and long intervals where their emotions spill over, causing them to ramble on about their feelings, their longings and their needs. Even the descriptive passages are emotionally charged, with the diction

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[222] Sylvan Barnet, Morton Berman and William Burto, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Boston, 1960) pp.83-84.
[223] Seymour Chatman, *Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Cornell University Press, 1978) p.59.

being mostly colloquial (therefore increasing its intimate nature), and highly passionate, almost like poetry. In *The Woman and the Cat*, the hero describes his secret visits to his mother: "I am happy as my mother's tenderness is enveloping me..."[224] In the same story, the repetitive stream of "*ī*" endings, denoting the personal, is often used when the hero is describing his state of mind: "*lafaḥatnī riyāḥ al-khawf...ṭawwaḥatnī al-dhikrā fī bi'r al-layl al-muẓlim. Jaladatnī al-afkār wa'l-aḥlām...*" (I was whipped by the winds of fear...memories rocked me in the dark well of the night. Thoughts and dreams thrashed me...)[225] In *Wasmiyyah*, the hero's words read like poetry, especially when he is talking to, or about, the absent Wasmiyyah: "Her name was Wasmiyyah – oh, that brown face pulsating with the colour of the desert, oh, that twinkling star of sleepless nights..."[226] There is a basic reason for this rhythmic information that is so akin to poetry, in that the love between ᶜAbdallāh and Wasmiyyah follows in the most noble of Arabic poetic traditions, that of *al-ḥubb al-ᶜudhrī* (chaste love). The almost platonic relationship between the two recalls that of Qays and Laylā and of Jamīl and Buthayna, which in turn inspires the author's language to be poetic in its configurations. One Arab critic suggests another reason: it seems that emotions, and emotional language, are the forte of Arab women writers. "Feeling and analysis," proclaimed al-Hakim, "were the cornerstone on which women built all glorious work..."[227]

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[224] Al-ᶜUthmān, *Al-Mar'ah wa'l-Qiṭṭah*, p.54.

[225] Ibid., p.45.

[226] Laylā al-ᶜUthmān, *Wasmiyyah Takhruj min al-Baḥr* (Kuwait, 1986) p.13.

[227] Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists*, p.90.

2.3.6   The Feminine Male Ideal

"The clergyman, it was said, was an intermediate sex, not so virile, hairy, and aggressive as the ordinary man, and thus much more accessible to the soft female imagination."[228] Though neither of her heroes is a man of the cloth (or overly religious in any sense), both have much in common with this particular specimen of Victorian feminine male ideal. Young boys both, they are neither excessively macho, nor particularly menacing or threatening in any way. In sharp contrast to Charlotte Brontë's choice of male protagonists, Laylā al-ᶜUthmān seems to have something of a Romeo and Juliet complex, with all the action in her stories taking place in the protagonists' teens, as their first experience with love, back in the age of innocence, a recurring theme in both her novels. By making them boys[229] and not men, she has effectively removed the threatening elements from their characters; they do not have the patriarchal authority of Laylā al-ᶜUthmān's own father, nor do they present the sexual demands of her own husband, and thus she avoids entering the adult male domain. A young boy, much like a woman, has to submit to the whims of his elders as the dictates of patriarchal society would have them; his employer, an older man, an aunt, etc. Although he enjoys a wider range of mobility, and his actions are less scrutinised than that of a woman, or a young girl, he still faces much of the same constraints that a woman does, and from the same source of authority. The other factor that neutralises the masculine threat of these two boys is their social class. ᶜAbdallāh is poor, his roots are strictly working class, and his mother is dependent on the patriarchs of Kuwaiti society for support. In the hierarchy of Kuwait's traditional mercantile and pearling society, poor boys from humble tribal backgrounds had even less power than

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[228] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.132.
[229] For most of the novel, ᶜAbdallāh is a young boy, except for the meeting with his wife, no other action takes place with the older ᶜAbdallāh, aside from his fishing.

some rich women from noble families.[230] Even though Sālim's class background is not

designated as being working class or otherwise, he is nevertheless economically dependent

on his father throughout the story, eventually working as a clerk in his shop. Thus, Laylā

al-ᶜUthmān's characters are poor, demoralised, and have no will of their own. They are

men, but men who are so emasculated by circumstance, so robbed of their own will, that

they might as well be women. Everyone pushes them around, and the protagonist from

The Woman and the Cat is virtually a eunuch, unable even to have sex with his wife, and

ᶜAbdallāh in *Wasmiyyah* is refused sexual intercourse with his wife.

There was a reason for these ritual humiliations that al-ᶜUthmān's male characters had to

endure: "...in feminine fiction men and woman become equals by submitting to mutual

limitation, not by allowing each other mutual growth";[231] castrating and emasculating

heroes to humiliate them and thus bring them down, as it were, to the female level of

experience. This in turn produced curious effects in the heroes' reactions to their

circumstances.[232] Laylā al-ᶜUthmān's boy-heroes are limited in their responses to the

injustices done to them, to professing their innocence time and again (Sālim), or using

emotional blackmail to get their own way (ᶜAbdallāh), and generally weeping and

lamenting their fates while feeling powerless to change them (both).

Yet it should come as no great surprise that al-ᶜUthmān's male depictions were not the

most masculine specimen; they follow an established trend in Feminine writing, where the

male protagonists express a form of wish-fulfilment for the author. "The model hero was

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[230] See ᶜAbd al-ᶜAzīz al-Rashīd, *Tārīkh al-Kuwayt* (Beirut: al-Ḥayāt, 1971).
[231] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.124.
[232] Ibid., p.138; see §2.1.1.

even less a product of adulation than of ignorance. To a considerable degree, he was the projection of women's fantasies about how they would act and feel if they were men, and, more didactically, of their views on how men should act and feel... Their heroes are not so much their ideal lovers as their projected egos."[233] In this sense, al-ᶜUthmān's men were all Laylā herself, parading as a man.

2.3.7   Woman against Herself:[234] Kuwaiti Gender Roles

Al-Mughni shows how even privileged, educated women can be instruments of patriarchal authority:

> Of all Kuwaiti women, those of the elite and the merchant class have been the most eager to preserve the kin relations from which they gain prestige and access to many privileges. Their loyalty to their own class has often superseded their loyalty to members of their own sex. Women's associations have been established to serve the interests of their social stratum rather than to serve the interests of all women... [These organizations] provide an important instrument through which the ruling elite can exercise control over women and monitor their lives.[235]

Laylā al-ᶜUthmān uses this to great effect in the figure of the domineering aunt in *The Woman and The Cat*; also in *Wasmiyyah* when the female heroine Wasmiyyah doesn't call out to save herself from drowning to "demonstrate her devotion to preserving the order that dictates her annihilation."[236] "According to al-ᶜUthmān, men are not solely responsible for women's suffering. Women also come in for criticism. Mothers, sisters and mothers-in-law frequently appear as severe, even cruel tyrants in their particular domain –

[233] Ibid., p.136.
[234] From George Tarabishi, *A Critique of Nawal Saadawi: Woman against Her Sex* (London: Saqi Books, 1988).
[235] Al-Mughni, *Women in Kuwait*, p.17.
[236] Hafez, "Women's Narrative", p.163.

the home."[237] In *The Woman and the Cat* the cruel aunt echoes the figure of Mrs Reed in *Jane Eyre*. Although she is a woman herself, she makes life unbearable for Hessa, and sabotages her brother's marriages just to get rid of his wives so that no one could share the household realm with her. In *Wasmiyyah*, Wasmiyyah's and ʿAbdallāh's mothers are intent on preserving the patriarchal order of things; Wasmiyyah can only leave the house with her mother, and Dalūl urges ʿAbdallāh not to talk to Wasmiyyah in a casual manner since she is one of his betters "*ʿammtik*",[238] even though they are only children.

2.3.8 Mortifying the Flesh: The Dilemma of Arab Women Writers

"Sexual activity, especially the non-marital and autoerotic varieties, were and still are strictly taboo subjects, particularly for women writers, who are not supposed to have the knowledge necessary for such writing."[239]

Like moths drawn to a flame, contemporary Arab women writers cannot resist tackling those subjects that bring them the most grief (and usually the highest sales figures and critical acclaim); issues of lust, sexuality, and the human body. Al-ʿUthmān's work is no exception. The hero's monologue in chapter eighteen of *The Woman and the Cat* reads like a piece of soft erotica, and when the protagonist finally manages to achieve sexual penetration of his wife, the "smell of his lovemaking"[240] seeps out of his pores and into the air, the sense of sexual achievement is almost embarrassing.

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[237] Rahmer, "Development of Women's Political Consciousness", p.179.
[238] Al-ʿUthmān, *Wasmiyyah*, p.16.
[239] Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists*, p.214.
[240] Al-ʿUthmān, *Al-Marʾah waʾl-Qiṭṭah*, p.123.

"The purpose of Brocklehurst in starving the 'vile bodies' is to create the intensely spiritualised creature the Victorians idealized as the Angel in the House."[241] Hessa and Wasmiyyah each represent this Angel, which is why, when either of them comes under the threat of impropriety, she must be killed. Sex and violence go hand-in-hand in Laylā al-ʿUthmān's work, much like a Hollywood blockbuster movie, and for the same reasons the sensationalism works; it represents human obsession with sex (especially since it is so taboo in the Arab world), and because it is so shocking and exciting. "Lowood represents sexual diminishment and repression"; "Brocklehurst proclaims that his mission 'is to mortify in these girls the lusts of the flesh'."[242] This is the aunt's mission in *The Woman and the Cat*. Gilbert and Gubar note that

> it is, after all, through the violence of the double that the female author enacts her own
> raging desire to escape male houses and male texts, while at the same time it is through
> the double's violence that this anxious author articulates for herself the costly
> destructiveness of anger repressed until it can no longer be contained.[243]

The skin-crawling horror of the cat being thrown in the *adab*,[244] the hole where human excretion was dumped in traditional Kuwaiti households, and Sālim being reminded of the cat's sexual acts and their grim repercussions every time he used the toilet to relieve himself, reveals that al-ʿUthmān ascribed to the pleasure/pain ideology prevalent in Islam (which states that all illicit pleasure, sexual, drug-induced, gambling, etc., would inevitably translate into flesh-searing punishment in hell). By his own admission Sālim was aroused by the vision of Dānah being mounted by a tomcat: "the rythmic movement of the tomcat

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[241] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.117.
[242] Ibid., p.163.
[243] Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman*, p.85.
[244] Al-ʿUthmān, *al-Mar'ah wa'l-Qiṭṭah*, p.29.

and Dānah excited his curiousity",[245] so Dānah's fate was a warning to him, lest he be

tempted. It is interesting that al-ᶜUthmān has placed her hero in what is usually a woman's

predicament. Ultimately it is the woman who suffers Dānah's fate, and not even for the

wanton promiscuity the latter enjoyed, and not the man. The slightest hint that a woman

has committed a moral offence could endanger her life, whereas the man has no fear of

legal action being taken against him. According to Zahra Freeth, "it has always been the

privilege of the male head of the family to wipe out a female member who sullies the

family honour".[246] By punishing the heroines for their transgressions, however slight or

imagined, it is as if the author is compensating for breaching the unspoken code and

tackling these subjects in her work, which would be fitting with the Feminine trend. "The

concept of *sharaf* was important for the merchant community. It kept them together and

helped them to preserve their privileges. More important, it kept women 'in their

place'."[247] By being the metaphoric protector of this *sharaf* (honour), al-ᶜUthmān is

propagating the practices of Kuwaiti patriarchal society.

With regard to the violence employed by al-ᶜUthmān, we find similar in Victorian

Feminine writers, and Showalter tells us that "Whipping girls to subdue the unruly flesh

and the rebellious spirit was a routine punishment for the Victorians, as well as a potent

sexual fantasy."[248] This is also true of the Arab world, and the Qur'an itself condones the

beating of women, though only under circumstances of extreme disobedience:

> As for those women,
>
> On whose part ye fear

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[245] Ibid., p.24.
[246] Zahra Freeth, *Kuwait Was My Home* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1956).
[247] Al-Mughni, *Women in Kuwait*.
[248] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.116.

Disloyalty and ill-conduct,

Admonish them (first),

(Next), refuse to share their bed,

(And last) beat them lightly...[249]

Laylā al-ʿUthmān's writing is full to the brim of male and female whippings and beatings and punishment.[250] ʿAbdallāh is beaten by his mother, and his leg is broken by Fahd, Wasmiyyah's brother; Sālim is beaten by his aunt, so is Dānah, and his mother is manhandled by her, and thrown out of the house.

There are other, practical reasons for the Arab woman writer to punish sexual transgressions in her novel, or conceal acts of sexuality in complex symbolic imagery, and that is the presence of the almighty Arab censor. By safeguarding *sharaf* in her stories, and thus ensuring that her novels fall within the acceptable limits of the patriarchal moral stance, al-ʿUthmān avoids making her work too unpalatable for publication. In this way, the mortification of the flesh in the work of Laylā al-ʿUthmān recalls that of the Feminine Victorian novelists, who wrote very popular stories about mad, bad women, bigamists and murderers, and made sure to kill them off or lock them up at the end of the story. Rochester's explanation of Bertha's many vices as a reason for her insanity, and eventual death, in *Jane Eyre* is one such example.[251]

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[249] Q.4:34 *Sūrat al-Nisāʾ* (translation from ʿAbdullah Yūsuf ʿAli, *The Meaning of the Holy Qurʾan* [4th edn, Maryland: Amana Corporation, 1989]).

[250] In *Fatḥiyah Takhtāru Mawtahā*, the first story is one where Fatḥiyah gets whipped to death by her mother.

[251] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p.276.

2.3.9   Feminine Exploration: The Gothic Elements

In traditional Gothic novels, "Sensibility is shown under pressure. Sexuality, elemental passions and fear now move to the centre of the novelist's stage. On one level the Gothic novel was an attempt to stimulate jaded sensibilities, and as such its descendants are the modern horror film and science fiction fantasy."[252] Gothic romances emerged in England when the novel form itself was just a few decades old, in part as a reaction against the limitations of novel-writing at the time.[253] Similarly, when al-ᶜUthmān wrote her stories, the novel genre was relatively new in the Arab world, and the Gothic elements in her work serve the same purpose as they did in eighteenth-century England.

The title of *Wasmiyyah Emerges from the Sea* brings to mind a vision of danger, of seduction, Wasmiyyah in her oyster shell,[254] like Botticelli's Venus rising from the waves, or of the sirens in Greek mythology who tempt sailors into a watery grave. A closer image to traditional Kuwaiti mentality would be that of a "*jinniyah*" (which is a constantly resurfacing prototype in al-ᶜUthmān's writing), coming out of the sea to enchant and ensnare unsuspecting young men and drag them into the sea to a certain death. This is a story that is widely repeated in Kuwaiti oral folklore, and a version of it was even made into a Ramadan serialisation by Kuwait TV in 1989 "ᶜ*Abdallāh al-Barrī wa-ᶜAbdallāh al-Baḥrī*"[255] (ᶜAbdallāh of the Land and ᶜAbdallāh of the Sea). In a highly superstitious society like that of traditional Kuwait[256] (this is still true to a lesser extent of modern Kuwait), this ethereal and other-worldly image of a young woman emerging from the sea

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[252] Roger Fowler (ed.), *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms* (London: Routledge, 1991) p.106.
[253] Ibid., p.105.
[254] Al-ᶜUthmān, *Wasmiyyah*, p.108.
[255] This is a corruption of the original tale in *A Thousand and One Nights*.
[256] Yūsuf bin ᶜIsā al-Qināᶜī, *Ṣafḥāt min Tārīkh al-Kuwayt* (Kuwait, 1968).

would certainly have carried overtones of eroticism as well as the threat of mortal danger. Laylā al-ʿUthmān uses the idea of a dangerous water nymph, a creature of the metaphysical world, to overturn the patriarchal order and bring down man in a literal sense in this novel. This is a practice that was often used by women as "a form of bargaining from a position of weakness"[257] to manipulate power relations in their favour. As Haya al-Mughni points out that "in the absence of institutionalised means to express their anger and protest men's control, the practice of *zār* [the exorcism of *jinn*] and sorcery has offered an alternative means for women to seek revenge and gain power. These practices are widespread in those societies where women have little power and are generally excluded from the men's world."[258] Seen in this light, al-ʿUthmān's choice of title exhibits her following in a trend that Kuwaiti women had long established as a means of manipulating traditional power relations to their benefit.

Both stories discussed here have a woman in their title, indicating that the woman would have a pivotal role in the novel. When this effect is being generated from beyond the grave, the novels, and their titles, take on a supernatural shade. The reader is instantly transported into a dimension where the usual rules and patriarchal dictates are neutralised by the presence of the unknown. There are many mysteries in her stories, many things that are left unclear to the reader, as well as to the protagonist. Did Wasmiyyah's ghost truly communicate with ʿAbdallāh or was he imagining the whole exchange? The phantom baby in *The Woman and the Cat* is another example of this, and so is the murder of Hessa at the story's end. Perhaps the most unsettling question is that of the baby's parentage. The only options are Sālim or his father, and if it is the latter (and this is deliberately left

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[257] Joan Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion* (Harmondsworth, 1971) p.72.

ambiguous), then the story takes on serious incestuous overtones. Was the meek, weak man a closet rapist? If he had sexual intercourse with his only son's wife then he is. It's not too much of a stretch of the imagination to assume that he had an immoral relationship with his sister as well, which would explain his passivity towards divorcing his wives and living alone with his sister, though he was a man in his prime. Through turning her heroes into neurotic, hallucinating messes who fall under the spell of visions, or reality-invading dreams, al-ᶜUthmān sets a tone of suspicion and unease that makes her stories more absorbing, while reflecting her own views on the conservative aspects of Kuwaiti society. She uses gothic elements to question who truly benefits from these pre-ordained social roles that only humiliate and confuse when deviated from, therefore limiting the practice of free will.

2.3.10 Splitting the Psyche: The Angel in the House

Laylā al-ᶜUthmān has portrayed women as both helpless and tyrannical, but there is a formula underlying both these depictions: "to whatever extent the portrayal of women differs, it is always reflective of socially constructed gender stereotypes."[259] In both stories the two polar extremes of patriarchal female stereotyping are represented. One is a picture of the ultimate male fantasy, sweet, pure and docile, the "Angel in the House" that Elaine Showalter spoke of,[260] as portrayed by Hessa in *The Woman and the Cat*, and Wasmiyyah in *Wasmiyyah Emerges from the Sea*; the other is the stuff of male nightmares, domineering, emasculating and significantly barren, as portrayed by the aunt in *The Woman and the Cat,* and the nagging wife in *Wasmiyyah*. These two polar extremes

[258] Al-Mughni, *Women in Kuwait*, p.52.
[259] Al-Ali, *Gender Writing/Writing Gender*, p.114.
[260] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.113.

represent the options available for women in Kuwait. The closest we come to a reconciliation of the two extremes is in the figure of the male protagonist. Interestingly, this is the point where the psychosis sets in: madness is relegated to the male protagonists, who, as previously established, are pseudo-females. ʿAbdallāh is taunted all night by the spectre of the dead Wasmiyyah, while Sālim sees visions of his dead cat, and his dead wife, urging them to flee from his aunt. Is this inverse punishment for the hero (since he was the cause of the heroine's death)? Or is it meant to show that men without women – these particular sweet women – suffer and cannot find happiness?

The tragic aspects of the novels come across as lapses in the logic of the plot. The time-interval during which Sālim left Hessa alone is highly suspicious. Why, if he feared for her life, did Sālim decide to visit his mother at this instance? He knew that his father and his aunt were plotting to kill Hessa, yet he bizarrely insisted on leaving her in a defenceless state to go out and purchase dinner, a dinner which she begged him to deem unnecessary if it meant that he would leave her unprotected.[261] Suzanne Michalak-Pikulska suggests that the author's intention in leaving Hessa by herself long enough for her to be murdered was intentional in that no one can escape the blame for her death:[262] Sālim, father and aunt all fall under suspicion. There is, however, another perspective on this incident that becomes apparent when one remembers that Sālim had just consummated his relationship with Hessa for the very first time right before he left to buy the dinner. His dinner was in fact a celebration of his finally getting over the fear that had impeded his performance prior to this point. Hessa, the angel in the house, has served her purpose in the story; she has

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[261] Al-ʿUthmān, *Al-Mar'ah wa'l-Qiṭṭah*, p.60.
[262] Barbara Michalak-Pikulska, *al-Turāth wa'l-Muʿāṣirah fī Ibdāʿ Layla al-ʿUthmān* (Beirut: Dār al-Maddāh, 1997).

helped the protagonist rise above himself, and commit his first act of heroism, and so, has become expendable. Furthermore, by coupling with Sālim, Hessa has been soiled; her angelic qualities have been tarnished, for now she has evolved into a sexual being. Even though she was already pregnant at the time, her pregnancy up to that point had been akin to an immaculate conception; although with child, Hessa was still a virgin, Sālim had not been able to take her like a man. That image had come undone with the act of fornication.

The situation in *Wasmiyyah* is similar. Kuwaiti women were no strangers to the sea; they went there on a regular basis to fetch drinking water from the supply boats, took the family's clothes to the beach to wash them,[263] and occasionally, when no men were around, they bathed and washed the henna from their hair, as ᶜAbdallāh's mother's lie demonstrates in the story. The water around the beach in Kuwait is fairly shallow, and there are no shark attacks or strong currents reported near the beaches. ᶜAbdallāh's entire conversation was over in a matter of minutes, so really there was little chance for her to drown. In order for that to happen, Wasmiyyah would have needed to go quite far into the water, and she could just as easily have avoided discovery by crouching in the water close to the beach. Her death happened for the same reasons as Hessa's: the angel figure was under threat. The pair were playing in the sand, their language emotionally charged, and their topics, though innocent, included marriage and procreation. Had Wasmiyyah stayed longer on the beach, ᶜAbdallāh may have attempted to hold her hand, or snatch a kiss. Her taste of freedom might have caused her to become more brazen, and agree to further late-night meetings, and that road only leads to one destination. To retain her position as the

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[263] Nūriyah al-Saᶜdānī, *Tārīkh al-Mar'ah al-Kuwaytiyyah* (Kuwait, 1972) p.49-50.

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ideal woman, she must be saved from herself, and from ᶜAbdallāh's tempting presence, and so "the absent Wasmiyyah becomes the ultimate object of desire".[264]

Balancing this angelic presence was the flip side of the coin, the sadistic woman, able to wreak havoc in the lives of men. ᶜAbdallāh's wife belittles him; she hates him for leaving his job, and for loving the sea, and refuses to fulfil her marital obligations by having sex with him. The hero constantly compares her to Wasmiyyah, which is hardly fair, since Wasmiyyah has assumed iconic proportions in ᶜAbdallāh's mind. The heartless aunt of *The Woman and the Cat* seems not to have a vestige of womanhood left in her; sympathy, tenderness, and understanding are replaced by an oppressive cruelty which turns Sālim's life into a living hell.

In the end though, neither of these two extremes succeeds. The angels die because they are too pure to exist, the standards they set are too unreasonable, and the tyrannical women lose out in the end, they are left partnerless and cannot fulfil their biological destinies as mothers. However, by not offering another, successful female model, the author leaves the issue unresolved. The stereotypical roles designated by men are not a valid option for women anymore, but then, what is?

2.3.11 The Missing God in the Work of Laylā al-ᶜUthmān

Perhaps owing to the fact that she was a reverend's daughter, Charlotte Brontë's work has a biblical preoccupation, with themes and passages lifted directly from the Bible and placed into her novels. However, there is a distinct lack of God or the Qur'an in Laylā al-

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[264] Hafez, "Women's Narrative", p.163.

ᶜUthmān's novels. In contrast to Charlotte Brontë and her protagonists, al-ᶜUthmān's heroes have no affinity with their faith. They do not turn to God for solace, or guidance, nor do they have an obvious sense of respect for His authority; there is no belief that He has preordained their fates, which is surprising in a culture that is very traditional and religious. This trend becomes less suspicious when we reflect that the writer herself was no great believer, and was widely suspected of being agnostic at the very least, she even went to trial to defend herself against charges of ᶜalmāniyyah (not believing in Allah).[265] God is mentioned in *The Woman and the Cat* only nineteen times, and even then only as part of a colloquial phrase, "*in shā' Allāh*"[266] ("God willing"), "*Allāh ykhallīk*"[267] ("God keep you"), and only in spoken parts of the narrative, never in the heroes' thoughts or in the narration of the actions. In *Wasmiyyah*, mention of God is made once every ten pages, under much the same circumstances as in *The Woman and the Cat.* "In general patriarchy is a social order, but in Arabic culture it has acquired a divine dimension through the religious ratification of the supremacy of men."[268] The language of the Qur'an itself imposes the power of men over women even in its grammatical rules.

So where do al-ᶜUthmān's heroines get their power, their ability to induce these states of dramatic delusion in the male protagonists' lives? They get their tremendous force from being on the opposite side of the coin, from the omnipresent, inescapable apparition of death, the darker side of the giver of life. There is another, alternative, God suggested by al-ᶜUthmān. From the book's title, *Wasmiyyah Emerges from the Sea*, it is clear that this is

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[265] Charges were brought against Layla al-ᶜUthmān for the use of "improper and immoral language" which violated the principles of *sharīᶜah* in her novel *al-Raḥīl* ("The Emigre") (1984). The matter was resolved in the courts in early 2000, when she was asked to pay a small fine instead of serving a jail sentence.
[266] Al-ᶜUthmān, *Al-Mar'ah wa'l-Qiṭṭah*, pp. 73, 82.
[267] Ibid., pp. 27, 80.

no ordinary romance, for it involves a third party, the sea: Laylā al-ʿUthmān's sea is the ultimate deity in *Wasmiyyah takhruj min al-baḥr*, it is the bearer of the protagonist's salvation, and his livelihood, and before all that, it is the master of his fate, it has the power to take Wasmiyyah away, and the power to return her. The secret love of the teenagers is both exposed and sealed at the seaside. It is significant that ʿAbdallāh and Wasmiyyah chose to announce their love at this location, thinking that the sea would bless this union, and their secret would be safe. The arid nature of the Kuwaiti soil, and the harshness of the desert climate, meant that the sea became the ultimate source of life. The people of Kuwait fished in it for their food, depended on it for their deliveries of fresh water (from Iraq) and other foodstuffs, they based their entire economic system around it; pearling and trading.[269]

ʿAbdallāh worships the sea like a lover, and the author explains that his love for the sea "cannot be erased through boredom, nor hesitation, nor fear, nor despair"[270]. Like the love of the Lord, it is invincible and everlasting. She even relegates the names of Allah to the sea: "He knew that it was the sea that was great and all-powerful".[271] In *Al-Turāth wa'l-Muʿāṣirah fī Ibdāʿ Laylā al-ʿUthmān*, Barbara Michalak-Pikulska quotes the Polish Orientalist Kristina Skarzynka-Bochenska as saying (in regard to Muḥammad al-Dīb's novel *Man Yadhkur al-Baḥr*) that the sea is the element that resists "the invasion of cement and nail", the markers of the encroachment of the modernising project: "The sea is symbolic of moment, of life and changes, freedom and love, silence and hope. Only through remembering the sea's presence and being aware of its existence can people be

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[268] Sabry Hafez, "Gender, Language and Identity: Arabic Narrative Discourse and Sexual Politics" (unpublished MS, 1992) p.2.

[269] See Sayf Marzūq al-Shamlān, *Tārīkh al-Ghawṣ ʿalā al-Lu'lu' fī al-Kuwayt wa'l-Khalīj al-ʿArabī* (Kuwait, 1975).

[270] Al-ʿUthmān, *Wasmiyyah*, p.56.

[271] Ibid., p.36.

allowed to go on..."[272] The sea is the antidote to the upheaval that the evolution of Kuwait into a capitalist state has caused in people's lives. It is the lifeline to the past, to tradition, to honour, and it is where al-ʿUthmān turns, through ʿAbdallāh, to find peace.

2.3.12   Families and Marriage: A Double-Edged Sword

"But marriage, in its way, was often liberating for women. 'She may read anything now she's married,' says Mr Brooke in *Middlemarch*, and married women could enjoy a wider range of experience outside the home as well as in the library, without fear of scandal."[273] This is applicable to and true of Laylā al-ʿUthmān. When she married a Palestinian man she entered into a society that "respect[s] a woman's feeling and her ambitions and encourages her to seek knowledge and a career."[274] But in al-ʿUthmān's portrayals a marriage is doomed more often than not. Talk of marriage kills Wasmiyyah, and through her marriage to the protagonist of *The Woman and the Cat*, Hessa faces first humiliation, then death. This morbid asphyxiation of matrimony may be better explained when one remembers that the writer left her first husband in 1974, and this marked a significant turning-point in her life; she herself attributes the pain that this period caused her to the literary outpourings that she placed in her novels.[275] For men too, marriage has ambivalent overtones: "I feel her presence with me is a weapon I can fight my aunt and my father with".[276] Hessa's presence gives Sālim the strength to stand up to his father and aunt, it is his only source of warmth and tenderness in a cruel world. And yet his marriage is his downfall, and the reason for his estrangement from his family and his incarceration.

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[272] Michalak-Pikulska, *al-Turāth wa'l-Muʿāṣirah*, p.69.
[273] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.67.
[274] Michalak-Pikulska, *al-Turāth wa'l-Muʿāṣirah*, p.18.
[275] Ibid., p.7.
[276] Al-ʿUthmān, *Al-Mar'ah wa'l-Qiṭṭah*, pp.101-102.

ʿAbdallāh's marriage only brings him grief, and his wife is another source of pain he wishes he could escape from.[277]

The mother figure is the saviour in both stories. In *Wasmiyyah*, his mother's "clever lie"[278] saves the protagonist from certain death, and in *The Woman and the Cat* only the protagonist's mother can make sense of Hessa's mysterious pregnancy. Laylā al-ʿUthmān shows how in Kuwait, the maternal forces of society are able to undo the chaos caused by the oppressive patriarchal practises. Yet, the mother still cannot prevent the ill-fated heroines from dying. In a sense, their actions are ultimately fruitless. The families she depicts are always broken: ʿAbdallāh's father is dead, Sālim's mother banished, and the relationship between him and his father severely dysfunctional.

2.3.13   The Socialist Implications of the Novels

Laylā al-ʿUthmān's novels, like Charlotte Brontë's, are all concerned with seeking an alternative reality, an escape from the daily, the inevitable, and while Charlotte Brontë's protagonists do achieve some measure of success in their endeavours, Laylā al-ʿUthmān's always fall short; the possibility for them is not only limited, it is always, in the end, denied.

In the novels of both Laylā al-ʿUthmān and Charlotte Brontë there is a sense of oppression, of the protagonists being stifled, because of the lack of personal space, both literally and metaphorically. However, in Laylā al-ʿUthmān's novels the sense of confinement is more acute: the protagonists are stifled by the actual physical limitations of

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[277] Al-ʿUthmān, *Wasmiyyah*, p.57.

the small seaside community they inhabit, as much as by the strict social codes that govern it. Gilbert and Gubar identify themes of escape in women's novels as a result of their "anxiety of authorship", combined with the fact that women are usually confined in men's spaces, both literally and figuratively.[279]

As in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, Laylā al-ʿUthmān's protagonists are orphans, subject to the cruelties of those around them who are supposed to be substitutes for the absent nurturers. But while Jane Eyre reacts to the ill treatments heaped upon her by rebelling, Laylā al-ʿUthmān's characters' spirits break.

2.3.14   The Controversy of Social Convention

In *Wasmiyyah*, although al-ʿUthmān chose two lovers from opposite sides of the class divide, the love ultimately fails. On the night of their fateful meeting, Wasmiyyah states clearly to ʿAbdallāh that she has not thought about the social dynamics that govern their relationship. Whenever ʿAbdallāh presses her for answers, for solutions to the impediment of their distinct social standing she becomes quiet.[280] Even though she is only a girl of not quite fourteen, Wasmiyyah's hesitation is palatable. She wants to break free from the restrictions that her social role imposes on her, but she is not willing to place herself in this position permanently. ʿAbdallāh chides her to take his conversation seriously when they meet on the moonlit beach, but it is difficult to believe from the way the conversation was going, especially in her beseeching him "don't spoil this moment for us",[281] that she would have gone ahead with ʿAbdallāh's plan for their eventual union. From the teasing tone of

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[278] Al-ʿUthmān, *Wasmiyyah*, p.103.
[279] Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman*, pp.51, 83.
[280] Al-ʿUthmān, *Wasmiyyah*, p.77-83.

the conversation, her playing along with ʿAbdallāh's fantasy, the reader does not get the impression that Wasmiyyah would have risked losing her social standing, her wealth, and her family, for the boy who used to play with her in the yard. And what is Wasmiyyah to ʿAbdallāh anyway? She is but a symbol of all that ʿAbdallāh wishes he was but does not have the drive or the ambition to become. He is obsessed by the differences that set them apart. On page 18, the incessant listing commences, "Wasmiyyah is the daughter of a noble family and I am but the son of Maryūm the errand woman". By his own admission, the new order that came into Kuwait brought with it new opportunities, opportunities that meant that he could "make people forget that I am Dalūl's son",[282] and yet he rejects this new order, rejects his wife who pushes him towards embracing the new status quo with its ability to transform their economic reality, and turns to the sea, his link with the past, the very past that oppressed him and limited his chances. Had he studied and worked hard and climbed the career ladder to make something, or someone, of himself, his life would have been very different, maybe even rewarding enough to make him forget Wasmiyyah. It was a question of choice, and he chose the sea, he chose to run away from school, to run away from facing his reality (and his nagging wife). His escapism betrays his cowardice; his unwillingness to embrace the "new" society emerging around him only proves that his sense of displacement is great in this new Kuwait where people have gone up in the world while he remains static. "Unlike the model heroes, they are not dedicated to their careers."[283] This hero type surfaces in both of al-ʿUthmān's novels: unbelievably passive, there is an almost impertinent lack of ambition in her male protagonists that verges on nihilism. The moral that the author seems to be giving here is extremely frustrating; even

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[281] Ibid., p.82.
[282] Ibid., p.54.
[283] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.140.

when the proletariat have the tools to change their lives, they will resist using them, and the only reason she can give is that of social conditioning. They are so accustomed to the old way that even if it crushes them, they remain attracted to it; they do not know any better...even if one chose to read ᶜAbdallāh's attachment to the past as an altruistic refusal to give in to capitalist temptations (and there are many indications in the novel that this seemed to be the author's intention),[284] one cannot ignore that his love of Wasmiyyah was up to the very end sub-texted with her higher social standing,[285] and never more than an illusion that he had built up in his mind to compensate for his inexorable social destiny; "and I dream big dreams, bigger than myself, that I become rich...so that I can marry you".[286] What did ᶜAbdallāh truly know of Wasmiyyah's character? She frolicked with him as a childhood playmate, and he was forbidden to meet with her as soon as she developed into her own person, her own character. All ᶜAbdallāh, and the reader, see of Wasmiyyah's character is her kindness, her yearning to be with her childhood companion who reminds her of those days of freedom, when she didn't have to wear the *ᶜabbāyah*, when her mother did not have to chaperone her on every outing, when she was confined to the four walls of her father's house.

We see in *Jane Eyre* that "Helen's death...provides the climax of the Lowood experience. She dies in Jane's arms, and Jane achieves a kind of victory: the harsh regime of Lowood is modified, its torments palliated. Like Bertha Mason, Helen is sacrificed to make way for

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[284] The opening paragraph of chapter seven: "She [ᶜAbdallāh's wife] wanted to force him to live in this era, an era when pipes of black gold exploded, and with them, pipes of greed exploded". (Al-ᶜUthmān, *Wasmiyyah*, p.52).
[285] "And if she were to return, would she forget that she is the daughter of a noble family..." (Al-ᶜUthmān, *Wasmiyyah*, p.106).
[286] Ibid., p.21.

Jane's fuller freedom."[287] But what was the point of the prolific female sacrifice in al-ʿUthmān's work? Nothing changes, no freedom is achieved, in fact, and the status quo is reaffirmed. Perhaps the difference is that her protagonists cause the deaths of their loved ones. Maybe she viewed all rebellions in the Arab world as exercises in futility. That was certainly the case in Kuwait where the Parliament was dissolved by a decree of the Emir as soon as it started to demand anything of substantial value. In the novel's conclusion, ʿAbdallāh sees Wasmiyyah's ghost calling to him from the floating seashell, and, as was his previous experience with her, he must take a mortal risk, a realisation that for this union to occur, so must death. This is a reflection of the rigidity and the inescapability of the social traditions of Kuwait.

Cruelty to children, the subjugation of women, sexual dysfunction, incest: *The Woman and the Cat* deals with the unresolved and irresolvable social issues that are embedded in the very fabric of Kuwaiti society, the issues may be of the everyday variety but their repercussions are bitter and far-reaching. The pervasive influence of the social codes and the traditions of the culture determine an individual's fate; with little reference to the dictates of religion, or basic human compassion, these aspects are cleverly drawn in a way that makes it impossible to assign blame, or designate the roles of "good and bad" to the characters of the story. The aunt's vicious tyranny shows no signs of being a conscious act, it simply is because it is allowed to be. As a spinster living in her familial home with her brother's family, it is her job to take over the role of caretaker. All her malicious actions are based on a survival instinct; if she allows her brother a happy marriage, the wife will take over the role of caretaker, and her stature will be diminished. In order for her to be a

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[287] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.118.

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successful caretaker, no vices can occur on her guard. Therefore she must kill the roots of evil where and how she finds them: in the figure of the sexually active Dānah; in the threat of Sālim's education ("school will teach him bad habits");[288] in the temptations Sālim faces as an unwed young man. The aunt is essentially a prisoner. The women of wealthy families lived in their own courtyards, secluded from the outside world and confined to a section of the house where there were no windows so that their voices could not be heard. The Kuwaiti historian Yusuf al-Qinaᶜī reported that it was considered ᶜayb (shameful) to let women's voices be heard: women should not be seen or even heard by men who were not their relatives.[289] The strict seclusion was a way of controlling women; the trading voyages took men away for long periods of time, leaving women and children behind, hence it was important for the merchant families that their women be safely protected, hidden and unheard during the men's prolonged absence. Therefore the houses were built to give women maximum protection, to conceal their existence and give them enough room to move round.[290] The men can escape the aunt's awful presence, they can leave the house, with its problems, and go to work, mingle with their friends, do any number of recreational activities, but she has nowhere else to go. According to the social laws that govern Kuwait, she must stay in the house, or leave it for a similar imprisonment in her husband's house, where the turf is new and her place in it not so certain. This explains her refusal to get married:

> Aunt – "She kept nagging you to marry me off to Saᶜidān."
>
> Father – "She wanted the best for you – that you'd get married, and we'd enjoy your children."

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[288] Al-ᶜUthmān, *Al-Mar'ah wa'l-Qiṭṭah*, p.39.
[289] Al-Qinaᶜī, *Ṣafḥāt*, p.66.
[290] Al-Mughni, *Women in Kuwait*, p.45.

His aunt was ungrateful towards the gesture, she explained how she saw it – "No. All

she was after was getting me out of the house so she could live in it by herself."[291]

Sālim's aunt saw her marriage to an unknown male, one who might not be as meek and

malleable as her brother, as a risk she was not willing to take. She chose to stay in a

situation that she had manipulated to her favour, even if that meant that she would be

denied companionship and children. In this sense, the aunt is also a tragic figure. Her harsh

words and actions are her only outlet in such a society; they preserve her authority in a

position where the odds are stacked heavily against her.

2.3.15   Claims to Feminism

"Whatever a writer's relation to the women's movement, a novel may be termed 'feminist'

for its analysis of gender as socially constructed and its sense that what has been

constructed may be reconstructed – for its understanding that change is possible and that

literature can play a part in it."[292]

We witness in al-ᶜUthmān's work the inversion of the patriarchal plots: the figure of the

aunt in *The Woman and the Cat* is that of a woman lording over men, and ᶜAbdallāh in

Wasmiyyah is placed in a Cinderella role. It is significant that the person who invades their

rendezvous, and spoils the lovers' reverie is an older man, a member of the established

patriarchal order. Just as it is significant that the mild-mannered, meek father in *The

Woman and the Cat* suddenly grows so incensed and wants to kill Hessa for bringing

shame to the family.

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[291] Al-ᶜUthmān, *Al-Mar'ah wa'l-Qiṭṭah*, p.40.

In a society where so much emphasis is placed on *sharaf*, the author takes a controversial, feminist stand. Her hero in *The Woman and the Cat* refuses to abandon his wife even though he has been cuckolded. His steadfast love and acceptance of Hessa's baby suggests that there are other ways for a man to show his strength, his "manliness", than by quashing those elements that might tarnish his honour. It is critical to the "feminist" suggestion here that the weak father shows sudden strength at this juncture in the story, and that the quietly rebellious Sālim takes what on the surface seems a position of weakness. Sālim's inaction demonstrates a superior kind of strength, in his protection of Hessa, especially under these circumstances, he shows incredible force and makes his father's uncharacteristic display of authority seem shallow, and predatory. By forcing the reader to empathise with this alternative model of manhood, this impotent and frustrated young man who refuses to abandon the woman he loves, al-ᶜUthmān strikes a blow against patriarchy.

However, that is not the only blow: fathers, the most potent symbol of patriarchal power in the Arab world, are kept outside the perimeters of the stories at all times. ᶜAbdallāh's father is dead, Wasmiyyah's father is absent and Sālim's father's contribution is negligible until the close of the story where it becomes decidedly negative. By shutting off the role of fathers in the stories, and denying both protagonists fatherhood, al-ᶜUthmān has effectively dismantled the source of patriarchal authority.

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[292] Al-Ali, *Gender Writing/Writing Gender*, p.116.

2.3.16 Defeating the Feminist Agenda

"Against the overwhelming tide of recent Arabic novels – which are leaning increasing towards being foremost political novels – emerges this novel – *al-Mar'ah wa'l-Qiṭṭah* – by the Kuwaiti author Laylā al-ʿUthmān."[293] The very fact that al-ʿUthmān chooses a topic that was isolated from the general trend, that was of a dreamier quality, far removed from the harsh realities of politics, is an anti-feminist signifier. She is allocating a space for woman away from the issues of the day. "With its emphasis on the return to the happy days of yore, nostalgia has been identified as an anti-feminist textual strategy preaching a return to the past when men were men and women were women."[294] Retreating into a fictional world of the old Kuwait, with its small community life and no threatening dynamics of change, even if read as an act of rebellion, as a conscious opting by a woman writer to digress from the mainstream, can only further marginalise Arab women's literary contribution.

In both *Wasmiyyah* and *The Woman and the Cat*, the female heroine, innocent, pure and blameless, dies in the end, while the male protagonist is the survivor, left in a half-dead limbo, lamenting the sad fate of his dearly departed. There are almost identical conversations in both books right before the heroine dies where she begs the male protagonist not to leave her alone:

> Wasmiyyah – "I'm scared."
>
> ʿAbdallāh – "Don't be scared."

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[293] ʿAlī al-Rāʿī, *al-Muṣawwar* magazine (31 January 1986).
[294] Hafez, "Women's Narrative", p.164.

Wasmiyyah – "But you are going to leave me on my own..." [295]

Hessa – "No, don't leave me alone."

Sālim – "I won't be long."

Hessa – "No, don't leave me." [296]

The portrayal of the heroine in a weak and helpless position is not a typical romantic ploy to show the male protagonists in hero mode. The author here seems to be dealing with her own issues of abandonment[297] and broken promises; the result of a childhood spent without the presence of a protective parental figure, and two failed marriages. Both men promised not to be late, they leave their women alone, and the women die. Effectively, the men have broken their word. Al-ᶜUthmān seems to be suggesting that without male protection – no matter how weak the male is – the woman cannot fend for herself, and will ultimately die. This is symbolic of the bigger picture of the dangers of going against the wishes of patriarchal society. The theme of martyrdom is also strong in her work, where the good (always young girls) die young, and the harmless male protagonists suffer without reprise. She is suggesting that in a community where there is no question but that "men are the guardians of women" (al-rijāl qawwāmūn ᶜalā 'l-nisā),[298] where men have the power to change women's lives for better or worse, the responsibility for the stunting of women's growth – educationally, spiritually, or otherwise (i.e., the metaphoric death of women) – falls squarely on them. By taking women out of this equation, by having a heroine who is unable to flee, to defend herself, to simply demand that her man not

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[295] Al-ᶜUthmān, Wasmiyyah, p.76.

[296] Al-ᶜUthmān, Al-Mar'ah wa'l-Qiṭṭah, p.80.

[297] See §2.3.3.

[298] Q.4:34 Sūrat al-Nisā' (trans. Yūsuf ᶜAli, The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an).

abandon her, or at least take her with him if he must go, al-ʿUthmān is allowing women simply to accept their fate, since it is up to men to change it, and not them.

Although her novels contain many elements that subvert the patriarchal elements of traditional Kuwaiti society, there is too much of a defeatist element in her stories for them to be labelled feminist works. The women in her writing are never elevated, or released from the societal dictates that regulate their lives. Martyrs and housebound nags are hardly the stuff of feminist inspiration. Feminism is essentially the advocacy of women's rights on the grounds of equality to men; Hessa, ʿAbdallāh's wife and Sālim's aunt, they are neither equal to men, nor do they show any signs of awareness of their situation, or a desire to change it. Wasmiyyah shows slightly more spirit than the others in her rebellious act of joining ʿAbdallāh on the beach, but Wasmiyyah drowns, and in the way that her feminist endeavour fails, so has the book's feminist possibilities. Even Laylā al-ʿUthmān's men are unequal to men; they do not share the power and the privilege that come with being a man in a society which exalts patriarchal power such as Kuwait. Feminism is essentially a revolutionary, evolutionary process, fuelled by rage and rebellion, and the movement of her novels has a distinctly negative timeline, disappearing into the past to avoid dealing with painful issues of the present.

2.3.17   Literary Merits: Soft Anger

At this Feminine stage the feminist consciousness has begun to formulate itself but is too "Feminine" in its tools to appropriate the level of anger, and thus we have exaggerated emotion and anger expressed as random violence. It is not only the situations in al-ʿUthmān's stories that are violent and perverse, but also the language itself;

Many of her stories deal with the subject of women as victims of brutal sexual exploitation. In this regard her use of language is important in that she makes use of very explicit vocabulary in her depictions. The taboo of sexuality is presented in a forthright manner that often verges on the crude. Al-ᶜUthmān's purpose is not always to achieve absolute authenticity, however. Rather, the character named in her title comes very much to the fore, while the plot within which s/he is placed sometimes feels contrived.[299]

This unnecessary use of explicit language is often self-defeating as it diverts focus from the text and centres it on the shock value of the actual diction. The opening sentence of *Wasmiyyah* draws a contrived sexual image that has no logical meaning and its only purpose seems to be as an attention-grabbing tactic: "There, a star twinkles like a woman's mouth at the moment of orgasm".[300] Paradoxically, the rest of the book contains no other references to such erotic imagery, and the language is full of romance and terms of endearment: "my love", "my companion", "I love her", and so on.

Though the social commentary inherent in the novels is glaringly obvious, it is not always clear to the reader where the author seems to be going with it. There is a wealth of emotion in the stories, which the writer always takes the utmost care to articulate, but after understanding and sympathising with her pseudo-male characters, the message the author wants to get across lacks conviction. Both stories are so emotional, so full of the cries of a tortured soul, that the reprimand to patriarchy is muffled, suffocated in the "soft" flood of heartfelt sentiment. Thus, the books create pathos, but not much else, in their readers.

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[299] Rahmer, "Development of Women's Political Consciousness", p.183.
[300] Al-ᶜUthmān, *Wasmiyyah*, p.1.

2.4 Conclusion

Besides showing decidedly Feminine characteristics such as their characterisations of men and the symbolic nature of their work, there were other meeting points in the lives of both of the writers detailed in this chapter. Both writers were not exactly pioneers of female novel-writing in their geographical areas, but they were both writing at a time when, suddenly, there was a huge influx of female novelists, so in that sense they were both, in their own socio-historical locations, part of a new phenomenon. As Showalter notes in a Western light:

> Through the 1850s and 1860s there was a great increase in theoretical and specific criticism of women novelists. Hardly a journal failed to publish an essay on women's literature; hardly a critic failed to express himself upon its innate and potential qualities. This situation, similar to the expanded market for literature by and about women in the late 1960s, suggests that the Victorians were responding to what seemed like a revolutionary, and in many ways a threatening, phenomenon.[301]

In the Arab world, the reaction was much the same,[302] and the Arab literary world has only now begun to examine the phenomenon of the woman writer in any critical depth.

2.4.1 Physical and Environmental Similarities

Traditional Kuwaiti society, with its emphasis on propriety, middle-class morality, and their strictly behind-closed-doors policy regarding family affairs, recalled many of the values of Victorian England. The similarity between certain aspects of the two societies

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[301] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.74.
[302] As discussed in chapter 1.

are so valid that Hessa bint Salmān refers to members of the privileged upper middle-class of the Arabian Gulf as the "Victorians".[303]

The industrial revolution introduced a great upheaval in the world of the early Victorians, which has certain correspondences to those caused in the Gulf by the discovery of oil in the 1930s, and the advent of the new economy. The work of both authors attempts to deal with the tremendous change that this had on their lives, and on their situations as women.

To some extent, both Laylā al-ʿUthmān and Charlotte Brontë belonged to literary households; indeed, Showalter notes that "quite a few of the women whose names appear in literary histories had fathers or uncles who were professional writers",[304] and the physical seclusion of both authors helped to foster their intellectual activity. Even their natural environments had some similar aspects: the bleakness of the moors and the dryness of the desert both meant that life in such places was a difficult task.

2.4.2　　　Stylistic Similarities

There are many obvious stylistic similarities in the work of both authors, some owing to the Feminine nature of the texts, such as the slightly "absurd"[305] nature of their male characters or in their portrayals of absent mother figures. "A factor that recurs with remarkable frequency in the backgrounds of these women is...either loss of, or alienation from, the mother...Even when the mother was present, she was often cold and

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[303] Personal encounter with Princess Hessa bint Salmān (Kuwait, September 1999); see Salmān, "The Social Politics of Human Rights in Saudi Arabia" (unpub. MA dissertation, University of Westminster, 2000).
[304] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.62.
[305] Ibid., p.65.

rejecting."[306] In both of Charlotte Brontë's novels the protagonist is an orphan, missing both parents, and in Laylā al-ᶜUthmān's *The Woman and the Cat*, the hero is effectively orphaned when his mother is taken away from him. This portrayal of the mother may have had its roots in the actual personal experience of the writers, al-ᶜUthmān was raised without a mother figure, and Brontë's mother died when she was a young girl. The incorporation of the orphan theme into their writing demonstrates another stylistic factor the writers had in common, which is the autobiographical and personal nature of their works. The novels of Laylā al-ᶜUthmān and Charlotte Brontë both mirror many of the details of their own lives. There is an overpowering loco-centric background in both authors' novels and an inherent social commentary in the text that condemns the privileged, and the constraints on individual freedom in both cultures.

However, there are other parallels in the work of the authors that are not necessarily a product of the Feminine trend, such as the gothic aspects of the works, and the highly emotional language that marks the novels of both authors. Both Laylā al-ᶜUthmān and Charlotte Brontë use first person narratives to success, making it the selling points of their novels.

2.4.3   Differences

There were, of course, many points at which the two writers did not converge. The sheer volume of the three-decker novel that Brontë had, of necessity, to write leaves the slim novels of al-ᶜUthmān looking like mere chapters in comparison, and even though the themes of love and estrangement are constant in the work of both authors, the stories

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[306] Ibid., p.61.

Charlotte Brontë writes are firmly entrenched in the here and now, while al-ᶜUthmān writes of an earlier, less complicated time.

In stark contrast to Laylā al-ᶜUthmān, Showalter writes that "Some of the most striking evidence of vocation can be found in the biographies of women who made sincere and heart-rending efforts to overcome their wish to write. Charlotte Brontë is the most important representative of this group."[307] Al-ᶜUthmān badly wanted to write, and so boldly defied the wishes of her father in the process. Though a Feminine writer in many ways, al-ᶜUthmān certainly did not suffer the sense of guilt that was characteristic of the early Victorian woman writers, and was never apologetic about her desire to be in the limelight. In the same vein, al-ᶜUthmān did not fit many of the other features that were associated with the Feminine Victorian novelists; "somehow, one cannot help suspecting that she would find it much easier to write in the fear of God if she had already to write in the fear of husband and children."[308] Charlotte Brontë certainly had the fear of God, though she lacked a husband and children, but al-ᶜUthmān, who had both husband and children, displayed no obvious fear of God. "The feminine novelists did share the cultural values of Victorian middle-class women, and they clung to the traditional notion of femininity."[309] The latter is true of Laylā al-ᶜUthmān in that she is inordinately proud of her womanly appearance, and enjoys being representative, at least physically, of male standards of female beauty.[310] The former, on the other hand, has no relevance to al-ᶜUthmān who despises the bourgeois tendencies of the Kuwaiti middle class, and believed

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[307] Ibid., p.55.
[308] Ibid., p.71.
[309] Ibid., p.97.
[310] Personal interview with al-ᶜUthmān (March 1999).

the women of this class, and their social clubs, to be one of the factors holding Kuwaiti women back.[311]

While it was theoretically possible for women novelists to write about female physical experience, including childbirth and maternal psychology, they faced many obstacles to self-expression in their own sphere. Victorian women were taught to keep these experiences to themselves, to record them in very private diaries...or to share them in intimate friendships with one or two other women; there were strong taboos against sharing them with men. As one historian explains: "From early childhood, girls were taught self-effacement and modesty, were encouraged to feel shame about their bodies, and were advised to try to 'hide' the natural conditions of menstruation and pregnancy."[312] Laylā al-ʿUthmān is very much the same in her writing in that she doesn't breach these subjects at all. At least, in the two novels discussed here, al-ʿUthmān's only reference is to the "woman" smell emitting from Hessa's body.[313] The novelists who came later, in the next Feminist stage, focused on these physical differences, even as far as celebrating them, as seen in the work of Sarah Grand and the Arab female novelist who represents the next stage, Nawāl al-Saʿdāwī.

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[311] Personal interview with al-ʿUthmān (March 1999).
[312] Showalter, *A Literature of Their* Own, p. 81.
[313] Al-ʿUthmān, *Al-Mar'ah wa'l-Qiṭṭah*, p. 56.

3

Feminist

3.1   Elaine Showalter's Feminist

According to Showalter, the Feminist state is essentially one of transition. She places

this period in a historical bracket that is often defined as the *fin de siècle*, from 1880

to 1920. Women writers at the turn of the century were greatly influenced by the

political climate in England, and that seeped into their work, colouring their prose and

affecting the quality of their writing. Feminists, according to Showalter, were aware

as writers of their disadvantaged position as women, and this came out in their work.

This was an important step in charting the evolution of women as writers in that it

forced them to divide the world into us (female) and them (male), which in turn

allowed them to define their own spheres more acutely, both as women and as writers,

thus elucidating the changes from the Feminine tradition of imitating a male voice, to

finding an independent Female blueprint. Unlike many of their Victorian precursors,

(turn-of-the-century) literary women no longer felt constrained to write covertly about

their rebellion against socially prescribed roles. Rather, many of these artists were

empowered to record both their protests and their pleas by the idea, articulated in

Woman and Labor, that "it is the woman who is the final standard of the race."[314] This

much is true in much of the "civilised" world, and even today, in the modern Arab

world it was (and sometimes still is) often the case that a country's "civility", or the

sophistication of its people, is measured by the political position held by its women

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[314] Gilbert and Gubar, *Norton Anthology*, p.978.

and the measure of freedom they enjoy. This is part of a much earlier mindset that came with the importation of Western concepts in the early twentieth century by Arab modernists such as Qāsim Amīn.[315]

Showalter suggests that towards the end of the century, the Feminist novelists arrived at the conclusion that men and women were

> indeed very different. They reversed the Victorian critical dictum; the most extreme group came to believe that men lacked an inner life, or at least one as rich and fruitful as their own. Turning the old biological stereotypes around, they began to see the culture and psychology of patriarchy as harsh and sterile and to seek the promise of spiritual and social evolution in the profound sympathies of the female psyche.[316]

In this way, helping transform the novel into a more self-consciously literary form than it had ever been before. Women writers of this period used this new and exciting novel form in a way unique to their cause, it was their weapon of choice in getting across to a cruel and patriarchal world their message that they would stand being second class citizens no longer.

By the beginning of World War I, many of the necessary conditions for female emancipation were present. As identified by the historian Gerda Lerner, these included "a technology that permitted society to remove food preparation and care of the sick from the home, the mechanization of heating and laundry, the spread of

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[315] Discussed in §1.2.3.
[316] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own.*

healthcare and birth control, and the availability of education to all children."[317] Another sign of the dramatic transformation of women's lives was the change in fashion that began to liberate women from the weight and confinement of crinolines and hoops, replacing them first with bustles and then with simpler, lighter skirts. Likewise, in the modernisation of Egypt and the Arab world, women of Nawāl al-Saʿdāwī's era experienced these changes, in dress and other aspects of their outward appearance, in rapid succession, bringing with them the same sense of liberation that had been given to the turn-of-the-century women in England fifty years before.

There were other factors that contributed to the metamorphosis that was occurring in female lives and thus in their letters during the Feminist stage; with the shrugging-off of the traditional shackles of domesticity came a parallel literary discarding, which opened up other avenues for female self-exploration. "The abrupt disappearance of the three-decker novel in the 1890s helped women writers who had never been comfortable with this format to experiment with short fiction: 'dreams', 'allegories', 'fantasias' and 'keynotes'."[318] This allowed women novelists to use a language that was all of their own to articulate gushes of feeling that would hitherto have looked like stylistic flaws in the patriarchal formats they were forced to adhere to prior to this discovery. The language of emotion as seen in the Feminine stage of writing had become able to stand up on its own as a unique Feminist voice.

However, for all their achievements, Feminist writers left much to be desired as representatives of independent women. Their very beliefs were sometimes the reason

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[317] Gilbert and Gubar, *Norton Anthology*, p.971.

for their downfall. The brightest stars of their day would very quickly fall into obscurity and would most likely have remained forgotten, had it not been for the revival of interest in women's independence movements that came in the 1970s. Elaine Showalter finds an explanation for this unfortunate lack in her discussion of George Egerton, "who never developed sufficiently as an artist to sustain her first celebrity. She considered her art 'of less importance' than her 'life as a woman' and consequently she put less energy into it."[319] This could be applied to many of the Feminist writers, who were often involved in socio-political pursuits that would take precedence over their writing, and furthermore, it seemed that many of them had difficulty committing to the disciplines of literary work. Netta Syrett, a turn-of-the-century poet, wrote in her autobiography, *Sheltering Tree*, that the Feminist author D'Arcy never filled her potential because she was incurably idle. Henry Harland of the *Yellow Book* is said to have locked her in a room on one occasion, and refused to let her out until a story was completed.[320]

3.1.1   Earlier and Later Feminists

The Feminist writers can be divided into earlier and later Feminists, according to where they stood on the political divide that the suffragists brought about. Many of the early Feminists, though they believed in the inherent differences between men and women and in the moral supremacy of women, did not think that it would be appropriate for women to pursue the vote, deeming it detrimental to woman's status. They firmly thought that a woman's place was in the home, and that exposure to the

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[318] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.182.
[319] Ibid., p.210.

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harsh realities of the outside world was a corrupting influence. "They were going to administer maternal love unto the world, and the maternal instinct, epitomized by Ruskin as the sheltering home or garden became for them a mighty fortress."[321] This is problematic for some of the later Feminists,[322] including Nawāl al-Saᶜdāwī, who were to suggest that actual maternal love was draining on women and that it diffused their energies. Joannou suggests that "by the turn of the century the Victorian obsession with respectability had come to seem increasingly outmoded by many observers. A criticism frequently levied against the leaders of Victorian and Edwardian suffragettes/ists by sexual radicals was that they supported the repressed codes of Victorian morality rather than demanding full sexual and emotional freedom for women."[323]

For many of the later Feminist writers, the true measure of female potential lay in their ability to put across their socio-political ideologies in a way that would support the woman mission, which often blurred the distinction between Feminist and Suffragette fiction. Joannou defines Suffragette fiction as

> fiction written by the suffragettes and their supporters in the period between the
> onset of Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) militancy in 1903 and 1928,
> when all women received the vote. By 1908 the public impact of suffragette

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[320] Valerie Sanders, *The Private Lives of Victorian Women: Autobiography in Nineteenth Century England* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989) p.162.
[321] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.188.
[322] Ibid., p.190.
[323] Maroula Joannou "Suffragette Fiction and the Fictions of Suffrage" in: (eds) Maroula Joannou and June Purvis, *The Women's Suffrage Movement; New Feminist Perspectives* (Manchester University Press, 1998) p.108.

militancy had already become such that *all* forms of rebelliousness exposed women

to the possibility of being associated with the suffragettes.[324]

By definition, all suffragettes were feminists, but not all feminists were suffragettes,

and for many women any association with the latter was a thing to be avoided at all

costs. At times, this was as much a survival instinct as a clash of ideologies.

3.1.2   Suffrage

"...The suffragette has served as an immediately recognised icon of strong-minded

English womanhood or audacious female eccentricity."[325]

No discussion of the emergence of feminism in England can escape mention of the

suffragettes, those brave women who fought long and hard to grant English women

the right to represent themselves in parliament through the vote. In joining the

movement, women writers had to abandon class distinction and, more often than not,

the privileges of being ladies, and of being treated as such. *The Daily Mail* newspaper

coined the term "suffragette" in 1906 to describe these "new style militants".[326]

Throughout the final decades of the nineteenth century, women attempted through

reform groups, volunteer organisations and clubs to extend their roles from the

domestic to the public sphere. After repeated efforts by the moderate National Union

had failed to get a suffrage bill through Parliament, Emmeline Pankhurst in 1903

formed a new suffrage society, the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU),

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[324] Ibid., p.101.

[325] Ibid., p.101.

[326] "Introduction" by Elaine Showalter, *The Beth Book* (London: Virago, 1979) p.10.

which used different tactics, such as heckling, illegal speaking, seeking arrest, and enduring imprisonment. Meetings and marches multiplied as militants began pouring acid into letterboxes, throwing bricks and stones through shop windows, cutting telegraph wires and slashing paintings. Convinced that they would only receive newspaper attention through dramatic action, those militants sentenced to prison terms refused to eat, and jailors resorted to forcible feeding of hunger strikers. Painful and dangerous, these force-feedings were humiliating and caused physical damage, and even the death of one of the suffragettes. In spite of growing support for women's suffrage during the renewed campaigns of 1913–1914, many moderates and socialists had been alienated by the Pankhursts' methods or by their exclusive focus on the vote. With the outbreak of war in August 1914, the movement was further split between those women who followed Mrs Pankhurst in dedicating their energies to the war effort, or those like the feminist author Olive Schriener, who worked for world peace.

The fact that Suffragette fiction was written at a time when votes for women appeared to hang finely in the balance, usually in the hope of influencing heated public debates, makes it significantly different from women's writing of the Victorian period. It became more significant at a time when there were many debates surrounding the nature of art and aesthetic expression. The fact that women's writing at that time did not necessarily follow the "art for art's sake" credo meant that it was dismissed as lacking in artistic value. However, as Linda Tickner points out, " the art/ propaganda divide is of questionable value within the context of the cultural production of the woman's suffrage movement because this demarcation is in itself, a kind of propaganda for art which secures the art as something complex, humane and ideologically pure through the operation of an alternative category of propaganda as

that which is crude, institutional, partisan."[327] Tickner stresses the need for a carefully

differentiated analysis of Suffragette fiction in which its relationship to existing power

structures, and the wider social, historical and political relationships of which it forms

a part, is assessed, and not in relation to preconceived notions about "propaganda"

and "art" or the inherent value of particular modes of writing. The validity of the art

vs. propaganda debate is seen in relation to a movement that is primarily concerned

with destroying preconceived notions of what should or shouldn't be, and challenging

all "traditional", i.e. male oriented, definitions.

3.1.3   Grand and al-Saʿdāwī: Representations of the Feminist

By Elaine Showalter's own admission, Sarah Grand was the "most productive and

robust representative of a generation of English women novelists writing in the

1890s",[328] and that is what makes Grand the ideal candidate for the purposes of this

comparison: she displays many of the "enabling" qualities of the suffragette writers,

whilst simultaneously being from the late Victorian generation, so that she comes

close to bridging the gap between early and late Feminist writers.

3.2   Sarah Grand

Grand was born Frances Elizabeth Clarke on June 10th 1854, in a small seaside town

in Ireland. Much like the characters she wrote about, Sarah Grand was the offspring of

typically middle-class parents: a naval officer and the daughter of a landed Yorkshire

squire. Her father passed away when Grand was seven, upon which the family moved

back to England. Up to the age of fourteen she was educated at home with her sisters,

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[327] Joannou and Purvis, *Women's Suffrage Movement*, pp.102-103.

then she was sent to a boarding school for two years to get the "discipline"[329] it was thought she required. At the age of sixteen she married a widowed army surgeon, the father of two, the eldest being only six years her junior. She gave birth to her only child, Archibald, in 1871, then moved with her husband to the Far East for five years, settling back in Warrington, Cheshire on their return. As Showalter puts it, "the unhappiness of the union can be surmised from her [Grand's] many fictional accounts of heroines suffering in marriage to military men, doctors, or both".[330] In 1890, Grand left her husband, renamed herself Sarah Grand (a name she used personally and professionally for the rest of her life), and moved to London, where she became a celebrated novelist, suffragist, and feminist essayist and speaker. At the end of World War I she retired to Bath, serving for six years as a "Lady Mayoress".[331] She died in relative obscurity on May 12th 1943, in Calne, Wiltshire, at the age of 88.[332]

3.2.1 Sarah Grand's Work

In 1878, Grand published her first story in *Aunt Judy's Magazine*. Jarrolds published her first book, *Two Dear Little Feet*, in 1880. *Ideala* was published next, in 1888, at Grand's own expense. She found trouble in publishing *The Heavenly Twins* too, although she eventually managed to sell it to William Heinemann in 1892, and the book was an instant bestseller. Heinemann published all but one of her novels and short-story collections until the last, *Variety*, in 1922. She continued to write well into the 1930s, although she was often hampered by ill health and social duties. Her last

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[328] Showalter, "Introduction", *The Beth Book*, p.xiv.

[329] Joan Huddleston (ed.), *Sarah Grand; A Bibliography* (Victorian Research Guides 1, Department of English, University of Queensland, 1979) p.11.

[330] Showalter, "Introduction", *The Beth Book*, p.xiv.

[331] The post was mainly one of an "official" hostess, for which Grand received an invitation by the widowed Lord Mayor, Cedric Chivers.

publication was *The Breath of Life* in 1933, a collection of extracts from her novels edited by Gladys Singers-Bigger and printed privately in Bath.

3.2.1.1   *The Heavenly Twins*

The Heavenly Twins pursues the lives and marriages of three heroines, Evadene Colquhoun, Edith Beale and Angelica Kilroy. The story begins with the reluctant marriage of Evadene, representing the Old and the New Woman, steeped respectively in religion and science, to Captain Colquhoun. Evadene refuses to consummate her marriage on discovering that her husband has been unfaithful; he finds other outlets, and her mental state slowly deteriorates from frustration and blocked maternal drives. Sir Mosley Metheith, a naval officer, courts Edith, but he has contracted syphilis on the HMS Abomination, and passes it on to her and her unborn baby; eventually she, her husband and her baby all die from the disease. The twins in the title are Angelica and Diavolo, and their respective development is charted throughout the story, and is usually the glue that holds the rest of the story together.

Grand explores the myriad socio-psychological complications associated with choosing a mate and living with him in relative harmony. Through a study of Evadene's youthful development, Sarah Grand explores the dangers of adolescent sexual feelings confusing a girl's judgement of men. She stresses the responsibility placed on parents in this situation, and in Evadene's story and more particularly in Edith's we see how even loving parents can fail to have high enough standards to ensure their daughter's safety. Edith is allowed to marry a dissolute man and contracts a venereal disease from him and dies. Evadene's

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[332] Gillian Kersley, *Darling Madame: Sarah Grand and Devoted Friend* (London: Virago, 1983).

marriage shows the adverse psychological and physiological effects of repressing her sexual feelings as she agrees to keep up the appearance of marriage for the sake of her husband's, and her family's, reputation.

Angelica's story, which is the more central of the three, demonstrates the part played by education and home training in creating roles for women outside the accepted norms of society. Angelica is completely at one with her brother until society forces them into what it considers the only appropriate role patterns of their respective sex, and in the pattern for women, as Grand portrays it, there were few outlets for their emotional and mental abilities, until she finally ends up in a marriage with a docile, uninteresting man who will neither satisfy nor threaten her.

There is sociological merit in Evadene's and Angelica's stories, mainly because of the author's recognition of the complexities in her heroines' characters and in their responses to the situations they find themselves in. Only in Edith's story does Sarah Grand descend to over-simplification and a disappointingly predictable ending, but even here she covers new ground in showing the heated sexual emotionalism of the adolescent girl's religious fervour, and in mentioning "for perhaps the first time in the 19th century popular novel, the existence of venereal disease as something that could affect middle-class women."[333]

Though *The Heavenly Twins* was a huge success in terms of sales figures (it sold out within a year in its three-decker form, and was reprinted in 1894 in a single

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[333] Huddleston, *Sarah Grand*, p.7.

volume)[334] and had some encouraging reviews – *The Spectator* approved the originality of her ideas and her forceful style, and found *The Heavenly Twins* full of ethical and intellectual interest, and *The Nation* also found it original and intelligent[335] – the novel got its fair share of scathing reviews. The choppy and unwieldy writing style of *The Heavenly Twins* and the way it was awkwardly put together gave reviewers a field day, and their cutting criticism of its style probably motivated to some extent the heated arguments in favor of purpose against fine writing which Beth makes during her confrontation with the young literary poseur towards the end of *The Beth Book*.

3.2.1.2 *The Beth Book*

The Beth Book was not quite so popular as *The Heavenly Twins* at the time of its publication, but the author's writing style had improved with time, with the result being that "it was less sensational, more psychological, more modern".[336]

In *The Beth Book*, Grand continues her studies of developing women, focusing on only one heroine this time. In the early part of the book she presents a full and fascinating story of female adolescence and growing maturity. The book benefits from this concentration on one character, and the first half of *The Beth Book* is compulsively engrossing, with the portrait of Beth's childhood being very similar to the repressed memory and emotion of the childhood chapters in *Jane Eyre*. There is none of the sentimentality of Brontë however, and Grand paints an unnervingly

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[334] Ibid., p.12.
[335] Ibid., p.9.
[336] "Introduction" by Sally Mitchell, *The Beth Book* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1994) p.xxii.

honest picture of the raw emotions that can distort a child's vision of the world. As a child Beth is quite terrible, yet the reader never loses sympathy for her, perhaps because she is so flawed and mischievous – exactly as a real child would be – and free from the self-righteousness that plagued the child narrator of *Jane Eyre*.

The family into which Beth Caldwell is born has burdened her mother with too many children, too little food, genteel standards, and a husband who is an alcoholic, judgemental and repressive, self-satisfied philanderer. Yet Mrs Caldwell does love him, and strains to please him for her own emotional well-being as well as out of dependence and fear. As Sally Mitchell puts it: "Women readers, I suspect, have always understood the excruciating realism of this family portrait and the sexual charisma encoded in the father's flirtatious encounters with his servants and his friend's daughters, though male critics when the book was published saw only a hysterically anti-male caricature."[337] In all five chapters that mark the beginning of Beth's life there is an intense struggle with her mother, who is shown to be a hard woman on her children, resorting to shaking the "highly-strung" Beth, and belittling her intellect, even in front of strangers, to the extent that Beth begins to see her mother as a repugnant figure, preferring the Catholic nurse Kitty.

The events of the novel then rush through the death of Beth's father, and the family's move back to England, and Beth's experiences in school, leading up to her coercion into an unhappy marriage with the family physicist, Dr Dan. The events of the story then take us through Beth's discovery of Dr Dan's infidelity, his misogynistic

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[337] Ibid., p.x.

vocation in the Lock Hospital and his practising of vivisection, and her eventual escape to London. The pace of the novel slows down considerably at this point and the reader learns in an abundance of detail of Beth's neighbours, and her illness, her dreams, her political awakening, the writing of her novel, and, finally, her meeting with the man of her dreams. The novel ends on this inconclusive note, of Beth, having fulfilled her literary and political ambitions, looking up the drive at the approaching figure of who may, or may not, be the man of her dreams, her neighbour in London, the American artist Arthur Brock.

3.2.2 Placing Sarah Grand's Work in Its Socio-Historical Background

Women's civil rights in relation to marriage had improved somewhat between the middle and the end of the nineteenth century. The Married Woman's Property Act of 1882 was the first comprehensive piece of legislation to give property rights to married women, who hitherto would relinquish all ownership to their husbands upon marriage, effectively becoming economically dependent on them irrespective of their financial status prior to the marriage. In 1891, an act was passed which denied men "conjugal rights" to their wives bodies without their wives' consent. By the 1890s then, married women at least enjoyed certain improvements in their legal positions, ones that in theory, rather than practice, women in Arab-Islamic cultures had divine right to (as far as inheritance rights and economic independence were concerned), and so had no need to campaign for.

The repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts in 1886 was based on an ideology of feminine purity that paradoxically involved many middle-class women in public discussions of prostitution and social diseases. The Contagious Diseases Acts of the 1860s were passed in an atmosphere of near terror concerning the spread of venereal disease, particularly amongst members of the armed forces. (Much like the Aids epidemic of the 1980s that brought with it a fresh look at morality and monogamy.) Prostitution was blamed for the spread of the disease and the first of the Acts provided that any woman thought to be a prostitute in the eleven named garrisons and dock towns could be forced to undergo medical examination. Virtually any working-class woman could fall under suspicion and be picked up for examination. There was no trial or defence, and any woman who was examined was then automatically registered as a prostitute. If she was unlucky enough to be found diseased, she could be detained in a "Lock" hospital for up to three months. Subsequent acts made police power against suspected prostitutes even more draconian. The Acts of course failed to control the spread of the disease, because whilst they sought to check and control diseased women, they left their (equally diseased) male clients free to re-infect anyone they came into contact with. The campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts was the first large-scale intervention of British women in the political process. During its course, women learnt to lobby MPs and influence public opinion by means of publicity, mass meetings and door-to-door canvassing. While working-class women in the affected districts worked to dispose of a direct threat, other women were drawn into a movement of solidarity which expressed their resentment of the control men were able to exercise over women's bodies and their lives, recalling the abortion issue that would surface a century later. Clearly referring to the feminist campaigns against the Contagious Diseases Acts, Grand revealed in an interview in

1896 that her impetus for writing *The Heavenly Twins* was mainly because "Men endeavour to protect themselves from disease by restrictive laws bearing on women, but nothing has yet been done to protect the married woman from contagion". She added to this her hope that "we shall soon see the marriage to certain men made a criminal offence".[338]

Like the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts, the antivivisection movement was a product of women's generalised suspicion of men and their resentment of doctors' unethical practices. The Cruelty to Animals Act of 1876 provided legal protection for medical experimenters. Antivivisectionists (like Beth in *The Beth Book*) were particularly inflamed by the use of docile and trusting dogs, by the lack of anaesthesia, and by the potential usefulness of such "medical" research. There was a widespread sense that women identified with pets and animals as dependents, and the lack of empathy displayed in the way male doctors treated both women and animals.

There is an unflattering picture of social hypocrisy in Sarah Grand's condemnation of the Victorian middle class's obsession with "keeping up appearances",[339] with which Captain Colquhoun is accused of being obsessed. It is the reason for Mrs Caldwell's misery in *The Beth Book*, and the reason that Evadene is forced into a sham of a marriage with a dissolute man in *The Heavenly Twins*.

3.2.3   The New Woman

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[338] Sally Ledger, "The Daughters of Decadence?" in: *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siecle* (Manchester University Press, 1997) p.111.
[339] Grand, *The Heavenly Twins* (1893) (University of Michigan Press, 1993) p.145.

"From the 1890s there was an upsurge of fiction written to explore the possibilities of greater social freedom for women. This 'New Woman' fiction ranged in tone from the serious in Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) to the hysterical in such minor fiction as Mona Caird's *Daughters of Danaus* (1894) or Emma Frances Brooke's *A Superfluous Woman* (1894)."[340] It seems that there was however a major difference between the way male writers and women writers chose to portray their New Woman heroines. Whereas the former focused on the greater freedom that women enjoyed, and the havoc they wreaked on an unsuspecting male sex through it, the latter tended to concentrate on the continuing confinement that faced women in an increasingly acquisitive society. These "New Woman" novels, however, did not follow a set formula, either in style or in content. As Huddleston notes:

> There were some novels at one extreme which encouraged the maximum licence in self-expression, as did George Egerton in *Keynotes* (1894), while at the other extreme there were those, like Mrs Humphrey Ward at her most virulent in *Delia Blanchflower* (1913), who deplored any development away from the notion of woman's traditional sphere, though it should be noted that notions of woman's sphere had been quietly changing throughout the Victorian period...Sarah Grand's novels must be placed midway between all these extremes.[341]

Sarah Grand herself coined the term "New Woman" in an 1849 essay, though the phenomenon had attracted attention since the mid-1880s. "Earlier designations, such as 'wild woman' and 'shrieking sisterhood' were (like 'bra burner' and 'woman's libber' a century later) wholly pejorative; 'New Woman', like 'feminist', could be

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[340] Huddleston, *Sarah Grand*, p.5.
[341] Ibid., pp.5-6.

claimed with pride even though it was also used as an insult."[342] Although many

critics and scholars have written a great deal about the "New Woman" and "New

Woman" fiction, it is sometimes confusing to define the term exactly. Ann Heilmann

writes: "in its most typical form New Woman fiction is feminist fiction written by

women, and deals with middle-class heroines who in some way re-enact

autobiographical dilemmas faced by the writers themselves...it is a genre at the

interface between autobiography, fiction and feminist propaganda."[343]

The authors of what came to be known as New Woman novels were not consciously

creating a distinct school of fiction and often pursued widely different lines of attack.

However, some common characteristics can be identified which established the

general tone of their fiction. "Heroines who refused to conform to the traditional

feminine role, challenged accepted ideals of marriage and maternity, chose to work

for a living, or who in any way argued the feminist cause, became commonplace in

the work of both major and minor writers and were firmly identified by readers and

reviewers as New Woman."[344] The central part played by reading and education is a

good example of the way New Woman novelists tried to include the ingredients of

female emancipation in their novels. More important than formal education was the

heroines' reading habits. "I never, never thought that she would live to quote books to

her parents"[345] wails Evadene's mother in *The Heavenly Twins*. Uncensored reading

was often held responsible for what was considered to be one of the New Woman's

most unpleasant characteristics, a distasteful frankness about sex. This is especially

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[342] Mitchell, "Introduction", *The Beth Book*, p.vi.
[343] Ann Heilmann, "New Woman Fiction and *fin de siecle* Feminism", *Women's Writing*, vol. 3 (1996) p.205.
[344] Gail Cunningham, *The New Woman and the Victorian Novel* (London: Macmillan Press, 1978) p.3.
[345] Grand, *The Heavenly Twins*, p.187.

true in the case of Evadene, who seemed to know the implications of marrying a man with a sexually active past better than her parents.

Another factor that the New Woman novels had in common was their heavy emphasis on nervous disorder, disease and death. Mental breakdown, madness and suicide are the penalties the New Woman has to pay for her attempted emancipation. Of course, this was mainly because the New Woman's ideals were far too advanced for her environment. These novelists were trying to do two things at once; firstly, they were arguing the case for a greater degree of freedom, and secondly, they were trying to demonstrate how firmly entrenched the creeds and conventions that trapped women were. They were promoting high-minded principles, while simultaneously exposing the stark reality of practice. Since the system was nearly invincible, and the odds stacked so heavily against her, it would be absurd to portray a New Woman triumphing over them. Thus the common pattern of the New Woman novel is to portray the heroine arriving at her ideals of freedom and equality through her own reading and observations of polite society, and then being put through the humiliating experience of trying to put them into practice, finally arriving at a position of weary disillusion. The feminism of New Woman fiction was so fraught with contradiction, and so preoccupied with narratives of female failure, that it appeared almost anti-feminist at times. Even when their heroines succeed, it is only achieved in half-measures, and through painful compromise. In Beth's case, her success seems somehow hollow after what she has been through, and it seems as though Grand herself was not sure how she should let her heroine achieve what she had striven so hard to accomplish, and the novel just tails off, with none of the real issues being settled. To their credit, the New Woman novelists tried hard to show that they did not

endorse their heroine's compromised positions; they present the deflated surrender that these talented and intelligent women are forced into as further proof of a rotten social fabric.

Detailing the literary subjectivities of the New Woman, Gail Cunningham bases her observations on Stutfield's analysis of the two types of New Woman fiction,[346] the "Purity School" and the "Neurotic School",[347] the former to which Sarah Grand belongs. She concurs that the "Purity School" variety featured a bold, independent heroine who turns her attention to the "woman question", and the problems associated with the institution of marriage. According to Cunningham, these writers clung to the notion of a "feminine ideal", that women occupied a different, though equally important, sphere from men, in which "purity" was the highest principle, except that these authors' conception of purity was in opposition to the conventional meaning of the term: "For these New Woman novelists, purity could derive only from knowledge, and possibly experience, of the world's blighting miseries, and if a few feverish joys could be picked up along the way, so much the better. Theirs was a purity of truth, personal integrity and freedom, and inevitably brought them into a head-on collision with social convention."[348]

The New Woman writers were taken to task for their failure, or refusal, to conform to traditional fictional paradigms and to observe the formal proprieties. William Barry's 1884 review of Sarah Grand's *The Heavenly Twins* is symptomatic, attacking Grand

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[346] Cunningham, *New Woman*, p.50.
[347] Generally, these authors purported a more radical feminist view, where greater emphasis was placed on sexual freedom for women, than on establishing a "feminine ideal".
[348] Cunningham, *New Woman*, p.51.

for filling pages with "shrieking", for inappropriately combining love affairs and ideas, and writing in a manner that is "self-conscious, or even pedantic".[349]

3.2.4   Feminist Autobiography: The Artist as a Young Woman

There are aspects of Grand's novels that are lifted directly from her life. As Showalter explains, "enough information is available to make clear that *The Beth Book* is autobiographical in its most important details."[350] In its portrait of the artist as a young woman, *The Beth Book* is an interesting example of the formal transition from Victorian realism to twentieth-century modernism. In her essay on "Portraits of the artist as a young woman: representations of the female artist in the New Woman fiction of the 1890s", Lynn Pykett discusses "the uses made of the artist in *fin-de-siecle* variants of the semi-autobiographical *Kunstlerroman*, a narrative form which was to become an important aspect of modernist writing".[351] She suggests that the figure of the female artist figured so prominently in the work of New Woman novelists and short-story writers as a result of their claims to an authority on a distinctive woman's experience, now that they were aware of their individuality, and the uniqueness of their perspective. This is an example of the "self-reflexivity" that characterised much of the New Woman fiction; through making woman writers of its heroines, it "foregrounds the conditions of its own production".[352] Therefore, she is the perfect subject to illustrate the obstacles an aspiring woman writer will encounter

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[349] Lyn Pykett, *The Improper Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and The New Woman Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992) p.9.

[350] Showalter, "Introduction", *The Beth Book*.

[351] Lyn Pykett, "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman: Representations of the Female Artist in the New Woman Fiction of the 1890s" in: (ed.) Nicola Diane Thompson, *Victorian Women Writers and the Woman Question* (Cambridge University Press, 1999) p.135.

[352] Ibid., p.136.

whilst trying to realise her literary ambitions, in the face of the dominant definitions of femininity.

Those who guarded entry into the institutions of literature and art – publishers, book and magazine editors, and menacing critics – were invariably males in New Woman fiction, as in real life. Women could only enter these domains on the narrow terms of what these male authorities considered suitable for their gender. This is illustrated perfectly in *The Beth Book*, when she meets up with her childhood boyfriend Alfred Cayley Pounce, whose ready-made criticism of her novel, prepared even before the book came out on the market, is reflective of the deep suspicion with which the Feminist writer regarded male critics. He has prejudged Beth's work solely on her sex and will never see her work in a different light, so when it is published anonymously, and he praises it without realising that it was in fact Beth's novel, Grand not only foils the manufactured responses to New Woman fiction, she also exposes the idiocy of male figures of authority, like critics.

"One of the most explicit fictional expositions on the relationship between art and society, and the most volatile refutation of late Victorian aesthetic ideology, is found in the militantly feminist semi-autobiographical *The Beth Book*."[353] Beth's ultimate resolve to make content rather than style her top priority reflects Grand's own resolutions. "She had been misled herself...by her pretty talent for writing, her love of turning phrases...The writing had come of this cultivation, but this [public

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[353] Rita S. Kranidis, *Subversive Discourse* (London: Macmillan Press, 1995) p.84.

speaking]...was a natural gift".[354] It is significant that Beth's writing finally takes the form of speeches, texts over which she has total command and which enable a more direct relationship with her audiences, unlike the novels whose marketability and integrity could very easily be misconstrued and corrupted. Accordingly, the heroine's definition of "success" centres on her public accessibility and visibility, and not necessarily on her mass popularity. In this narrative the key opposition is between art for art's sake, and art for money's sake, on the one hand, and writing with a purpose, on the other. In other words aestheticism and commerce are bracketed together in opposition to social action or politics.

Most importantly for Feminist writers, the figure of the struggling female artist, even in her failed state, represents the realisation of women's ambition to become financially as well as emotionally independent, and to explore female desire to speak up and speak out, the desire for a form of creativity that was not the biological one of maternity. In much of the New Woman writing, the figure of the young artist was the best means available for late-nineteenth-century women to transcend the ideological and material conditions of middle-class femininity.

3.2.5 Political Diatribes: Social and Legal Issues in the Novels of Sarah Grand

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[354] Grand, *The Beth Book*, p.525.

One of the declared objectives of the Women Writers' Suffrage League (WWSL), which was founded in 1908, the membership of which included many well-known authors such as Olive Schriener and Sarah Grand, was "proselytising for the vote by the means proper to writers, the use of the pen". Of course, the very act of subscribing to the WWSL constituted "not only a public challenge to the hallowed autonomy of the creative artist, but also a public declaration to the effect that the woman author did not view art as a special activity divorced from the political".[355] Even though both books discussed here were written prior to the founding of the WWSL, Grand makes no secret of the fact that she sees writing as an "educating" mission not to be taken lightly.

Both *The Heavenly Twins* and *The Beth Book* are fuelled by issues central to the women's movement. Grand creates situations which demonstrate the legal and financial disabilities of wives, the varieties of inadequate education provided to girls, the need for women to become financially knowledgeable, the extent to which marriage is seen as a woman's sole vocation (and therefore her only escape from an unhappy family life), and the dangers of a double standard that condones men's premarital and even extra-marital promiscuity. Middle-class insularity and complacency are depicted in Grand's work as being both emotionally and socially crippling to women since they perpetuate dependency and a primary allegiance to social class in the very women they serve to oppress. Beth uproots herself, rejecting the socially sanctioned marriage she was in, exploring her potential for life as a single woman in London, where she effectively loses her socio-economic identity, becoming

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[355] Joannou and Purvis, *Women's Suffrage Movement*, p.104.

one of the merging, unnamed class of the 'masses'. She only reaches true independence and self-actualisation when she occupies a place on the fringes of social and class divisions. Political commitment is exemplified as a female virtue in *The Beth Book*, whose heroine's growth culminates in her becoming a feminist activist:

> She was deeply engrossed by thoughts on progress, which had been suggested by a passage in one of Emerson's essays: "All conservatives are such from natural defects. They have been effeminated by position or nature, born halt or blind, through luxury of their parents, and can, only, like invalids, act on the defensive." Even in her own little life Beth had seen so much of the ill effects of conservatism in the class to which she belonged, and had suffered so much from it herself already, that the subject appealed to her strongly, and she pursued it with enthusiasm – more from the social than the political point of view – however.[356]

Sarah Grand takes great pains to delineate exactly what the feminists stood for and/or against. They were anti-classism, yet elitist in their own way; against man's knowledge, science, medicine, pro-nature; not conservative and at the same time against moral debauchery. In this, she strongly expresses and explains their opinions, their causes and their influences, and the results sometimes overpower the text, with her voice as the author at times muffling that of her heroine, which is reminiscent of Charlotte Brontë in *Jane Eyre*. Beth's constant sermonising and philosophising can grate on the modern reader's nerves. Ironically, this only happens towards the book's close, when she discovers herself as a feminist.

It is interesting that the circle of activists at the edge of the action in *The Beth Book*, Mrs Orton Beg, Mrs Kilroy, Sir George Galbraith, Lady Fulda Guthrie, are leaders in the Contagious Diseases Acts repeal campaign, a role in which they appeared in Sarah

Grand's earlier novel *The Heavenly Twins*. The figure of Ideala, and some of *The Beth Book*'s and *The Heavenly Twins*'s supporting cast, were a throwback to her earlier novel in the "feminist" trilogy, *Ideala*. It is as if Grand wished to comment on the continuing nature of the struggle for women's emancipation. Interestingly, in *The Beth Book* the figure of Ideala is a victor and an agent of radical change, and not the victim she appeared to be in the first novel; she is the one who convinces Beth that she is right to leave her husband, and thus we have a cross-textual evolution from a subservient state, to that of revolutionary possibility.

Mitchell argues that the political debates in *The Beth Book* do not detract from its "readability":

> Unlike many New Woman novels, *The Beth Book* does not have a plot wholly devised to illustrate a thesis, nor is the story merely an excuse for the characters to hold long conversations about important issues. Critics have usually treated the book as social history or biography. Yet *The Beth Book* is also a "good read".[357]

Yet, she admits that it "shares the faults of many socialist and New Woman books from the period; it is essentially a treatise in which characters sit around talking about the new world order."[358]

3.2.6   Breaking the Silence: Taboos to the Fore

Beth's sole source of moral direction as a child is her maiden aunt Victoria, who is marginal enough to provide the child with a sense of propriety and moral self-

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[356] Grand, *The Beth Book*, p.359.
[357] Mitchell, "Introduction", *The Beth Book*, p.xviii.

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command without imposing restrictions on her. When Beth questions Biblical teaching she causes great stress to the teachers, who try to convince her of the sanctity of the Holy Scripture, and she, although she does not argue, remains unconvinced and "she determined to read the Bible through from beginning to end, and see for herself if she could detect any grounds for the mischief making doubts and controversies she had been hearing about."[359] This shows that a feminist must have enough awareness, enough "feminist consciousness", to question the givens of any establishment she finds herself put against, or put under. "She did not believe in the God of Job – because she was sure that there must be a better God –that was all."[360] It is very relevant that Beth's moment of religious doubt should come precisely when she was about to be confirmed, and this was assuaged, swallowed up into the folds of patriarchal establishment. Grand also makes a controversial comment when she is discussing the reasons of Beth's desertion of her fervour for the Christian religion: "There might be some explanation to excuse this game of God and devil, but until she knew the excuse she would vow no adhesion to a power whose conduct on that occasion seemed contrary to every canon of justice and mercy."[361] Later on in the book, Beth is sent to a boarding school that is in truth just a "marketplace" which prepares girls for suitable marriages; her strict ideas that govern the symbiotic relationship between the sexes begin to thaw. And again Beth's feminism is saved just in time: "It would have been well for Beth if she had been left at Miss Blackburne's for the next three years; but just when the rebellious beating of her wings against the

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[358] Ibid., p.xxi.
[359] Grand, *The Beth Book*, p.305.
[360] Ibid., p.306.
[361] Ibid., p.307.

bars had ceased, and they had folded themselves contentedly behind her for a while...she was summoned away."[362]

In addition to its attack on social problems ranging from marriage customs to medical abuse to miseducation to family violence, *The Beth Book* contains an unsentimental child's-eye view of childhood and an unprecedented picture of a girl-child's dawning sexual awareness. Beth's adolescent sexual stirring is exposed in a shockingly matter-of-fact manner: "There comes a time to all healthy young people when Nature says: Mate, my children, and be happy."[363] *The Beth Book* exposes the growth of the teenage heroine's erotic longings in extraordinary detail and variety. Beth's passage through puberty is traced through her pursuit of a series of "puppy love" boyfriends, and real and imagined romantic rendezvous, always gauging others' reactions to her, whether as listeners (her neighbour Sally), or as recipients of her mild flirtations (Pounce). Evadene's denial of her sexuality in *The Heavenly Twins* and the desire she feels for her husband is especially interesting given the otherwise puritanical tone of the novel, with its emphasis on the church bells chiming every fifteen pages or so, reminding the characters, and the readers, of their ultimate demise. In her unconsummated marriage to Captain Colquhoun, Evadene yearns "to be held close, close; to be kissed until she could not think, to live the intoxicating life of the senses only, and not care."[364] It is in the articulation of Evadene's repressed desire that the true merit of the text resides.

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[362] Ibid., p.319.
[363] Ibid., p.287.
[364] Grand, *The Heavenly Twins*, p.344.

While it was permissible for a male writer such as William Stead to expose the male abusers of prostitutes, it was quite another thing to have a woman writer expose the underbelly of male sexuality in bourgeois marriage, the cornerstone of "respectability". *The Heavenly Twins* is most interesting in the way that it inverts contemporary sexual ideology; the Contagious Diseases Acts were based on the premise that it is the female body that pollutes society, and Grand turns that on its head so that the focus becomes the diseased male body, and his degenerate spirit that is the source of evil, a "feminist manoeuvre of the highest order".[365]

3.2.7 Feminism and the Marriage Question

The novels of Sarah Grand paint a particularly unwholesome picture of genteel society's complicity in women's degradation through its double standard as far as the virtues of men and women are concerned, especially in marriage. Both *The Heavenly Twins* and *The Beth Book* focus directly on the minute details of the plight of women trapped in degrading marriages. *The Heavenly Twins* has two parallel demeaning-marriage plots. In the first, Evadene, a woman of high principles and independent views, succumbs to familial pressure and agrees to live in a sham of a marriage to a man whose debauched past is exposed to her. Grand uses this marriage as a vehicle for exploring and exposing sexual politics within marital relations. In the parallel plot, the Church and the patriarchal family, cornerstones of the establishment, represented in the figure of Edith's father, the Bishop, connive to place an innocent in the power of a lecherous and sexually diseased man. Edith, the epitome of all that is pure and innocent in woman, fails to heed Evadene's warning about the past of her fiancé, Sir

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[365] Ledger, "Daughters of Decadence", p.115.

Moseley Mentieth, eventually bearing his syphilitic child before succumbing herself to a syphilis-induced madness. Indeed, most of Grand's main female characters are represented as victims of an atavistic male sexuality, which, despite its primitivism, is enforced by social and cultural authority.

The Beth Book depicts its heroine's entrapment in, and eventual escape from, marriage to a coarse and money-grabbing adulterer, whose exploitation of women extends to his professional life as a doctor in charge of one of the Lock hospitals that were in operation at the time of the Contagious Diseases Acts. Grand represents male brutishness not only through feminist rhetoric, but also by the Feminist tools of feelings and sensations. In *The Beth Book*, she documents her heroine's painful endurance of her husband's coarse appetites. His sexual attentions are crude and self-gratifying, and his excessive interest in food and drink makes mealtimes only increase his wife's repulsion. By focusing on Beth's feelings of repulsion Grand ensures that the reader too feels the socially sanctioned brutishness of masculinity.

The effects of Grand's focusing on the claustrophobia of domestic space is that it foregrounds "the effects of the man's mind upon the woman's, shut up with him in the closest intimacy day and night, and all the time imbibing his poisoned thoughts."[366] More often than not, it is a debilitating influence, with Evadene's husband in *The Heavenly Twins* going out of his way to tempt her into consummating their marriage, until her self-imposed sexual starvation leads to an incurable manic depression, whose scars are felt well after his death and her subsequent remarriage. Interestingly, the

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[366] Grand, *The Beth Book*, p.356.

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symptoms of her approaching breakdown are signalled by a progressive decline into conformity, and thus Evadene's madness is charted through an abandonment of her reading material, and the taking part in endless, meaningless rounds of tea parties; in effect, her turning into what her mother had thought she had raised Evadene to be.

The nature and status of Evadene's feelings become particularly important in the novel's final section, in which the first-person narrative of Galbraith, Evadene's doctor and subsequently her husband, replaces the impersonal third-person narrator. In this final book, the feeling female subject becomes the object of the male medical gaze. The third-person narration, with its privileged access to the character's subjectivity, invites the reader's sympathetic identification with, and intuitive understanding of, Evadene's feelings as suffering. The first-person narrative of Galbraith, on the other hand, scrutinises those feelings as hysterical symptoms. The third-person narrative offers the reader a subjective understanding of the character's feelings as the history of her interiority; Galbraith views the character from the outside, and through the lens of the male-oriented science of psychology, which claims a privileged knowledge of woman's interiority. The discourse of women's affectivity, which is developed in the third-person narrative of *The Heavenly Twins*, represents Evadene's "hysteria" as both withdrawal and resistance. As Lyn Pykett suggests, it is a form of "hyperfemininity, which even as it disables the character also marks her out as a moral heroine who is superior to the men who seek to diagnose and treat her".[367] So in a sense, Evadene's nervous symptoms are a barometer of her superior feminine sensitivity to the evils of a degenerate male world. The effect of this

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[367] Pykett, *The Improper Feminine*, p.175.

juxtaposition is ultimately to illustrate how and who might define "woman" and women's feelings, thus restaging a battle that was being waged more widely in New Woman fiction and in contemporary culture at large. It is never made clear why the good doctor chooses to marry Evadene, if it was pity, fear of losing his star patient, or even, less cynically, some semblance of "true love". Whatever the reason, "The Impressions of Dr Galbraith", on which the book closes, seal Evadene's fate with the latter in a marriage which, whatever it may be, is not one of equals, and offers little hope of compatible happiness for either party.

In *The Heavenly Twins* Angelica is the prototypical "Rebellious Daughter", who enters a chaste marriage in order to escape the constant pressure to marry, and thus obtain the freedom from social constraints which middle-class marriage afforded to women, without accepting the social and domestic burdens and obligations which usually accompanied it. Angelica's unconventional marriage provides the arena for her experiments in life, the chief of which forms the strange "Interlude" of "The Tenor and the Boy". For the female character, and possibly for the female reader as well, this period of cross-dressing serves to enact a fantasy of liberation from the constraints of her gender. Angelica's response to the tenor's death is her movement towards the acceptance of her womanly roles. Angelica's journey to full womanhood proceeds by a series of epiphanies of feeling until "she awoke to the consciousness...that she herself was an insignificant trifle on the face of the earth."[368] This realisation is followed by another one, in which she acknowledges her need for a loving husband. Like the Interlude with the tenor and the boy, this phase of the

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[368] Grand, *The Heavenly Twins*, p.542.

narrative is also marked by melodramatic excess that verges on the parodic and comic. The ending of wild dreams and language culminating in a tableau in which traditional gender roles are re-established represents the close of the phase of unwomanly eccentricity.

In spite of her many angry treatises on the subject, and her viciously anti-male-vice stances, Sarah Grand herself had a stronger respect for marriage than many of the other Feminist writers; in an interview with *Woman* magazine she summarised her view on the subject, "Women will always be women, and men will always be men, and marriage, in my opinion, must always be the ideal state."[369] This is somewhat surprising considering the author's own life choices, but it makes complete sense with regard to her heroines. They are all, whether major or minor characters, locked into unhappy marriages to boorish and overbearing men, and the only respite comes either through the latter's death, or some other exceptional circumstance. They are trapped in a domestic limbo where their intellectual and emotional potentials are stifled, and yet are not uncomfortable enough to force them to leave. In that, at least, is a realistic measure of the frustrated dissatisfaction that tends to permeate all disappointing marriages.

It seemed that Sarah Grand's formula for a successful marriage was based on two factors: that the wife is well informed about the facts of her husband's past, and that men should be stripped of their sexual licence, in both their pre- and post-marital states. The "New Woman", Grand argued, was well educated and determined not to

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[369] Cunningham, *New Woman*, p.57.

acquiesce to the status quo, would not turn a blind eye to her husband's philandering, like the "sow women" who came before them, and who Grand found equally guilty of allowing male vice to flourish through their inaction, in an 1894 interview.[370] Not once does Grand condemn the institution of marriage itself, and insisted that these men needed to be reformed rather than abandoned, "a strong hand to the child man...with infinite tenderness and pity...helping him up." A stance on sexual politics that is more embarrassing than merely disappointing to twenty-first-century feminists.

3.2.8 Bearing the Fruits of Feminist Thought: Male Hypocrisy and Female Servility

Grand wrote a trilogy of "controversial feminist"[371] novels, casting off the name given to her by her father and her husband, and rejecting the cover of a male pseudonym, publishing them under the Feminist title Sarah Grand, to avoid the indignity of having to pigeonhole herself as a "Miss" or "Mrs", the last of these novels being *The Beth Book*. Her choice of a matriarchal pseudonym was a feminist act in itself, though it could have had a more practical reason, which is for her novels to gain some disassociation from her social identity as a women's rights activist. As a writer, she believed that social change (as opposed to political or legal change) could be shaped by fiction and cultural imagery, paying explicit attention to ideology. She enlisted economic and sociological data from external sources (sometimes even in the form of footnotes to the text), and digressed from the main body of the text to intervene in public issues.

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[370] Ledger, "Daughters of Decadence", p.21.

According to Grand, it seems that social upbringing corrupts men, and is responsible for turning them into the bastards they eventually become: "it was impossible for her [Beth] to say what she thought of the difference between the conceited, dissipated-looking, hysterical man of many meannesses, and the diffident unspoilt promising boy, she held her peace."[372] The idea of social conditioning is explored further in *The Heavenly Twins*, when the novel's namesakes, Angelica and Diavolo, are portrayed in a lengthy period of pre-gendered existence, in which Angelica, the more active, vocal and physically daring of the two, displays most forcefully those characteristics conventionally attributed to masculinity. Until the very end, Angelica remains a spirited female renegade, while Diavolo resists full assimilation into the cultural concept of masculinity, remaining sensitive, spiritual and sissified, a feminised and Feminist 'New Man' (like the knightly figure of Beth's fantasies in *The Beth Book*.)

By the 1890s, the deadly syphilitic male "had become an arch-villain of feminist protest fiction, a carrier of contamination and madness, and a threat to the spiritual evolution of the human race...".[373] Not only does Grand daringly choose to highlight the taboo topic of venereal disease in *The Heavenly Twins*, more importantly, she involves nice upper-class girls in the discussion. It was supposed that only prostitutes could become infected, but one of her heroines, a high Anglican from an upper-class family, actually dies from it. Brought up in complete sexual ignorance, Edith and Evadene are married off by parents whose idea of a "good match" is strictly economic. From *The Heavenly Twins* the reader gains the impression that a large

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[371] Mitchell, "Introduction", *The Beth Book*, p.iii.
[372] Grand, *The Beth Book*, p.463.
[373] Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siecle* (London: Bloomsbury, 1991) p.170.

proportion of British army officers, and a good deal of the Peerage, are suffering from syphilis. Since these are the men who provide the most desirable matches socially, the results give considerable scope for an implicit condemnation of the men, and women, of this social stratum.

Men "reeking with infamy"[374] populate the novels of Sarah Grand, but they are not the only culprits in her portrayal of society's demoralisation of women. It could be argued that Grand holds women first and foremost accountable for the position they find themselves in. *The Heavenly Twins* focuses on three women who, though each has a different response to the established order represented in the novel by parents and the entire male population, display an almost masochistic conformity, with disastrous results in all but Angelica's case, proving that the socially sanctioned modes of feminine behaviour are inadequate and indeed dangerous at times. It is Evadene's mother who finally succeeds in forcing her to return to Captain Colquhoun, and agree to live in a false state of matrimony with him. She coerces her daughter into this unhappy situation first by threatening her with a lunatic asylum, then with a suit for reconstitution of conjugal rights, and finally succeeds through her own miserable state to break Evadene's spirit. The threat of Beth's mother's unhappiness is also the main reason that Beth agrees to marry Dr Dan against her every instinct, and for her staying with him a good number of years. "It was the slavish apathy and ignorance of women, as well as the self-interest and injustice of men, that were the twin targets of Grand's novels: women to some extent hold the key to their sexual jail."[375]

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[374] Cunningham, *New Woman*, p.51.

Sarah Grand's condemnation of "women of fashion" shows that to feminists some women were just as despicable in their actions as men: "They are sheep running hither and thither in servile imitation of each other, without an original thought amongst them; the froth of society, with the natural tendency to froth to the surface and be swept aside; mere bubbles, that shine a moment and then burst. It is fashion that unsexes women and unmakes men. To be in the world of fashion and of it, is to degenerate; but to be in it and not of it, to know it and remain untainted, despising all it has to give, make towards solid advance. There are some ugly stages to be gone through, however, before the advancement is pronounced."[376]

And yet Grand is never derogatory about women the way Brontë is in *Jane Eyre*; though Mrs Caldwell in *The Beth Book* is pathetically inadequate as a feminist symbol, spoiling her sons and taking out her frustrations on her daughters, Grand never lets the reader feel anything but sympathy for her. Even in her most violent and emotionally abusive states, she too is a victim of the social practices of the time. The same is apparent in her treatment of the other weak women labouring under the tyrannies of the Victorian feminine ideal, the wasted life of the spinster aunt, the sweetness of another aunt married to a miser. In *The Heavenly Twins* too, the same sensitive analysis of the relationships between the more advanced women and their other conformist counterparts is shown in her depictions of how the former can be used as tools of female oppression in a patriarchal social system; Evadene's mother, and her aunt, Mrs Orton Beg, and the other ladies, Lady Fulda, and even the Heavenly Twins' poor mother.

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[375] Ledger, "Daughters of Decadence", p.115.

Grand was a true feminist in her interest in female characterisations, concentrating on her advanced women, Beth, Angelica, and the like, as the heralds of a new age where men and women would work together for the spiritual evolution of humankind. But there are few male candidates in her book for the kind of partnerships she dreamed of, her often sketchy male characters suffered from her bias towards all things female, in that even on the rare occasion that she attempted to present a 'New Man' (for example, Diavolo in *The Heavenly Twins*, or Brock at the close of *The Beth Book*), it was not very successful, and the characters never really feel complete in the sense that her female characters do.

Out of all Grand's heroines, Angelica, the eponymous twin in *The Heavenly Twins*, is the most outwardly "feminist". She assaults social conventions in a manner that is hard to judge in terms of securing a feminist victory. Far from attempting to avoid the twin shackles of matrimony and domesticity, she actually proposes to the man she feels would be her safest bet, one who is twenty years her senior and has known her all her life. Granted, she was in the throws of a deep agitation, having just witnessed the gruesome fate of Edith Beale and her poor child, but it was nevertheless a symbolic gesture for her to practically order Kilroy to preserve her from such a fate, and remove from her life the awful temptation of dashingly attractive men whose amorous overtones could literally end her life. Was it an escapist ploy? There is no question that it seems to be, in a modern reading of the text, the coward's way out. Certainly marrying the man you most comfortably refer to as "Daddy", cannot be seen

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[376] Grand, *The Beth Book*, p.317.

as acceptable for modern feminists, but in light of Angelica's option at that point in time, it may have been the best bargain an independent woman could hope for. Re-examining the evidence, we find that Kilroy had not taken on an easy deal, far from having realised the ultimate middle-aged male dream of marrying a beautiful girl, young enough to be his daughter, he had agreed to effectively give his protection to a woman over whose actions he had no control. He would be forced to act as a buffer between Angelica and the disapproval of society at large, yet he could only truly possess her as his wife if he agreed to let her do as she pleased, provided it was not immoral. In the end, however, it is still a far cry from Angelica's childhood dreams and aspirations.

In the semi-autobiographical *The Beth Book*, Grand does not deny her heroine the boldness, the passion, the discipline and the determination that shaped her own life, as she did her other heroines in *The Heavenly Twins*. Beth is capable and self-reliant in ways that challenge the Victorian concept of "femininity'; she has a sharp tongue that she is not afraid to use, she is never squeamish, she can kill a rabbit using only a stone, manage a runaway horse, create an independent income for herself from selling embroidery, and live by herself in a strange city. Her triumphant escape to London, to a room of her own, a life of her own, a New-Man lover of her own, though fraught with hesitations and compromises a modern feminist would never tolerate, is one that the latter would nevertheless find inspiring. Beth ultimately ends up in London, the centre of feminist activism in the 1890s. She lives on her own, working as a nurse to the poor, and it is there she discovers her purpose in life. She finds that though she is committed to social work, she is aware that philanthropy is no substitute for self-emancipation. At the novel's close, Beth is free to choose her destiny from the many

possibilities open to her, none of which is mutually exclusive: writing novels, marrying an idealistic American "New Man", who serves as a contrast to her first husband, and joining the suffragettes in their social and political campaigning. Beth has both love and political commitment to the women's cause and to her own empowerment, which is the ultimate Feminist attainment.

3.2.9 Androgyny and the Annihilation of the Female Body

The Feminist writers were the first to articulate the love-hate relationship that existed between a woman and her body. They were the first to put words to the female-skin-shedding desire that all aware women go through at some stage of their life. In *The Heavenly Twins* Angelica weeps when she is first put into long dresses, it is she who will most vocally object to the preordained social conditioning of woman into a role for which many are unsuitable, "I had none of the domestic virtues, and yet they would insist on domesticating me...I had the feeling...that if I broke down conventional obstacles, broke the hampering laws of society, I should have a chance."[377]

The very title of Grand's *The Heavenly Twins* suggests a dichotomous nature to the novel, and the twins' names immediately suggest a parody of the feminine/ masculine binary opposition, and this is accompanied by a gender inversion in the twins' physical and mental characteristics. The twins' cross-dressing (for example when they swap clothes at Evadene's wedding) also suggests a gender inversion. Angelica and Diavolo refuse a gendered education, she gets to study with him and does better than

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[377] Grand, *The Heavenly Twins*, p.378.

him, as their male tutor soon finds out. The narrative of Angelica's young life presents a coded challenge to heterosexual gender roles, especially the curiously intrusive chapter named the "The Tenor and the Boy – An Interlude".

For the reader, the hallucinatory writing style of the Interlude in *The Heavenly Twins* conjures up a dream world where gender boundaries dissolve and reform in disconcerting ways. The whole episode is charged with a frisson of ambiguous sexuality: the tenor is clearly attracted to the boy, but it is unclear whether this is a homoerotic attraction, or an attraction to Angelica's essential femininity. The episode offers a displaced narrative version of a male character being destroyed by the whims of a New Woman that is more commonly found in the novels of male writers of the period, such as Jude in Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*. In this case, the tenor's death coincides with his discovery that the "boy" is in fact a woman.

The tenor in the cathedral choir with whom Angelica, dressed as a boy, has a relationship with, is a virgin male, and virginity in Victorian terms was a "feminine" attribute. Grand describes the tenor as a "representative of another and a higher race."[378] In a confused way, the tenor desires the androgynous boy, but it is unclear whether this is a clear-cut homosexual desire, for the appeal of the boy to the tenor lies in that he appears to be androgynous. He tells Angelica: "When you play [the violin] you are like that creature in the 'Witch of Atlas': 'A sexless thing it was, and

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[378] Ibid., p.359.

in its growth it seemed to have developed no defect of either sex, yet all the grace of both'."[379]

The appeal of the relationship for both the tenor and Angelica is that it is free from the gender constraints of society. Angelica describes it as "the delight of associating with a man intimately who did not know I was a woman. I have enjoyed the benefit of free intercourse with your masculine mind undiluted by your masculine prejudices and proclivities with regard to my sex."[380] Such a relationship could not possibly exist in the emphatically heterosexual unions that figured in the main narrative. What Angelica seeks from her cross-dressing is different from the sentimental love that the tenor feels for her as the boy: she is in effect recreating the heterosexual friendship that has the equality of a brother/ sister relationship that she shared with Diavolo prior to his move to Sandhurst for an army career. It is an oddly incestuous relationship, among its other perversions, on Angelica's part, and can only end in death and misery as she realises that she has put an innocent life to waste in her zeal to relive that dynamic she had with her twin. This could be a manifestation of what Elaine Showalter described as "...The revolutionary energies of the women are projected onto male figures who are androgynous in the sense that their disguise is to appear effeminate. Like their creators, these heroes survive by concealing their real strength and 'passing' as limp and ineffectual."[381]

3.2.10 The Fight for Freedom: Unresolved Issues

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[379] Ibid., p.403.
[380] Ibid., p.458.
[381] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.192.

Something that may explain the slightly schizophrenic nature of Sarah Grand's work: at one point so advanced in its views, and at another, for example the marriage issue, so conventionally Victorian, is that

> Between the 1880s and the outbreak of World War I in 1914 female lives and letters on both sides of the Atlantic were transformed by the entrance of large numbers of women into the labour force, by increased educational opportunities, and by the emergence of militant suffragism. It is hardly surprising, then, that many literary figures in this period felt that they were living between two worlds, one dead and the other struggling to be born. Nor is it surprising that both sexes frequently associated accelerating historical changes with the rapidly shifting situation of women.[382]

According to Huddleston, "Sarah Grand was a feminist, determined to break what she called 'the conspiracy of silence' on certain issues that affected women very strongly, but she was a modest feminist, with no revolutionary suggestions for the future social conduct of the sexes."[383]

The main let-down in reading the novels in a Feminist context lies in the way the author chooses to end them. In *The Heavenly Twins*, one of the author's most rebellious female characters, Angelica, is finally content to marry a political husband and write his parliamentary speeches for him. Although the idea of woman as political inspiration or power behind the successful man is a seductive one, it is hard to accept it as a satisfactory solution to the restrictions imposed on Angelica because she is a woman. The woman-behind-the-man theory suits neither Angelica nor the novel,

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[382] Gilbert and Gubar, *Norton Anthology*, p.961.
[383] Huddleston, *Sarah Grand*, pp.5-6.

which ends lamely as a result; hiding behind a man's shadow can never be a substitute for freedom.

Elaine Showalter suggests that the Feminist heroines "are all caught between conflicting desires; the desire to be loved and the desire to be active and independent."[384] Halfway through the novel, Beth escapes from school in the dead of night and just runs around in the garden and orchard. The theme of confinement and the subsequent escape from confinement is often repeated in Beth's early life, and foreshadows her subsequent escape from her marriage to Dr Dan. Her little episodes always occur at night when no one is watching, and Beth never runs away or does anything morally reprehensible. In keeping with the novel's "purity" fixation, all she does is dance in the moonlight and converse with nature. When Beth's midnight rambles are found out and her headmistress Miss Clifford and favourite teacher Miss Bey reprimand her for disappointing their high expectations of her, she cries, "Oh, why didn't you tell me? I thought you all fancied I should never do anything well, and that disheartened me. If I had known!" and then bursts into tears.[385] Beth's constant need for approval and for reassurance is exhausting in the feminist scheme of things. It is a pattern that Beth would fall into with her mother, and her husband, and Sarah Grand brings it up time and again, to show how a "little kindness"[386] went a long way in swaying Beth's feelings. Her lack of self-sufficiency causes her to blame others' lack of enthusiasm and encouragement of her as a cause of her own detrimental behaviour, which is not very conducive to the notion of independent feminism.

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[384] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.192.
[385] Grand, *The Beth Book*, p.312.
[386] Ibid., p.289.

Beth deals with reality by quite literally escaping from it. She is often visited by dreams and visions and so she remaps her physical world, transforming it into a more pleasant state of existence. This constant escapism is frustrating to the feminist cause; Beth does not rise to the challenge, she doesn't pry, question, investigate enough the givens in her life. It is hard to believe that one who is so bright and perceptive can live with the awful Dr Dan Maclure for so long and yet be completely innocent to what he does: the Lock hospital, the vivisection. Even when she is aware of his atrocious behaviour, like his constant siphoning-off of her money, she just goes along with it (albeit a little smugly), but she never forces his hand, never confronts him, likewise with the other-woman incident. Why is the illustrious Beth so eager to keep the status quo? Is it a reflection on the "conservative" nature of Sarah Grand? It is difficult to justify Grand's refusal to let Beth make the choices that she had once made and just flee from her husband as she herself had done. If the book is truly an autobiography, is it a reflection on Grand's regret that she did that or is it merely an artistic ploy to demonstrate either Beth's virtue or the social constraints placed on "good" women at the time?

Beth (though surrounded by women) seems to find her salvation in men. It is they who can see her true potential and whose admiration and attention bring out the best in her, starting with Dr Gottley, and then her father, and Count Gustav, who frees her from her morbid pre-occupation with hell and human salvation, and culminating in Dr Galbraith who sees her for who she really is and decides to take an interest in her, one that is rather inappropriate considering her status as a married woman as her husband rightly points out. It is the good doctor who convinces the women of Beth's innocence

regarding her husband's work at the Lock hospital. He immediately sees what they fail to, in effect the man exposes the truth to judgemental, though feminist, women, so how is that a feminist stance?

"The protagonist of Sarah Grand's *The Beth Book* is also represented as an exceptional woman (or perhaps, several kinds of exceptional woman in succession), as the subtitle of the book emphasizes – *Being a Study of Elizabeth Caldwell Maclure, A Woman of Genius.*"[387] Though it seemed to be the author's intention to provide a role model of an ordinary girl, everyday-woman done well, she chooses a person who is at the core extra-ordinary. Beth can play musical pieces after hearing them only once, she has a lot of intelligence, almost completely self-taught, and for someone who has been supposedly constantly demoralised by her mother, she is yet confident enough to air her views whenever and to whomever she pleases. Beth decides to take the podium and improvise an unprepared speech on *The Desecration of Marriage.* She, of course, dazzles: "I never spoke before, nor heard anyone else speak till to-night."[388] The problem isn't that Beth isn't real, even if she was, she possesses exceptional inner resources that the majority of normal human beings (men or women) just do not possess. So in fact the author has created something/someone that does not exist for most people, which in turn has diminished at least part of its value as a feminist manifesto. This is part of what Penny Boumelha has recently argued was the New Woman writer's preoccupation with the woman of genius as an evasion of key issues of power and choice, since "the concept of innate genius enables the

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[387] Thompson, *Victorian Women Writers*, p.140.
[388] Grand, *The Beth Book*, p.420.

representation of achievement without conscious ambition,"[389] which allows it to become just part of the protagonist's destiny, without challenging the conventional womanliness of selflessness. Stubbs, however, argues that: "Women like...Sarah Grand just weren't good enough as writers to turn their material into an important challenge to the literary tradition."[390]

In terms of sexual morality, Sarah Grand adhered strictly to popular convention; Evadene, Angelica and Beth all have strong sexual feelings, but would never think of indulging them outside marriage. Even though Evadene and Angelica end up in conventional marriages with liberal men, there is no romantic closure. Evadene is more a patient than a wife, Angelica a daughter. Even Beth's fate is not certain: Brock was quickly swayed by his friend's passing remark once before, what's to say that he would be able to handle life with the liberated Beth? Perhaps the reason behind this seeming dithering-away and glut of loose ends can be found in the actual nature of Feminist writing. In her essay "The Politics of Publication: Women in the Literary Marketplace", Rita Kranidis suggests that the central motivation shaping feminist characterisations of New Woman was the "desire to create a space in which some of the deliberations feminists were engaged in might at least be articulated, regardless of whether a neat resolution to the dilemmas exposed could be provided."[391]

3.2.11   Literary Merits: Rage Against the Machine

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[389] Thompson, *Victorian Women Writers*, p.141.
[390] Patricia Stubbs, *Women and Fiction: Feminism and the Novel 1880-1920* (Harvester Press, 1979).
[391] Kranidis, *Subversive Discourse*, p.63.

The Feminist writers took their craft very seriously, but in many instances it was but a means to a higher, socio-political end. Huddleston observes that

> In each of her three most important novels, *Ideala* (1888), *The Heavenly Twins* (1893), and *The Beth Book* (1897), she [Sarah Grand] forced social problems into the novel form, as a way of bringing the issues she dealt with into the hands of women who might never go to a Pioneer Club lecture or to a WSPU meeting, but who might learn something to their advantage through the gentler medium of the novel, and who might take more notice of advice given by a novelist to them in a privacy of their own reading.[392]

Unfortunately, this had a cumbersome effect on the actual storytelling process, prompting Mark Twain to remark in notations on his copy of *The Heavenly Twins*: "The art of all this, is intolerably bad. It is literary 'prentice work...This is wretchedly done. A cat could do better literature than that."[393] In their zeal to express anger, the Feminist authors have forgotten the delicate process of maintaining a uniform narrative voice, and the soft elusiveness of make-believe is ham-handed, and lets down the novel's overall quality. For example, the second part of *The Beth Book*, concerning the development of Beth's feminist consciousness, falls short of the first part in terms of enjoyability, and in its success in engrossing the reader. The book seems to suffer from Grand's political agenda, especially towards the end, so that "the latter part of the book, concerning Beth's marriage and her escape to self-determination, is less subtle and, one feels, less carefully thought out".[394] Grand provides a handbook for the young woman writer, a demonstration of the need for a secret space in which to develop one's own craft, a warning of the dangers of commerce and notoriety, and an exemplar of honest success, though unfortunately it is at

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[392] Huddleston, *Sarah Grand*, p.6.
[393] *The New York Times*, February 8th 1911.
[394] Huddleston, *Sarah Grand*, p.8.

this juncture that the book goes down in the "readability" stakes, and starts to sound like a lecture, or at times an actual how-to manual.

3.3 Nawāl al-Saʿdāwī

Nawāl al-Sayyid al-Saʿdāwī was born in the village of Kafr Ṭalḥa, Egypt, on the 27th of October 1931. She studied psychiatry at the Faculty of Medicine in Cairo, and received her Bachelor of Medicine degree from Cairo University in 1955. Between 1955 and 1965 she practised as a medical doctor and psychiatrist at the University Hospital and in the Ministry of Health. Her practice in cities as well as in the countryside allowed her to deepen her understanding of matters related to Egyptian society, particularly the condition of women.

After receiving a degree in public health from Columbia University in New York in 1966, she returned to Egypt and became Acting Director General and later Director General of the Health Education Department in the Ministry of Health. At that time she founded the Association for Health Education, in addition to serving as the director of a popular magazine dealing with medical information. She also was Assistant General Secretary of the Medical Association in Egypt, and United Nations Advisor for the Women's Program in Africa and the Middle East.

In 1970, Nawāl al-Saʿdāwī published her book *al-Mar'a wa'l-Jins* ("Women and Sex"), amid the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, which was fuelled by the sympathetic Sādāt regime, and widespread disillusionment as result of the latter's "open door" (*infitāḥ*) capitalist policy. In this book, as in many of her others, al-Saʿdāwī breached taboo subjects that were far too private to be discussed openly in such a climate. This

move cost her her job at the Ministry of Health and eventually led to her self-imposed exile. The book caused so much controversy ("not since Qāsim Amīn's *Taḥrīr al-Mar'a* [1899] had there been such an impassioned outcry from patriarchal forces")[395] that her magazine was shut down and her books censored. In 1978, al-Saʿdāwī began work for the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, in the African Training and Research Centre for Women, based at Addis Ababa. This was a prestigious position entailing high responsibilities in which she was in charge of the centre's training programmes. Her efforts to oppose the use of consultants who were all white and all male, in reinterpreting the projects submitted by women, ended in frustration and she resigned the following year.[396]

Al-Saʿdāwī was imprisoned in September 1981 (along with a group of other Egyptian feminists), and emerged from prison more forthright than ever, following Anwar Sādāt's assassination in October 1981.

In 1983, she founded and presided over the Arab Women's Solidarity Association, which was dissolved in 1991 for not being in line with the government's official policies. Death threats from the extreme Islamist groups, coupled with continuous harassment by the Egyptian authorities, prompted al-Saʿdāwī and her third husband Sharīf Ḥitātā finally to leave their homeland in 1993 and move to Duke University in the USA, where she has resided in a state of semi-exile since.

3.3.1 Nawāl al-Saʿdāwī's Work

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[395] Badran and Cooke, *Opening the Gates*, p.144.

Al-Saʿdāwī is the author of many books on women in the Arab world generally, Egypt specifically, several novels and short story collections, two plays, and two memoirs (one autobiographical, and the other a book of her travels). Though her books were mainly written in Arabic, they have been read widely the world over, and have been translated into several languages, including English, French, German, Persian, Portuguese, Italian, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish and Dutch. The best known of her novels *are Memoirs of a Female Physician* (1959), *Woman at Point Zero* (1975), *Two Women in One* (1975), *God Dies by the Nile, Death of an Ex-Minister* (1980), and *The Fall of the Imam* (1987). She has been awarded two distinctions for her literary achievements; the Literary Award of the Supreme Council for Arts and Social Sciences, Cairo, Egypt (1974), and the Literary Award of the Franco-Arab Friendship Association, Paris, France (1982).

3.3.1.1   *Memoirs of a Female Physician*

Much like *The Beth Book*, al-Saʿdāwī's first novel *Memoirs of a Female Physician* is regarded as largely autobiographical, and this is attested by the doctor-protagonist's remaining nameless throughout the novel. Written in the first person, the novel traces the narrator's progression from childhood through to her thirtieth year; it records the impact of her society's concentration on gender roles, and the favouritism lavished on the male sex at every stage of her life. This prejudice begins at home, where her parents treat her brother as a god, and expect her to clean up after him and always be

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[396] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, trans. Catherine Cobham (London: al-Saqi Books, 1988) p.10.

satisfied with less so that he can have more. It is at this point that the protagonist becomes aware that this discrimination is a direct result of her femininity, and begins to resent it: "I wept over my femininity before I knew what it was."[397] The novel rushes through her early life, the trauma of circumcision, etc. Adolescence brings with it even more prominent symbols of her deficient status; "two lumps of flesh", and the onslaught of menstruation, convince her that even Allah despises women, to have made them so unclean. Later she joins the medical establishment and discovers that it is not her physical attributes that are the cause of this difference in treatment, but something outside of herself.

It is through becoming part of the medical establishment, a traditionally male zone, that the heroine of *Memoirs of a Female Physician* can reconcile the two sides of her personality and stop feeling like a social misfit, born woman but despising the sex as much as men do, though not male either. She makes medicine "the focus of her own call for integration of traditionally male and female qualities",[398] and yet it fails her by not being omnipotent, and when a woman dies in childbirth under her supervision she retreats into the countryside to commune with nature, away from the social pressures that come with an urban lifestyle. While practising in the village, the doctor-protagonist experiences a profound shift in the way she views life; she finds herself no longer ashamed to be a woman, and anxious to return to the society that has taught her self-loathing as a defence mechanism, and find a mate for life.

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[397] Glynis Ann Horsey, *An Introduction to the Written Works of Nawal Saadawi* (PhD Diss., University of London, 1988) p.10.

[398] Fadwa Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991) p.134.

Marriage, however, brings with it a fresh cycle of disappointment, disillusion, anger and revelation that is repeated at every narrative focal point. The protagonist's marriage is based on a series of compromises from its instigation. She chooses a man who does not challenge her mentally or arouse her physically because she believed that would insure equality in their union. But the absolute power awarded to the male upon entrance into the marriage contract corrupts this docile man, and he becomes petulant and resentful, demanding that "mummy", which is how he sees her and even what he calls her at times, shut down her medical practice to attend to him full-time. Divorce is the only solution for this unhappy situation, and the doctor-protagonist shines as a feminist by opting for the social stigma of the divorced Arab woman, rather than being trapped in an unsatisfying marriage. Soon, however, the heroine starts to pine for a mate, and this time she wants to be certain that the two of them are on an equal footing. Thus, in true feminist fashion, she goes out searching for one, concluding that she would be able to make a more informed choice if she did the seeking, and not if she waited for her options to present themselves to her; but her attempts are thwarted by an unsympathetic society, which puts her down for not having a male protector, and by men who refuse to view her as an equal.

This marks another extreme shift in the narrator's attitude towards men, and life in general. She decrees love unnecessary for a satisfied existence, and throws herself into her work, performing illegal operations such as abortions, and amassing a great deal of money in the process, as well as a feeling of great power. After a while, an emptiness permeates her life, making her financial success seem hollow, as she realises that she has been so caught up in fighting the patriarchal system that she has denied herself the chance of the happiness that comes from being in a loving,

supportive relationship with another person. It is at this juncture, when she has resolved part of the conflict between her and her society that she meets her perfect partner, a musician who is not threatened by her intelligence, and whose love would not stifle her ambition, and, much like *The Beth Book*, the novel closes with the heroine finding her New Man. With him by her side, she is ready for the final revelation in her evolution as a feminist heroine, which is that she must not use medicine for material gains; instead, she should use it to "heal", regardless of the financial profit she would make. It is intentional that this is brought about by her treatment of a dying young man, and not a woman, which hints that she has found her true place in the patriarchal order; she is now positioned to treat patriarchy's ills, and forgive its grievances against her. The young man is also a metaphor for the oppressive nature of patriarchy, in that its prejudices are felt not only in the gender divide but also in the class one as well. The poor, like women, have little or no rights, regardless of their sex. However, it is noteworthy here that, as Manisty points out, "The significance of the social context in relation to [*Memoirs*] is complex and problematic because of the lack of any convincing interaction between the protagonist and the social world."[399]

3.3.1.2   *Woman at Point Zero*

Woman at Point Zero is based on the "true" story of a woman ("...*Woman at Point Zero* is halfway between fiction and fact. I was so affected by this real woman, that I wrote it as it

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[399] Dinah Manisty, *Changing Limitations: A Study of the Woman's Novel in Egypt 1960-1991* (PhD Diss., University of London, 1993) p.49.

was.")[400] who is condemned to death for having murdered a man. The "story" follows a female psychiatrist who goes to a women's prison, and is so intrigued by one of the death-row inmates that she determines to get this woman's story. Eventually, she succeeds in breaking down the latter's defensive barriers; the woman opens up and tells the psychiatrist her story, which constitutes a series of increasingly traumatic experiences.

Firdaws's life begins with her birth into a peasant family, and the reader is exposed to her childhood sexual stirrings, whose innocence is juxtaposed with the lack of sensation she experiences when her uncle fingers her genitals after her clitoris is removed. The only impact her immediate family has on her early life consists of an absent father and a physically abusive mother, who dies soon after, leaving Firdaws in her uncle's care. She moves to Cairo to be with him, and he sends her to a boarding school, in between bursts of sexual molestation. When her uncle weds, his new wife marries Firdaws off to a sixty-year-old man to be rid of her. Needless to say, she is miserable with him: he is both physically and sexually abusive, and treats her more as a slave than as a wife. This is comparable with the British situation: "We must recall that the Victorians believed that the wife could not refuse her husband's advances, his conjugal rights were absolute. George Egerton wrote, 'marriage becomes to many women a legal prostitution'."[401] It seems that some interpretations of Islam see it in a similar light; there is a *ḥadīth* in which the Prophet seems to sanction the absolute conjugal rights of men:

Abū Ḥurayra, may Allāh be pleased with him, reported:

Allāh's Messenger (may peace be upon him) said:

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[400] "Reflections of a Feminist", interview with Nawāl al-Saʿdāwī by Fadwa Malti-Douglas and Allan Douglas, in Badran and Cooke *Opening the Gates*, p.402.
[401] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.189.

When a woman spends the night abandoning the bed of her husband, the angels curse her until morning.

ḥadīth no. 2594 in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*[402]

Firdaws seeks help from her uncle, but, finding none, chooses life on the streets rather than return to her husband. It is this point that marks her descent into prostitution.

Firdaws is pimped, and raped, by the men who prey on her, and even by the police. She then tries to return to respectable living by working in an agency, but unfortunately falls in love with one of her colleagues, and gives herself to him in the biblical sense; she is then surprised and heart-broken when he leaves her and marries another woman. This induces another fit of wandering the streets and prostitution, this time as a self-chosen vocation. This culminates in her brutally stabbing a man and ending up in prison. The story closes with the psychiatrist leaving the prison feeling disturbed and hopeless, despairing of the future of women and their fate in the Arab world. She is overpowered by a sense of shame, even of her own existence.

Evelyne Accad says:

> In this poignant and vivid story, al-Saʿdāwī gives us an account of some of the most painful problems facing Arab women today. Firdaws's revolt is not a selfish, self-destructive assertion of her personality, but an act of despair and an outcry against the oppression and servitude forced upon her. What al-Saʿdāwī seems to be

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[402] See http://hadith.al-islam.com/Bayan/Display.asp/Lang=eng&ID=815.

telling us is that Arab women's oppression today condemns all of Arab society to live in lies and inauthenticity.[403]

This is hard to agree with however, since it seems to ignore the fact that Firdaws is a classic psychopath who harbours deep-seated homicidal tendencies.

3.3.2   Placing Nawāl al-Saᶜdāwī's Work in Its Socio-Historical Background

Prior to the twentieth century and up to the 1920s, Egyptian women engaged in discreet, "feminine" forms of feminism. After this date, openly feminist, politically organised women's societies emerged as part of a larger nationalistic struggle, which facilitated the breaking with convention and access to public life. Women's nationalist experience, in which they participated in street demonstrations, political organising, communications, and morale-boosting, paved the way for a declaration of the rights of women by women, if it did not in itself produce a feminist ideology. After the achievement of partial independence, upper-class Egyptian women were emboldened enough to part with their veils and to put an end to their seclusion in domestic spheres. In 1923, Hudā Shaᶜrāwī, along with a group of upper- and middle-class women formed the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU), which declared an agenda that would transform women's lives politically, socially and economically in both the private and public spheres. By 1928, despite public opposition, young women were being admitted to university. In the 1940s women were emboldened enough to apply their experience on a pan-Arab scale, with the result that Shaᶜrāwī founded the National Union of Arab Women.

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[403] "Rebellion, Maturity, and the Social Context; Arab Women's Special Contribution to Literature", in: (ed.) Judith E. Tucker *Arab Women; Old Boundaries, New Frontiers* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1993) p.235.

However, it was not simply the nationalist struggles that made possible the emergence of feminism in Egypt. As Barakat explains, "Expanding economics, industrialization, and urbanization have contributed to the emergence of bourgeois classes and cultures...These structural changes have already begun to undermine traditional relationships, roles and value orientations within the Arab family."[404] With this re-evaluation came the space needed to introduce feminist thought. The overthrow of the monarchy and the establishment of the Socialist Republic of Egypt brought with it further opportunities for feminist thought and action. The Nāṣir regime advocated a socialist agenda that aimed to bestow equal benefits on both sexes. The new welfare state contributed to a development of "state feminism"[405] as a legal, economic and ideological strategy to introduce changes into Egyptian gender relations. This relationship had a reciprocal nature in that the policy of state feminism "contributed to the legitimacy of Gamal Abdel Nasser's regime and its progressive credentials."[406] An Electoral Law passed in 1956 realised the suffragist ambition of Egyptian women in giving them the right to vote. Education and health benefits were distributed fully and freely to all classes and throughout rural Egypt, and labour laws were changed to ensure and protect women's equal standing in the labour force. As a result, social attitudes toward women's education and employment changed, and this gave a new generation of women unprecedented definitions of their productive and reproductive roles. Although this "state feminism" brought with it some measure of

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[404] Halim Barakat, "The Arab Family and the Challenge of Social Transformation" in: (ed.) Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, *Women and the Family in the Middle East; New Voices of Change* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985) p.30.
[405] "State feminism" was coined by students of the welfare state in Scandinavia, and referred to government efforts to remove the structural basis of gender inequality by making reproduction a public, instead of a private, concern, coupled with the employment of larger numbers of women in the state sector.

freedom as far as the women's situation was concerned, they were still trapped in the same social roles by the family values that operated in Egypt at the time. As Saud Joseph put it, "The boundaries between this triangulation of state, civil society, and kinship or private domain are highly fluid. People's commitments remain grounded in kin and community, and they carry those commitments with them, whether in the civil or state spheres."[407] The progressive framework of state feminism also accommodated more conservative social outlooks on women's positions in the family and in the political system that were left unchallenged, like the personal status laws, which denied women their Islamic right to divorce. The Nāṣir regime was not very tolerant towards any independent or non-governmental organisation, with the result that it demobilised Egyptian feminist societies, and women's representation in parliament and other political institutions remained erratic. Lacking independent representative organisations of their own, women remained captives of the state's political needs.

The regimes of Anwar Sādāt and Ḥusnī Mubārak redefined the relationship of women to the state and the role they were to play in society; gender issues were used by the state, its foes and its allies to distinguish themselves from one other, and to score ideological and political victories. These policies were identified with the development of conservative social, economic and political systems that were hostile to state activism, in general, and state support of women's public equality, in particular. With the retreat of the state as a social and economic agent of change, many official commitments to gender equality were either ignored or abandoned within or outside the state sector. This created an ideological

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[406] Mervat F. Hatem, "Economic and Political Liberalization in Egypt and the Demise of State Feminism" in: (ed.) Suha Sabbagh, *Arab Women; Between Defiance and Restraint* (New York: Olive Branch Press, 1996) p.171.
[407] Joe Stork, "Gender and Civil Society: An Interview with Saud Joseph" in Sabbagh, *Arab Women*, p.203.

and economic vacuum that was filled by one of two extremes: local and international capitalism, with its Western leanings, or Islamic rhetoric, and its call to a return to the fundamentals of the religion as interpreted by patriarchal society. Generally speaking, the Islamists have supported women's education only within the parameters of making the latter better wives and mothers, and their attitude to women in the workplace has been ambivalent at best, conceded only through economic necessity rather than true equality.

A clash between the Islamists and the Sādāt regime occurred in the late 1970s following a prolonged symbiotic relationship, during which women's rights issues were placed on the back burner. The initiation of the United Nations Decade for Women in 1975 also put pressure on what had become a more West-oriented Egypt to redress its standing on the women's rights issue. Because of these factors, a more women-friendly personal status law was passed by presidential decree in 1979 along with another decree that gave Egyptian women thirty seats in the Assembly and twenty percent of all seats in the People's Assembly Party. These were both repealed in 1987.

3.3.3 Woman vs. Man: Radical Feminism in Nawāl al-Saᶜdāwī's Novels

Nawāl al-Saᶜdāwī unveils her contempt for the male sex in the attitudes of her heroines towards men in general, rather than a specific male authority, although the latter does come up as well in the figures of despotic fathers and husbands. This mass condemnation is apparent in Firdaws's description of the men of her village at the ᶜīd prayer: "They murmured, invoking God's name and praying...I saw them, they nodded, coughed, blew their noses loudly, constantly scratching themselves under their arms and between their

legs."[408] Even her father is portrayed as a belching, masticating animal, finding gluttonous

enjoyment in eating while the rest of his family watch him starving. This is mirrored in the

way that her geriatric husband monitors her food intake like a hawk. In both of her novels

discussed here, Nawāl al-Sa‘dāwī demonstrated how men were essentially simple

creatures that women, being superior creatures, could easily manipulate (mostly through

the promise of sexual gratification) for their own benefit.

Life for Firdaws was a stream of vile, invading male bodies: "There were so many of

them. I did not understand where they could have possibly come from. For they were all

married, all educated, all carrying swollen leather bags, and swollen leather wallets in their

inner pockets."[409] Even wealth and education could not elevate their status; they were

doomed in Firdaws's eyes, based purely on the sex they were born into. In this respect she

inverts the stereotypical Arab contempt for women that is usually only the product of their

being female. In the above passage there is an implicit attack on social propriety. These

men project all the outer signs of being respectable; they have good jobs and a family life,

and they benefit from the refinement that is associated with having a reasonable education;

yet they frequent prostitutes on a regular basis. Their shell of respectability belies their

inner depravity.

This portrayal of men as swollen, seeping bodies that stink at various times of a menagerie

of odious scents (dead dogs, stagnant water) effectively dehumanises the male characters

in the novels. This paves the way for al-Sa‘dāwī's heroines' mistreatment of men, and so,

when Firdaws finally kills her pimp, it is less a criminal act than an inevitability. He has

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[408] Nawal El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero*, trans. Sherif Hetata (Zed Books, 1983) p.8.

threatened her, he is a man, and men are awful, substandard creatures, and therefore it's no big loss if one of them dies. Nadje Sadig al-Ali suggests that:

> The relationship between Firdaws and the male characters is characterised by unequal power...Only as a prostitute, independent from any pimp and in full awareness of the implications of her work, does the heroine reverse the power relations. She gains control of her body, of herself, and consequently, of her relationships with men. The act of killing "one of them" constitutes the climax of her struggle to gain control of her life and herself.[410]

This destructive urge is replayed in *Memoirs* when the heroine first enters the medical establishment, and has her first contact with a naked male body "ugly, and in pieces",[411] in the form of a carcass to be dissected. It is not difficult to read into the psychological implications of this the sadistic relish with which the heroine falls upon the body, tearing it apart, looking for the secrets of its might.

The tendency to view man as the 'other', the 'enemy', instead of as a life partner can be explained by the experiences of the author and Egyptian women in general with their first taste of independence under the Nāṣir regime. In an interview with Fadwa Malti Douglas, al-Saʿdāwī highlighted this dilemma in the difference between their inner and outer perceptions of themselves at work and in the domestic sphere: "I was very prominent in my work as a writer and a physician. I didn't have problems with men outside. But once I opened the door and entered my home I faced problems as a wife."[412] The autonomous, independent woman who had stood side by side with men in their nationalistic struggle,

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[409] Ibid., p.23.
[410] Al-Ali, *Writing Gender/Gender Writing*, p.25.
[411] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Memoirs*.
[412] Al-Saʿdāwī "Reflections of a Feminist", p.399.

and in rebuilding a more Utopian Egypt, was expected to revert back to the submissive, obedient wife/daughter/sister once she returned to the domestic sphere. It was as if all the advancements that she had garnered outside her house, in the workplace, or elsewhere in the public eye, did not apply within the aggressively patriarchal Egyptian home. "While patriarchy's control over women for the last century has loosened in the societal arena, it has remained more firmly entrenched within the family."[413] Al-Saʿdāwī's work focuses mainly on the interactive relationship between her heroines' attempts at self-realisation and the tradition-bound Arab culture they find themselves born into.

3.3.4 Breaking the Bonds of Tradition

"The paradox of support and suppression, love and power, generosity and competition compels both attachment to and struggle within families."[414]

As we have seen previously, "in Egypt, and throughout the Middle East, there is a lag between the new roles impelled by current economic demands and the persistence of traditional values regarding women's domestic responsibilities".[415] The enforcer, however, was not only the male patriarch; women too were so entrenched in the traditional patriarchal value system that they also became its enforcers: "older women transmit men's authority and are thus equally important in maintaining customs".[416] This is apparent in al-Saʿdāwī's mother's enforcement of clitoridectomy on her young daughters even though she has been through the same ordeal and knows how painful it was for her. In effect, it

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[413] Margot Badran, "Independent Women; More than a Century of Feminism in Egypt", in Tucker, *Arab Women*, p.129.
[414] Saud Joseph in Stork, "Interview with Saud Joseph", p.201.
[415] Safia K. Mohsen, "New Images, Old Reflections: Working Middle-Class Women in Egypt" in Warnock Fernea, *New Voices of Change*, p.71.

was thus both men and women, the community as a unit, policing and prohibiting feminist progress: "The isolation of rebellious women is reinforced by the whole community, to whom such behaviour is quite unacceptable."[417] It is even something that is self-reflexive in women. This idea of conforming to a certain mould of honour and respectability is hard for Arab women to shake off, even if there are no oppressive male influences around. Although it is hard to believe, al-Saʿdāwī herself complained of this phenomenon: "Because, you know, in spite of the fact that I'm freer, relatively speaking, than other women in my writing, there is still an internal censorship, from different repressions and oppressions."[418] The image of eyes, watching, following, observing, is a recurrent one in the fiction of Nawāl al-Saʿdāwī. It seems that the Arab female cannot shake off the feeling that she is constantly being watched, being judged, even if her only judge and jury are the voices in her head. Even when the woman writer musters up courage enough to write, she must be aware of the viability of her writing in commercial terms; if it is too controversial for publication in the Arab world, it is a derivative experience at best:

> ...There are concepts which cannot be accepted at all in the Arab countries. Therefore no one would read my books. So, while my books are read because of this compromise, and I want to be read rather than totally isolated, I pay a price for this.[419]

Presumably, her artistic integrity is the price she pays for this self-censorship.

Perhaps it was something specific in al-Saʿdāwī's class background that made it easier for her to break with the bonds of tradition and declare herself the Arab feminist *par excellence*. As Sophia K. Mohsen notes:

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[416] Juliette Minces, *The House of Obedience; Women in Arab Society*, trans. Michael Pallis (Zed Press, London, 1982) p.20.

[417] Ibid., p.31.

[418] Al-Saʿdāwī, "Reflections of a Feminist", p.403.

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> Unlike less affluent women, the upper-middle-class woman does not have to double her duties and responsibilities by going to work...Of more importance is the cultural support for their public role. Upper-middle-class women adapted quickly to the westernization processes. They adapted easily to everything Western, from fads in clothes and music to smoking and drinking in public. Male/female friendships are frequent, dating is becoming acceptable, and marriage for love is gaining in popularity among the group.[420]

It also helped that the Nāṣir regime had implemented co-educational programmes in its state schools, due to a shortage of teachers and buildings. This greatly facilitated the modernisation of the attitudes of Egyptian men and women towards being in a mixed-sex environment.

It was also the social conditions of Egypt at the time of al-Saʿdāwī's coming of age as a writer that made it easier for her than for other Arab women of her generation to become so outwardly feminist. At the time of her writing there was a strong feminist consciousness among women and, as Halim Barakat put it, "it has become increasingly clear that socio-economic conditions rather than some inherent nature are responsible for the woman's role as dependent on men (father, husband, and son); for evaluation in terms of role (that is, feminist, mother, sister, daughter) rather than her personality; for her responsibility not only for her own sins but also for those men because she is seen as a source of enticement, seduction, and evil; and for the expectation that she be totally faithful to her husband, who,

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[419] Ibid.
[420] Mohsen, "New Images, Old Reflections", pp.58-59.

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while expected to provide her with material support, is not held to a strong moral commitment to her".[421]

Feminists in Egypt, as elsewhere in the vast Islamic world, started to gain awareness of their disadvantaged position by coming to the conclusion that it was primarily patriarchal tradition, and it's (mis)interpretations of Islam, that has kept women down. The struggle remained, however, to deliver a clear distinction between the two in arguing their case, when the former had a vested interest in keeping all its agenda embroiled in the latter's name. This was often compounded by the shifting nature of Islam on Arab feminist agendas. While it was used as a way of reinforcing male supremacy on Egyptian women, it was also a way for women to resist the invasion of Western culture, as discussed by Minces: "Islam became an ideology of resistance".[422] Some women were ostentatiously taking up the veil for political reasons, as a matter of choice rather than in response to family or social pressures. It symbolised their demand for a more 'moral' economic, political and social life, as prescribed by Islam; a return to the wellsprings of Muslim identity and a new fundamentalism, exemplified by 1970s-Iran, and, in fact, "the 1967 defeat is held to be a turning point, at which fervent religiosity began to take hold in Egypt, and traditional Islamic groups proliferated".[423] This made it doubly difficult to try to envisage any other form of feminism without being labelled Western-influenced.

3.3.5   Pandering to the Western Reader

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[421] Barakat "The Arab Family", pp.34-35.
[422] Minces, *House of Obedience*, p.35.
[423] Sophie Bennett, *Gender and Identity in the Modern Egyptian Short Story (1954-1992)* (PhD diss., University of London, 1993) p.9.

As discussed in the Introduction, just the fact that a woman writer, or even a male writer, was willing to publicly declare a feminist stance, was enough to condemn them as having embraced Westernism in the eyes of the masses. Feminism in much of the Third World usually emerged following a nation's shift from being a rural society that had been insular and unexposed to foreign elements, to being established as an independent state which would be placed under Western scrutiny, incorporating itself into a Western-dominated world economy. Often, it only became visibly organised as a political movement following anti-colonial struggles for independence. As Badran puts it: "Third World feminisms, which have had distinct nationalist dimensions, and have typically incorporated religious reformism in their agenda, have had to endure from their own patriarchies the condemnation of being Western, and thus at best irrelevant and at worst culturally and politically subversive."[424] In this way, the accusation of being Westernised, and of not remaining true to one's customs and upbringing, is one that any fairly liberal woman would have to put up with. Yet, even amongst the "enlightened" academic elite of the Arab world, and among many of its feminists, al-Saᶜdāwī is viewed as being too Westernised, or even of blatantly pandering to the West. An example of this is Fathiyah al-ᶜAṣṣāl, an Egyptian political activist belonging to *Hizb al-Tagammuᶜ* (the leftist party), who "criticizes fellow Egyptian feminist Nawāl el-Saᶜdāwī, lionized in the west, for her exclusive focus on women's issues like marital abuse. This focus, she notes, corresponds (too) nicely to the depoliticised agenda of the American-based Ford Foundation, which sponsored al-Saᶜdāwī's short-lived feminist organisation, the Arab Women's Solidarity Union. As al-ᶜAṣṣāl explains: 'I'm against men beating their wives, and women submitting to being beaten, of course. But that is not the only issue. For me the issue is

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[424] Badran, "Independent Women", p.130.

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how women can be liberated economically, politically, and intellectually; then they will be automatically liberated from men'."[425] It is an undeniable fact that Western support (including international funding of its activities and its selection in the West as the true representative of Egyptian feminism) has contributed to the powerful institutional presence on the Egyptian scene of *Taḍāmun al-Mar'ah al-ʿArabīyyah* (Arab Women's Solidarity Union), founded in 1985 by Nawāl al-Saʿdāwī, which aroused hostile feelings in many moderate Egyptians, and thus further alienated the association. However, al-Saʿdāwī herself contributed to the organisation's estrangement from the mainstream, as this passage shows:

> Organizationally, this new secular and/or feminist organization did not offer its members greater opportunities for participation at all levels. As one Egyptian critic put it, *Taḍāmun* operates as a family enterprise. For example, Nawāl el-Saʿdāwī is the editor of the association's magazine, *Nūn*. Her daughter is the assistant editor and her husband is the managing editor. They are also the ones who represent the association in Arab and international conferences. This family monopoly of all positions of power in the association and its resources casts serious doubts about the organization's success in opening up leadership ranks for its women members, who are denied these opportunities elsewhere, in both Islamist and state institutions.

> *Taḍāmun*'s agenda, and/or the approaches it uses to analyze the important issues, is superimposed on the Egyptian social map from the outside. For instance, there is more than one article that questions the marriage institution. One discusses why women are happier in love, but not in marriage, another discusses the desire to become mothers outside the marriage institution, and a third equates marriage to slavery. While the critique of the marriage institution is not new in Egyptian women's writing, the idea of

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[425] Abu-Lughod, *Remaking Women*, p.78.

abandoning marriage to become single mothers and/or free women does not sound very Egyptian...they are not the primary aspirations of most Egyptian women. And they are not the burning issues around which one can mobilize Egyptian women.

Finally, there are numerous condescending attacks on the veil and veiled women who do not understand the connotations of their actions and how it reinforces women's inferiority. They are accused of not distinguishing between what is and what is not important in Islam. El-Saʿdāwī even describes them as suffering from "false consciousness". These Westernized views and concerns distinguish upper-middle-class and upper-class women from their counterparts who belong to the lower middle-class. Their ideologically polarized positions make coalition building extremely difficult at best. It confronts these different organizations with the serious challenge of political fragmentation.[426]

Hafez makes a similar point in his discussion on the secret of al-Saʿdāwī's popularity in the West. He cites a scene in *Memoirs* in which the heroine is reluctant to take her husband's name, but does so in the end. This, he explains, is only an issue with Western feminists, since "in Egypt, women do not change their maiden names after marriage".[427] However, although "coming from a different cultural base, Egyptian feminism is not intellectually isolated from Western feminism...[since] gender is a cross-cultural issue; it is valid to draw on various discourses, as Egyptian critics do, to gain a deeper understanding of Egypt's particular experience."[428]

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[426] Hatem, "Economic and Political Liberalization", p.192.
[427] Sabry Hafez, "Intentions and Realisations in the Narrative of Nawal El-Saadawi", *Third World Quarterly*, no. 3 (July 1989) p.189.
[428] Bennet, *Gender and Identity*, p.28.

There were some circumstances that perhaps made al-Sa°dāwī more susceptible than others of her kind to being attracted to a Western readership. According to Mohsen, it was a phenomenon that affected her entire social class: "Sādāt's 'open-door' policy, which permitted easy access to foreign investment in Egypt throughout the 1970s, tended to favour upper-middle-class women, especially in the area of high-paying jobs. The readiness, even the eagerness, of that class to adopt the Western style of life made it possible for these women to translate their economic gains into changes in their family relations."[429] It seems that their educational background paved the way for this sort of cultural-transference, as Mohsen explains: "Traditionally, women in that group have shown an interest in foreign education (French, English, or German) and a disdain for public (government) education."[430] This was obviously the case with al-Sa°dāwī, who was sent to school at an early age, and whose parents were relatively open-minded, and supported their daughter's education. But it was not just her family's circumstances, or her willingness to embrace Western culture that caused al-Sa°dāwī's work to be perceived as it was. There were other factors that were directly related to the feminist writer's struggle for publication: "In print, even more than elsewhere (unless she is reckless) she must wear the aspect that shall have the best chance of pleasing her brothers. Her publishers are not women."[431] This explains the pandering to overt sensationalism in Arab woman's novels, of which al-Sa°dāwī is certainly a culprit. Elaine Showalter relates an anecdote concerning Elizabeth Robin's play *Votes For Women* and quotes the playwright as saying that she feared she would be too controversial for London theatres at that time (1906-1907), but that she was sure that she would have no problems having it published in novel form; "No

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[429] Mohsen, "New Images, Old Reflections", p.56.
[430] Ibid., p.57.
[431] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.226.

trouble to get that accepted, however much a firebrand!"[432] This leaves us to wonder how much this mentality affected the quality of the work Nawāl al-Saᶜdāwī produced, especially since she is generally accused of catering to sensationalism and to a view of the post-colonial Arab-Islamic world that would promote Western sympathies.

Al-Saᶜdāwī herself is aware of this accusation; in discussing the shocked reaction that her book *Memoirs of a Female Physician* provoked, she remarked: "No one can believe it. Everyone thinks that we write such things in imitation of the West."[433] This is an assertion she makes at a later date in response to Al-Ali's question on her reaction to Leila Ahmed's comment that al-Saᶜdāwī's fiction was embedded in a Western frame made in her article "Arab Culture and Writing Women's Bodies":

> She [Leila Ahmed] lives in the West, and that is how her consciousness is formed. In
>
> my case, it is completely the opposite. I live in Egypt. All my consciousness is formed
>
> in the Arab culture; my English is poor. Most of what I read and learn is in Arabic.
>
> Therefore my frame of reference is my village, Arabic, Egyptian culture, history, and
>
> my struggle in my country. I think Leila Ahmed and other Westernized scholars try to
>
> ignore the struggle and authentic work of writers like me, who live all the time in Egypt.
>
> They cannot imagine that there is an Egyptian writer who writes without being anchored
>
> in Western thought. As if there is nothing called original thought except in the West. Or
>
> as if there is nothing called 'thought' except Western thought.[434]

Al-Saᶜdāwī turns this accusation of being Westernised against her critics, suggesting that the flaw resides in their own lack of faith in the ability of the Arab artist to produce original work that is not embedded in a Western progressive ideal. And, as Horsey says,

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[432] Ibid., pp.221-222.
[433] Al-Saᶜdāwī, "Reflections of a Feminist", p.400.
[434] Al-Ali, *Gender Writing/Writing Gender*, p.32.

"With the exception of Fatima Memissi in Morocco, no other writer has rivalled Saadawi's insight into the social realities of the Arab family and the position of women in modern Muslim society, and shown such commitment to publishing the facts, not only to the Arab societies themselves but also to the West."[435]

3.3.6 Feminist Victories

Essentially securing the feminist credentials of any Arab women writers is the argument that "Any woman who has attained to even a small measure of success in literature or art has done so by discarding, consciously or unconsciously, the traditions in which she was reared, by turning her back upon the conventional ideas of dependence that were held up for her admiration in her youth."[436] Showalter also suggests that "women writers viewed 'romance' from an economic perspective, so that their love stories were not frivolous fantasies, but accounts of female survival".[437] That this argument is especially true with regards to Nawāl al-Saᶜdāwī is evident in her use of the final, feminist love story as a means of bringing victory to the autonomous female in *Memoirs of a Female Physician*. Leaving her heroine unwed at the end would have proved the fatality of going against the grain in typical and traditional Arab societies, since one of the greatest fears faced by the Arab "shrew", should she escape familial punishment (*taᶜdhīb*), is the adage that no man would want her. However, in the words of Horsey, "to label her a feminist is, I believe, to understate her social commitment and give the impression that she is anti-men, due to the unfortunate negative connotations of the word 'feminist' as it is popularly conceived. It is amusing to note that this young lady writing in the late twentieth century should display

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[435] Horsey, *Introduction*, p.1.
[436] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.226.
[437] ibid.

the same concerns over the negative connotations of the word 'feminist' as feminist writers did a hundred years before her on the word 'suffragist'."[438] Though it is unclear whether these pejorative assumptions are based on Western or Arab conceptions of the term "feminist", what is clear is that the term involved a certain pigeon-holing that this author was anxious to avoid.

In her article, Sophia K. Mohsen points out how the writing of some of the prominent male authors of the mid-70s reflected their antagonism towards the expanding public role of Egyptian women. She quotes ᶜAbd al-Raḥmān Fāhūn as saying in an article in *Al-Jumhūriyyah*: "What the woman has not realized is that when she 'scooped' her rights she forgot her duties: her duties to raise children and her duties to provide the proper atmosphere in the small kingdom so that its members can produce for the good of society. All these duties were forgotten in the woman's haste to grab other people's rights."[439] Al-Saᶜdāwī thus decided to publish her most controversial work of non-fiction *Al-Mar'ah wa-l-jins* at a time when an already ultra-conservative society was feeling especially hostile towards women. There are some things which she chose to discuss in her novels that actually went against the concept of honour, making her absolutely unacceptable to the moral majority. As Barakat puts it: "Honour meant, for women, a chaste reputation, and for men, courage, religiosity, hospitality."[440] In her act of writing on taboo subjects, and openly expressing opinions that were controversial even in a Western context, such as her advocation of abortion, she has effectively given up her "honour", marking her as a target for any male to attack, verbally or otherwise. The merit of her work in this field is

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[438] Horsey, *Introduction*, p.13.
[439] Mohsen, "New Images, Old Reflections", p.62.
[440] Barakat "The Arab Family", p.27.

unquestionable, as she brought to light issues that would forever change the face of "acceptable" social norms. This translated directly into a heightened interest in her fictional writings, which, though not considered literary masterpieces, were very useful as vehicles for promoting feminist thought to a wider readership base. Though "the resulting story provides a telling commentary of the effects of woman's emergence into the workplace on the psychology of male authority figures...the incorporation of such a large burden of feminist societal content into a short story...produces an inconsistency between narrative voice and character."[441]

Even though there are "more competent novelists"[442] than al-Sa°dāwī, and there is "a significant gap between her standing in the West and her position in her own culture",[443] one cannot deny that, as a feminist, Nawāl al-Sa°dāwī stands out from the others. This is not to detract from the contribution of other, less high-profile Arab feminists; it is simply a fact. Al-Sa°dāwī is louder, more controversial, and more likely to elicit a reaction on a pan-Arab scale than any other feminist. Even those who have not read any of her books have strong opinions about her. Her incessant popularity on the Arab satellite stations' chat show circuit is a testament to that, and even though people may not like her, and though she may be too "obvious", there is a great deal of interest in whatever she has to say/ write/ do next. Certainly, according to critics such as Barakat, "the Egyptian physician-essayist-novelist Nawāl al-Sa°dāwī...and several others have contributed to a sophisticated and progressive understanding of the women's rights issue."[444]

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[441] Roger Allen, "The Arabic Short Story and the Status of Women" in Allen et al., *Love and Sexuality*, p.89.
[442] Hafez, "Intentions and Realisations", p.188.
[443] Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists*, p.138.
[444] Barakat, "The Arab Family", p.34.

Al-Saʿdāwī was unique as a feminist, in that she had the "male" tools of clinical observation, and scientific authority, and the "female" powers of empathetic expression. As a women doctor with a feminist consciousness and a feminist pen she attacked patriarchal assaults on the female body, and highlighted the fears and obsessions from which these public and private forms of aggression stemmed: mainly those of female virginity and sexual purity. She paid special attention to the physiological and psychological harms that the practice of clitoridectomy wreaks on the female body, exposing the falsity of condoning this extreme form of patriarchal control of female sexuality in the name of Islam.

The "Cinderella motif" popularised in rags-to-riches stories of feminine writers such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is transformed by the century's end to the victimised woman, often a prostitute, such as in George Egerton's *Gone Under*. There is no comfort for this exploited and discarded woman; abandoned to despair, she runs not only from her Prince-turned-Beast, but even from the compassion of the female narrator. What she leaves behind is no dainty glass slipper, but a "frayed, mud-soaked, satin shoe" and a cry "like the fancied echo of the laughter of hell".[445] This is very close to both the plot and the fate of the female protagonist of Nawāl al-Saʿdāwī's *Woman at Point Zero*, which is essentially the story of a good girl who is soiled and dehumanised through male exploitation, and the cruelties of patriarchal society. Firdaws too is "a voice from hell": she is angered by the men who try to save her even more than she is by those who solicit her services. In choosing Firdaws as a subject for her novel, al-Saʿdāwī remains true to turn-of-the-century Feminist leanings.

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[445] Sanders, *Private Lives*, p.18.

3.3.7   Penis Envy: Nawāl al-Saᶜdāwī and the Desire to be Male

"How nice it would be to be a man."[446] The opening sentence of Schriener's novel unites

the Feminist writers' latent wish, and explains the turn from celebrating the female body to

denying it and wishing to embrace manhood, a crime that Nawāl al-Saᶜdāwī is particularly

accused of.

> We are cursed...born cursed from the time our mothers bring us into the world till the
>
> shrouds are put on us...they begin to shape us to our cursed end...when we are tiny
>
> things in shoes and socks. We sit with our little feet drawn up under us in the window,
>
> and look out at the boys in their happy play. We want to go. Then a loving hand is laid
>
> on us "little one, you cannot go," they say "your little face will burn and your nice white
>
> dress be spoiled." We feel it must be for our good, it is so lovingly said: but we cannot
>
> understand and we kneel still with one little cheek wistfully pressed against the pane.[447]

This is a passage that Showalter uses to demonstrate the sentiments of a typically Feminist

writer. George Egerton's female protagonist echoes exactly the sentiments of Nawāl al-

Saᶜdāwī's heroine in *Memoirs of a Female Physician* and of Nawāl al-Saᶜdāwī herself in

her autobiographical work. The passage is very reminiscent of al-Saᶜdāwī's description of

her heroine's hatred of being a girl and the oppression by her mother in *Memoirs* and her

hated of her brothers. Here we have the planting of the seeds for the flight into androgyny,

which is witnessed in the next stage of Female consciousness. Much like Grand's Angelica

in her cross-dressing Interlude,[448] Nawāl al-Saᶜdāwī is living out the prototypical Feminist

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[446] Quoted in: Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.203.
[447] Ibid., p.199-200.
[448] In fact, al-Saᶜdāwī wrote a novel called *Ughniyat al-atfāl al-dā'iriyyah*, ("The Circling Song"), which is very similar in content and in the use of male/female twins to demonstrate how sexual roles are imposed by society rather than a product of nature.

fantasy of being a boy, cutting off her 'mounds' and embracing a no man's land between woman- and manhood for the freedom of being treated as a person, not just as a woman.

Al-Sa°dāwī uses her experiences as a doctor and psychiatrist to express the internal and external conflicts brought about in women's lives through repression, and the greatest repression her heroines experience is that of their femininity. Nadje Sadig al-Ali has said of the female protagonist in *Two Women in One* that "The struggle to reach her true essence, to find her identity, is closely bound to a rejection of her body in everything she defines as being female."[449] This can be applied to the doctor-heroine of *Memoirs* even more emphatically. She investigates this phenomenon, further adding: "The primary referents of shame, which are linked to femaleness, are physical: the private parts...But it is obvious that it also stands for the femininity of the female protagonist. It is central to the predicament of the heroine, the key cultural reality against which she rebels, embodying both her sense of physical shame and inadequacy, on the one hand, and the social restrictions placed upon her, on the other."[450] Long hair, breasts, menstruation; all aspects of being a woman, or at least those which set her as being different from men, were obstacles to al-Sa°dāwī's heroine, ones which she had to overcome even before leaving her room and facing a judgemental outside world. The internalisation of sexism causes this self-loathing, and it is a tragic refutation of feminist aspirations in an already hostile patriarchal society.

3.3.8 Inverting Patriarchal Codes

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[449] Al-Ali, *Gender Writing/Writing Gender*, p.26.
[450] Ibid., p.28.

As a prostitute I had been looked upon with more respect, and been valued more highly than all the female employees, myself included...I felt sorry for the other girls who were guileless enough to offer their bodies and their physical efforts every night in return for a meal, or a good yearly report, or just to ensure that they would not be treated unfairly, or discriminated against, or transferred...An employee is scared of losing her job and becoming a prostitute because she does not understand that the prostitute's life is in fact better than hers. And so she pays the price of her illusory fears with her life, her health, her body, and her mind. She pays the highest price for things of the lowest value. I now knew that all of us were prostitutes who sold themselves at varying prices, and that an expensive prostitute was better than a cheap one.[451]

Although the twisted logic of Firdaws's statement is easily accessible to the majority of Arab females (in that joining the public workforce is not an accurate measure of women's liberation), and is reflective of women's position the world over, Nawāl al-Saᶜdāwī unwittingly succumbs to what Sabry Hafez identified as "a peculiar tendency to invert the prevalent patriarchal order without a clear understanding of the dangers involved".[452] In *Woman at Point Zero* all it takes for Firdaws to abandon her new-found freedom and lucrative lifestyle as a freelance prostitute is for a single man, her client no less, to describe her as "not respectable".[453] In the space of a day, Firdaws abandons her entire belief system and begins work in an office as a secretary in order to become "respectable", confirming all the patriarchal assumptions that she was supposedly wise to, and thus inoculated from. This pattern of self-contradiction emerges time and again in the actions of Nawāl al-Saᶜdāwī's heroines; their actions almost inevitably conflict with what they preach. In spite of her supposed repulsion towards all things male, Firdaws falls head over

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[451] Al-Saᶜdāwī, *Woman at Point Zero*, pp.75-76.
[452] Hafez, "Intentions and Realisations", p.166.
[453] Al-Saᶜdāwī, *Woman at Point Zero*, p.73.

heels in love with one of her employees and, all life's lessons flying out of the window, gives herself to him in every sense of the word. Here again she confirms the patriarchal assertion that a woman cannot gain fulfillment without the love of a man, which is also seen in the fairytale-ending of *Memoirs*.

Firdaws's self-delusion reaches incredible heights when she falls in love with Ibrāhīm, a colleague at work. She is devastated when he chooses to marry the boss's daughter over her, especially since she gave had sexual intercourse with him. The question that presents itself at this juncture is why? Why should Firdaws react with such violent shock? She has been born and bred in a culture that puts a huge price on women's sexual purity, a fact that she acknowledges and chooses to embrace by abandoning her career as a prostitute and joining the respectable working sector. In giving herself freely to a man, she must realise, especially as a jaded prostitute, how greatly that diminishes her relative suitability as a life partner, no matter what protestations of love he may have made to her. This has the effect of her returning to prostitution again. Her decisions to join and abandon respectability, although executed through her own free will, were both motivated by men, and their actions towards her, reinforcing the extent of control weaved by men in a patriarchal society, even on a woman operating in its peripherals.

As Allen says,

> In retrospect it seems reasonable to suggest that writers such as Baᶜlbakī, al-Sammān, and al-Saᶜdāwī, whatever one's verdict may be about the literary merits of their fiction, have considerably expanded the creative space within which contemporary writers of both sexes may portray their worlds. In other words, the fictions that they create and the narrative strategies that they employ to bring them into existence are to be regarded as

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contributions to the technical repertoire of Arabic fiction, quite apart from whatever kind of adjustment of balance or advocacy of change they may be effecting in the broader societal frame.[454]

Yet it is society that triumphs in the end: Firdaws is persecuted, tried, jailed and executed, which is the only possible outcome for a person in her situation, regardless of gender. Had al-Saʿdāwī portrayed a villainous male who gets through the loopholes of the law, and uses the code of silence that permeates 'respectable' society when it comes to male vice, as Sarah Grand had done, her novel would have had a much more profound impact. As it stands, the trials and tribulations of a prostitute who murders her pimp and is executed as a result, *Woman at Point Zero* has been an exercise in futility as far as the feminist agenda is concerned. Al-Saʿdāwī asserts that,

> The execution of Firdaws does not mean the annihilation of her body. Neither does it mean the victory of male/patriarchal values. It means other things. One of them is the ability of women to resist oppression up to death. To kill here is an action. It is a positive action against traditional passivity of women. However, it has many other meanings, including hope and the power to resist.[455]

It is hard not to disagree with this statement. Al-Saʿdāwī is describing a parallel reality where death equals hope, and a heroine's demise is a victory. This signals a retreat into a state of denial whereby if al-Saʿdāwī refuses to acknowledge a patriarchal system she negates its existence. The problem is that the author, much like Firdaws, exists within such a system, so in its negation, she erases her existence too, and so not much is achieved in the sense of improving women's position within the system, and through that, transforming the system itself.

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[454] Allen, "The Arabic Short Story", p.88.

3.3.9 Literary Merits: Rage against the Machine

In al-Sa°dāwī's novels the all-enveloping anger of her protagonists is symptomatic of the author's anxiety to insure that the message of unfair treatment and inequality towards women gets across. This weakens the fictional qualities of the novels as it is hard to pinpoint where the author's voice ends and those of her characters begin, since they all use the same language and have the same descriptive abilities as the author does, and they indulge in the political tirades associated with feminist writers.

Another aspect that distorts the soft-focus quality of the literature is the author's suspect choice of narrators. Moreover, according to Al-Ali: "In al-Sa°dāwī's [Memoirs] the protagonist remains inward-looking – the centre of her own universe – with the result that no new situation or experience can be 'educative'. What emerges instead is a pattern in which the protagonist's inflated preoccupation with her ego results in an exaggerated response to events."[456] Additionally, as Manisty notes, al-Sa°dāwī's "overwhelming authorial domination and the politically feminist agenda behind her novels is conducted through a monologous voice which intrudes on the protagonist's potential to develop a discourse able to challenge limitations."

While reading *Woman at Point Zero* one wonders just how reliable Firdaws the prostitute is as a narrator. Even though the author, in the guise of the psychiatrist narrator, chooses to believe her story, how can the reader, faced with a murderous hooker, give this person any credibility? Even before Firdaws begins to tell her story, the reader recognises that it must

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[455] Al-Ali, *Gender Writing/Writing Gender*, p.32.

be, could not be anything but, a hooker-with-a-heart-of-gold, poor-me story, with undeniably harsh circumstances that have brought the hooker/victim to this end. It is the plot behind every prostitute's story, from *Moll Flanders* to the movie *Pretty Woman*. No one in their right mind, and given other viable options, would choose to become a prostitute (with the possible exception of Venetian courtesans), and so the tale is one that is so familiar, so devoid of new revelations, that, although it does arouse some sympathy, it does not bring about the overwhelming empathy that the author seems to feel for Firdaws. The fact remains that both sexes generally regard prostitutes as despicable, though pitiful, figures. It shouldn't be expected of a morally sound audience that they would muster respect for such an irredeemable character, especially one given to committing murder in so violent a manner. Firdaws's confounding self-righteousness only makes her even more repulsive to the reader, and the psychiatrist/author's glorification of her makes the latter seem unstable and morally defunct. According to al-Ali, "apparently, the psychiatrist envies the courage of Firdaws, who by becoming a prostitute and murderer was more true to her Self and who acted upon her predicament as a woman in a manner that managed to reveal the lies and hypocrisies around her".[457] Al-Saᶜdāwī's insistence on painting Firdaws as the martyr ("Day and night I lay on the bed, crucified, and every hour a man would come in...")[458] is frustrating to her feminist agenda in the same manner described by Hafez in his discussion of *The Fall of the Imam*,[459] in that it follows no obvious logic, and is therefore unable to ignite the desired sympathy in the reader, thereby weakening the story. The dream-like state that the psychiatrist-narrator enters into and emerges from at both the beginning and close of the novel only serves to accentuate the prevailing sense of a forced

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[456] Ibid., p.120.
[457] Ibid., p.21.
[458] Al-Saᶜdāwī, *Woman at Point Zero*, p.34.
[459] Sabry Hafez, "Women's Narrative", p.243.

suspension of disbelief on the reader's part, and casts even more doubt on Firdaws's reliability, and the psychiatrist's competency, for what kind of a psychiatrist would fall under their subject's spell?

3.4 Conclusion

Nawāl al-Saᶜdāwī and Sarah Grand were both active contributors to the Feminist trend of using the language and the medium of novel-writing in a unique way that is ultimately concerned with women. Sarah Grand and Nawāl al-Saᶜdāwī share many of the attributes that were common to Feminist writers in general, and especially those that set the latter apart from their predecessors. Primarily, they were involved in the mechanics of a woman's thoughts and feelings and her immediate psychological referents with a much more claustrophobic intensity. "Their gender is of far more immediate concern than it is for men writers",[460] which is why they tend to fixate on it so much more. Notably, to some extent Nawāl al-Saᶜdāwī was a suffragette; she went to court on several occasions and even ended up in prison for her beliefs. She used her writing, fictional or otherwise, to protest the atrocities committed against women in Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world. She headed up many organisations for women's advancement in Egypt, and on a pan-Arabian basis. And like the suffragettes her fiction suffered from the label of "political propaganda".

Both Grand and al-Saᶜdāwī focused on marriage rather than on courtship, which formed the trajectory of most Feminine fiction, so that their writing was of necessity more realistic than romantic. Both writers used plots and characters that questioned the contradictory

nature of marriage and the domestic ideal, actively challenging the dominant definitions of womanhood and its prescribed social and familial roles in their respective cultures. Both Grand and al-Saᶜdāwī are Feminist in that they seek to uncover the complexities of female emotions by placing them under the microscope, demystifying romantic love, marriage and motherhood in the process, and uncovering the network of sexual, economic and psychological exploitation upon which "civilised" marriage is constructed. Above all, the work of both Sarah Grand and Nawāl al-Saᶜdāwī generated critical controversy, which became embedded in a broader socio-cultural anxiety about gender roles.

3.4.1 Similarities

There were socio-historic similarities in the backgrounds of both Sarah Grand and Nawāl al-Saᶜdāwī. Both were born at a time when their respective countries' economic structures and methods of production had helped dislocate the traditional family, and made it possible for women in urban surroundings to work, and gain higher visibility outside the domestic sphere. Even in their social class, both were part of the modernist bourgeoisie, and were far from constituting the norm.

Like Sarah Grand before her, al-Saᶜdāwī forced the "private" matter of sexuality into the open, and argued for a rethinking of the practised norms. She pointed out in her writings the operation of a double standard whereby the Islamic prescription of confining all sexual activity to the marital bed was applied to women and not to men, and exposed the sexual exploitation of women in the domestic sphere. Both writers focused on the law and policing that affected women's fate, and exposed the roots of vice in their respective

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460 Manisty, *Changing Limitations*, p.44.

societies, which were always, inevitably, male. Like Grand, al-Sa°dāwī brought to light the sexual and emotional domination of women, and placed the bulk of the blame on men and society at a time when women in Egypt were being led to believe that the responsibility was theirs to cover themselves (with the veil and long, loose clothing) and to distance themselves from the public arena lest they be a source of temptation and sin.

Al-Sa°dāwī also attacks the cornerstone of the Islamic institution, which is the family and its spiritual embodiment of marriage. "With mutual sexual attraction more or less ruled out, marriage is usually based on materialistic considerations; it is a kind of business transaction or legalized prostitution in which the husband becomes the sole owner of his wife, with unilateral rights of divorce."[461] In this she resembles Sarah Grand a great deal, especially in the way the latter discredits the merits of the traditional bourgeoisie marriage.[462]

The invasion of a woman's sexual organs by the practices of a patriarchal society was a theme that preoccupied both English feminists like Sarah Grand and Arab ones such as Nawāl al-Sa°dāwī. "They seem to tear the passage open first with their hands," one victim testified, "and then they thrust in instruments, and they pull them out and push them in, and they turn and twist them about; and if you cry out they stifle you."[463] This is oddly similar to Nawāl al-Sa°dāwī's harrowing account of the removal of her heroine's clitoris in *Memoirs of a Female Physician*, and again in *Woman at Point Zero*.

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[461] Accad, "Rebellion, Maturity and the Social Context", p.233.
[462] Discussed in §3.2.7.
[463] Gilbert and Gubar, *Norton Anthology*, p.973.

Both authors displayed the tendency discussed earlier in the section entitled 'The Fight for Freedom; Unresolved Issues' to elevate their heroines to superwoman status. As feminist heroines they are by definition independent, capable women; however, they sometimes seem too capable. "I knew that women did not become heads of state, but I felt that I was not like other women, nor like the other girls around me..."[464] It is evident here how Firdaws displays Beth's megalomaniac tendencies. Time and again Grand and al-Saᶜdāwī want to reassure the reader of the exceptional qualities of their heroine. "No, no, no" they seem to be saying, "this is no ordinary woman", even though this defies all conviction and overrides all of the reader's logic. This defeats the feminist cause in two ways. First of all, it reasserts the notion that a woman must have extra-ordinary capacities to make something of herself, which is disheartening not only to plain Janes but also to every woman without megalomaniac tendencies. It supports patriarchal notions of women's capabilities by suggesting that these women are aberrations. Secondly, it undermines the confidence the reader places in the author's judgements by planting the suggestion that the female writer is suffering from blind bias in relating the events surrounding her heroine due to an excessive sympathy/empathy with her that a male writer would not necessarily suffer from. However, paradoxically,

> when al-Saᶜdāwī shows that young women *can* in fact criticize society, their families and men (such as in the case of the heroine of *Memoirs*) and yet survive, in fact, can find happiness and purpose in life, then al-Saᶜdāwī is actually taking literature in a new direction. At a time when role models for intelligent young women growing up normally are scarce, whether in Egyptian literature or in the media, the appearance of strong and respectable heroines in al-Saᶜdāwī's novels must be a welcome sight.[465]

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[464] Al-Saᶜdāwī, *Woman at Point Zero*, p.25.
[465] Badran, "Independent Women", p.130.

3.4.2 Contrasts

Even before the discussion of contrasts in their personal backgrounds, or their writing styles, it is necessary to note the fundamental social differences between the two authors that greatly affected the quality of their work. True, both writers had an agenda in much of their fiction that made it similar in many ways, yet their target audiences were different. If the accusations levelled against al-Sa'dāwī are to be believed, al-Sa'dāwī was targeting a readership outside her culture, let alone her sex. Furthermore, according to Horsey, "cultural and dialectal differences in the Arab world usually predispose the reader to find his or her own indigenous fiction the most rewarding",[466] and though this is not necessarily true, it introduces the possibility that al-Sa'dāwī would not have been able to easily target even the Arab world. In addition to this, the two women were embroiled in exceedingly loco-centric feminist struggles that created contrasts in even the type of feminism they envisaged. "In the Third World, the time frame of feminist evolution has been much more compressed than in the West. In the United States, for example, women made significant advances in education and inroads into paid work some half-century before they stepped up to the suffrage movement. At the start of organized feminism in Egypt, women simultaneously demanded social, economic, and political rights, sequentially spacing out their campaigns in these areas only to a limited extent."[467]

Although both authors use science and the medical establishment to define male/ female terms of power, they use them to symbolise opposing visions of feminism. In both *The Heavenly Twins* and *Woman at Point Zero* the relation of power and medicine is reflected

in the doctor-patient dynamic of two of the main protagonists. In *The Heavenly Twins*, Evadene and her husband represent the male/ female dichotomy of the medical relationship, and in *Woman at Point Zero*, this is reflected in the psychiatrist's relationship with Firdaws. In *The Beth Book* and in *Memoirs of a Female Physician*, doctor figures are used to represent male oppression; Beth's husband Dr Dan Maclure's very job is to violate women's privates in the Lock hospital. Science and medicine are patriarchal tools in *Memoirs of a Female Physician* too, except now they are not in opposition to the female protagonist, so that she conquers the male world of medicine, in effect turning patriarchy's tools against itself by using them to give authority to her feminist endeavours. However, both authors display the science/ art or reason/ feeling in an obvious male/ female formula. It is no coincidence that both novels end with the heroine meeting a man who is an artist. This is a very conscious choice in that the authors are projecting feelings and feminine intuitions and attributes onto their ideal male to prove the civilising influence of being in touch with nature, as represented by the artistic leanings of women. Malti-Douglas suggests that the "science vs. art" debate paves the way in *Memoirs of a Female Physician* for "linking individual with collective emancipation".[468] The doctor protagonist uses her scientific knowledge to bring justice and liberation to women whose lives can be saved or ruined according to the whim of the medical establishment, which is traditionally the realm of men. This is demonstrated in the heroine's decision to perform an abortion on an unmarried young girl, ignoring the fatal consequences that her actions could ignite to her own person: "I'd accept my fate and meet death with a satisfied soul and an easy conscience."[469]

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[466] Horsey, *Introduction*, p.24.
[467] Ibid., p.23.
[468] Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body*, p.143.
[469] Al-Saʿdāwī, *Memoirs*, p.81.

"El Saadawi portrays a woman who distinguishes herself from what she discerns as female...[her heroine] is described as better than other females, as one who struggles and obtains personhood. This could be looked at as El Saadawi's indication that the 'mass of females' is of lesser worth than her stories' main character..."[470] This attitude differs greatly from the forgiving, understanding tone with which Grand dealt with what she regarded as 'inferior' females, those that did not share her heroine's feminist aspirations, or who failed to embrace them with sufficient vigour. In fact, George Tarabishi dedicated an entire book to establishing just how great were the "feelings of hostility"[471] Nawāl al-Saʿdāwī harboured towards women, which is quite obvious from the book's title *Woman Against her Sex*.

Finally, there was a great difference in their attitudes towards sex. Grand demanded equality in sexual austerity for both sexes rather than greater, equivalent freedom for women, and she is reticent and coy when dealing with sexual encounters. In this respect she is much more a Feminine writer than a Feminist one. Al-Saʿdāwī's attitude is closer to that of the later Feminist writers towards sexual relations. Although she agrees with Grand in that sexual purity should be required of men as much as it is of women, especially in the context of marital relationships, she also advocates sex outside the boundaries of marriage and granting women the same sexual freedom as men.

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[470] Al-Ali, *Gender Writing/Writing Gender*, p.29.
[471] Tarabishi, *Woman against Her Sex*, p.148.

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Female

4.1   Elaine Showalter's Female

World War One, described by contemporary world leaders as "the war to end all wars", was experienced as an extraordinary turning point, not only in England's history but in the history of all humankind. This apocalyptic nightmare, with the highest fatality rate that has ever been witnessed in any war before, subverted many golden "ideals", and led to a redefinition of concepts of morality, patriotism and conventional social or gender roles. In the face of the new technological realities of the trenches, poison gas, land mines and machine guns, there was a general submission to the will of a new world order, one that placed women, out of necessity, on a higher social level than ever before, mostly because women at last had a chance to dispel the myth of their vulnerability and their supposed inability to withstand the trauma of the "real world". In fact, the Great War generated one of the most striking discontinuities between male and female experience in the modernist period.

Although the war was perceived as a massive tragedy for thousands of grieving wives and mothers, the conflict presented a reversal of the old order which "contributed enormously to the liberation and the new exuberance of women, who felt for the first time not only needed but appreciated".[472] Unarguably, British women's contributions to the war effort were a major factor in achieving the right to vote, and facilitated what decades of hard

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[472] Gilbert and Gubar, *Norton Anthology*, p.1221.

work and socio-political struggles had failed to do. Filling the places conscripts had left behind in mines and munitions factories, farms and railroads, women found themselves confronted for the first time with opportunities to do remunerative and meaningful work in the public sphere.

But it was not only the economic necessity and male absence that gave women access to a new kind of freedom. There were a number of other ways in which the social disruption fostered by the war seemed also to help facilitate the liberation of women. "Although nineteenth-century factory and farm workers had always had more freedom of movement than their upper-class counterparts, 'war girls' were among the first 'respectable' female group in Western history who could stroll the public streets unescorted, go to theatres and dances without chaperones, and even travel on their own without inurning the suspicion that they were 'fallen' women."[473] In addition, such female workers were the first group to shed traditional women's costumes in significant numbers. As one historian has observed, flappers' clothes, with their short hemlines and sleeveless designs, were in themselves a marked departure from the cramped confines of women's clothing in the Victorian period. Miriam Cooke relates how for women in World War One (and for Lebanese women in the civil war at a much later historical stage), "the war facilitated not just a liberation from the constricting trivia of parlours and petticoats but unprecedented transcendence of the profound constraints imposed by traditional sex roles."[474]

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[473] Ibid., p.1222.
[474] Miriam Cooke, *War's Other Voices; Women Writers on the Lebanese Civil War* (Cambridge University Press, 1988) p.2.

Although many of the most crucial social changes affecting women's lives in this era had already been set in motion by the various campaigns of turn-of-the-century feminists, such as the birth-control and childcare movements, and even, paradoxically, the free-love movement, these all came into fruition in the years between 1914 and 1921. The fact that, in Virginia Woolf's words, "professions for women seemed finally to have become seriously possible",[475] gave considerable prominence to feminist movements with pre-war origins and contributed to fostering female autonomy, and through that, to opening up unprecedented avenues for the articulation and exploration of female sexual desires by women. "Thus, where late-nineteenth-century literary men had become obsessed by the threatening and predatory figure of the femme fatale...modernist men were haunted by a new kind of destructive female: the flapper, a figure whose daunting ease with technology and unnerving sexual freedom were manifested by her short skirts and bobbed hair, her feverish dancing and wild drinking, her skillful driving and willful wandering".[476] And so it was that, by and large, much literature of the period is notable for its obsession with what women should do, and be, and dominated by the long shadow of the war.

Following the emotional and physical ravages of World War One, and "the frightening spectacle of how closely feminist militancy[477] resembled its masculine form",[478] woman writers began to search for a way to express their newly acquired liberation, and with it a new form of consciousness. With a wider range of experiences behind them, and greater opportunities anticipated, the likelihood that the Female women writers could and would

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[475] Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, intro by Maureen Howard (New York: Harvest Press, 1981) p.135.

[476] Gilbert and Gubar, *Norton Anthology*, pp.1217-1218.

[477] In the summer of 1914, suffragist militancy in Britain had reached an unprecedented intensity. Led by the Pankhursts, women engaged in hunger strikes, window smashing and other acts of violence. After the war broke out, however, British suffragist societies immediately suspended all such activities, and the government issued an amnesty to all its hunger-striking women prisoners.

function as autonomous creators in their own right grew. "The Female aesthetic applied feminist ideology to language as well as to literature, to words and sentences as well as to perceptions and values."[479] Yet, as Showalter is quick to remind us, the psychological state of the female artists at this time was still precarious; at best, hesitant, and at worst, self-hating. "Women writers responded to the war by turning within; yet they renounced the demands of the individual narrative self."[480] This in turn filtered into their writing; "Thus the fiction of this generation seems oddly impersonal and renunciatory at the same time that it is openly and insistently female. The female aesthetic was to become another form of self-annihilation for women writers, rather than a way of self-realization. One detects in this generation clear and disturbing signs of retreat: retreat from the ego, retreat from the physical experience of women, retreat from the material world."[481] Ironically, the new freedoms that women had gained seemed to supply them with more obstacles and binding chains that interfered with their happiness, confused their sense of identity, and made it harder for them to live and produce as writers. "Members of a generation of women in rebellion against the traditional feminine domestic rules, they tried free love, only to find themselves exploited; if they then chose marriage, they often felt trapped."[482] At the time, however, female aestheticism seemed to signal a movement forward, towards attaining a more Female art form that could be accepted into the main stream without the taint of imitation or inferiority, to the extent that "some women novelists and critics felt that...the literature of women had finally emancipated itself from its cultural subjection to a male tradition, and that its historical moment had arrived."[483]

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[478] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.240.
[479] Ibid., p.240.
[488] Ibid.
[489] Ibid.
[482] Ibid., p.244.
[483] Ibid., p.241.

Between the Edwardian and Georgian reigns in England, there came about an immense shift in the status of women in the hiatus that followed the war. Virginia Woolf declared that "all human relations have shifted" [484] and especially, as her images of change indicate, the relations between the sexes. Both middle- and upper-class women, no longer bound by the preceding century's ideology of femininity, entered universities and professions in ever increasing numbers while exulting in a new intellectual and sexual freedom. Finally, after nearly a century of struggle, women of all classes in both Britain and America at last gained the right to vote, a right that at least legally acknowledged their full citizenship in the human community for the first time.

Despite all these advances, however, the 1920s and 1930s saw the inauguration of the phase that Elaine Showalter called "feminism's awkward age". Many suffragists discovered, too, that "anti-feminism" was, in the words of Rebecca West, "striking the correct fashion...among...the intellectual"[485] in this period, and that, although a woman wanted work of her own, she also wanted a husband, home, and children for whose care she was still obliged to bear primary responsibility – so that how to reconcile these two desires in real life "was a perplexing question".[486]

At a much later historical stage, Arab women were asking themselves these same questions. Post-1980, women in most of the Arab world had gone through the first awkward phases of settling into their (slightly) more emancipated roles, and after the flurry of "nation-building"[487] had died down, and, as new social and economic problems began

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[484] Gilbert and Gubar, *Norton Anthology*, p.1220.
[485] Ibid., p.1223.
[486] Ibid.
[487] §1.2.3.2.

emerging, women found their cause taking the backseat, now that the major issues (such as access to the workplace and the right to suffrage) had been addressed. In many aspects they were similar to the women in Britain, reeling from the aftermath of the many wars that plagued the area, and yet unable to access the same degree of emancipation from men.

Arab women in the Female stage were also confronting some odd choices in their newly emancipated circumstances. Many of them had acquired the right to vote, and managed to push themselves through to the higher echelons of the workplace (whether governmental or private) with access to greater mobility and independence than ever before, but this is where the leash ended. Unlike women in Britain, their new-found freedom did not translate itself to a wider sexual licence, with a high social price still being placed on female virginity prior to marriage, and chastity post. They found themselves still expected to fulfil a traditional familial and domestic role whenever they were at home. This created unease with their new-found situation, which quickly translated itself into their writing; heroines would often outwardly seem capable of attaining independence, and yet remain hesitant to embrace it. Instead, more subversive outlets would be sought: fantasy, illicit sex, familial melodrama.

It seems that the Female Arab author, like her British counterpart, has progressed beyond the need to constantly access her position vis-a-vis the male writer, and has accepted that her voice consists of a unique contribution to the literature of the period. Taken much more seriously as authors and genuine artists, women writers in the Female stage no longer needed to question the validity of their work, or to suppose that the (male) critic would not take them seriously, or would pigeonhole them because of their sex, as in the previous stages. In fact, Arab women writing in the Female stage enjoy a certain vogue at the

present time, and writers such as Ḥanān al-Shaykh, Aḥlām Mustaghānī, and Ghādah al-Sammān find themselves earning pan-Arab and multi-national acclaim that was only a decade or so previously the sole domain of the Arab male author.

4.1.1   Early Female and Late Female

Post-1930, Elaine Showalter sees a marked difference in women's writing: "There is a new frankness about the body and about such topics as adultery, abortion, lesbianism, and prostitution."[488] This, she concludes, came as a direct result of changes in the socio-economic and cultural sphere of British society. The halo of male supremacy and knowledge fell somewhat as female access to university education grew. "Women writers educated like their brothers at Oxford and Cambridge were no longer likely to venerate masculine knowledge...or to reject it...Women allowed to express their own sexuality, albeit in very limited ways, were not so insistent on chastity for men."[489]

Along with differences in educational status of women novelists (the overwhelming majority of women writers of the post-war period had university degrees as opposed to 50% or less previously), "during the post-war period, it also seemed that the boundaries of the female subculture, still strong for working-class women, were not as rigid for the cultural elite."[490] But by far the most important accomplishment that this created, in Showalter's estimation, was the bridging of the gap between male and female writing so much that "the differences in subject matter and tone between the works of English

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[488] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.299.
[489] Ibid., p.301.
[490] Ibid., p.300.

women novelists and their male contemporaries"[491] paled in comparison to "the differences between English novelists generally and their more ambitious, explosive American counterparts".[492] Men and women writers of the same cultural background no longer seemed to be speaking a different language. Similarly, Hafez demonstrates how the Arab Female writer differs from the Feminist one by stating that unlike the latter, the former doesn't "aspire to cancel out the male voice, or to subject it to the rubrics of feminist oppression, but rather to create a new order in which the two genders relate a different story of the female."[493]

Another evolution would occur even later in the Female stage. "Around 1970, the clever, dry tone of these novels, in which women guiltily confronted the collapse of their expectations, began to change to something much more urgent, angry, and unpredictable."[494] Even the protagonists of their novels transmogrified, and the result is "a heroine at her absolute limits of endurance, filled with unexpressed rage."[495] This new heroine would be able to engage in the world of men and letters, live her life on her own womanly terms, and prove, once and for all, that the female experience is intrinsically different from the male one, that it deserves recognition, and more importantly that it can and does appeal to a cross-gender audience.

In the same vein, Evelyne Accad suggests that in the novels of some contemporary Arab women writers

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[491] Ibid., p.301.
[492] Ibid.
[493] Sabry Hafez, "Women's Narrative", p.173.
[494] Showalter, A Literature of Their Own, p.304.
[495] Ibid.

the social milieu begins to be explored with a new clarity and frankness that moves it from the background to the front of the fictional stage. It becomes clear that not only individuals, but also the society in which they live, must be reborn. It is because of this progression that I suggest that the fiction of...some women writers...has achieved a true maturity of vision; a realization that the self – and its freedom – cannot be separated from the entire social context. Obviously, this evolving vision has important political implications.[496]

What Accad seems to suggest here is that Arab women writers have succeeded in seeing themselves, and their fictions, as being part of a communal struggle to evolve and modernise, and find a sense of identity in a rapidly changing world. The divide is no longer "us" and "them" where women and men are pitted against each other, with the latter acting as an oppressive agent on the former, but rather as complimentary, sometimes detractory, reflections of where the Arab stands in an often unsympathetic, Western-dominated world.

4.1.2 Virginia Woolf and Ḥanān al-Shaykh: Female Models

Both Woolf and al-Shaykh would fit into Showalter's category of Female, in that they were writing in an age where many of the major obstacles facing women's freedom had been eradicated, and yet some fundamental questions about the nature of emancipated womanhood remained. Both display more "early" Female than "late" Female tendencies, allowing for the discrepancies in time that exist between the production of their work. It must be noted that although Showalter chose to focus on Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, the focus here is on two of the latter's fictional works, to keep the structure of this study consistent.

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[496] Evelyne Accad, "Rebellion, Maturity, and the Social Context", p.225.

4.2   Virginia Woolf

Born in London, on January 25th 1882, Adeline Virginia Stephen was the third child of Julia and Leslie Stephen. Both her parents had been previously married, and so Virginia had four half-brothers and sisters, who she lived with in her parents' home in London. Her father (previously married to the novelist Thackeray's daughter) was part of the intellectual aristocracy of England, and Virginia was allowed uncensored access to his extensive library. In 1895 her mother died unexpectedly, after which Virginia suffered the first in a series of many nervous breakdowns. Though her brothers were sent to preparatory and public schools, Woolf's own education was sketchy, and she never attended school herself. In Cambridge, Thoby, Woolf's older brother, made friends with what would become the nucleus of the Bloomsbury group,[497] and among them, Leonard Woolf. This marked a turning point in Woolf's young life and would forever change the path of her destiny:

> In these early Bloomsbury years, however, they functioned primarily as messengers of freedom that Virginia, in particular, seems hardly to have allowed herself to imagine before she met them. From late night discussions of beauty and truth, the group moved to frank analyses of their own sexuality, especially of the homosexuality that had characterized many of men's public (secondary) school and collage careers. For the young woman who was to become the novelist Virginia Woolf, the Victorian period,

with its covert suppression of the female intellect and its overt disapproval of everybody's sexuality, seems definitively to have ended.[498]

In 1905, Woolf established the beginnings of her literary career when she started reviewing in *The Times Literary Supplement*, where she continued to write for many years. When Leonard Woolf returned to England in 1911, on leave from the Ceylon Civil Service, he proposed to Virginia, and after some reluctance on her part, he finally convinced her, and they were married on August 10th of the same year. From 1912 onwards the Woolfs would rent a succession of homes in Sussex, even naming the small hand-printing press that was originally intended as a therapeutic hobby for Virginia, after one of them. Hogarth Press would give Virginia room for the experimental writing that she would forever become associated with, and with the exception of a few limited editions, all of Virginia's publications as of 1921 would come out of it. By about 1922, Hogarth Press had become a business, and even though the Woolfs continued hand-printing until 1932, they were more publishers than printers. "The Woolves produced editions of, among other notable works, the poems of T.S. Eliot, the short stories of Katherine Mansfield, and the writings of Sigmund Freud in translation".[499] Virginia Woolf committed suicide in 1941 by drowning in the River Ouse, near Monks House, her home since 1919.

4.2.1   Virginia Woolf's Work

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[497] The group of young men that Thoby Stephen befriended at Cambridge were to become regular visitors at his family's home, at that time (1905) 46 Gordon Square in Bloomsbury, London, which is where the group got its name. Along with Vanessa and Virginia, Thoby's sisters, the group was originally made up of Clive Bell (who would later marry Vanessa), Leonard Woolf (who would later marry Virginia), Saxon Sydney-Turner, Lytton Strachey and John Maynard Keynes. A year later, following Thoby's death, the two sisters would continue the Thursday evening tradition their brother had started, when all his friends would come to visit and have intellectual discussions. Thursday evening attendees would later include Shaw, Yeats, and novelist E.M. Forster, among others. The Stephen sisters, Vanessa and Virginia, dominated what had come to be called "the Bloomsbury Group" as artist and writer, and flavoured its aesthetic. Both the Omega artist workshop and Hogarth Press were essentially by-products of the Bloomsbury group and their artistic ideals.

In early 1908, Woolf began writing her first novel *The Voyage Out* (also called *Melymbrosia*), which took five years to finish, but, due to another severe mental breakdown following her marriage, was published even later, in 1915, by her half-brother Gerald's publishing house, Duckworth & Co. Her second novel *Night and Day*, also published by Duckworth, followed in 1919. Both were quite conventional in style and content matter. In 1921, however, her writing style began to change, and her first collection of short stories, *Monday or Tuesday*, which was experimental in nature, was published by her own printing press, Hogarth, by whom all her following books would be published. Her first experimental novel, *Jacob's Room*, came out in 1922. *Mrs Dalloway* followed in 1925, *To the Lighthouse* in 1927, and *The Waves* in 1931, and these three novels in particular are considered to be her greatest achievement as a modernist writer. *Orlando*, published in 1928, was a *roman à clef* inspired by the ancestors of the aristocratic novelist and poet Vita Sackville-West (with whom she was involved at the time) at Knole in Kent. The following year, Woolf published *A Room of One's Own*, a discussion of the historical and social underpinnings of women's writing in England, inspired by two talks at women's colleges in Cambridge. In 1933 came *Flush*, a fictional biography of Elizabeth Barret Browning's dog. *The Years*, a family saga that was being written and rewritten for a long period previously, was finally published in 1937, and though it was a bestseller in the USA, it failed to do equally well in Britain. *Three Guineas*, essentially a successor to *A Room of One's Own*, followed it in 1938. A biography of her friend Roger Fry, who had died in 1934, was published in 1940. She had virtually completed her final novel, *Between the Acts*, when she committed suicide, and it was published posthumously. Over sixty

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[498] Gilbert and Gubar, *Norton Anthology*, p.1315.
[499] Ibid.

years after her death, the writings of Virginia Woolf continue to influence the literary scene, and have gone on to achieve international prominence.

4.2.1.1   *Mrs Dalloway*

In this novel, Woolf "dispenses with the usual conventions of plot"[500] and, in passages employing a stream-of-consciousness technique, seeks to narrate the inner world of her characters. The novel deals with twenty-four hours in the life of its heroine Clarissa Dalloway,[501] a middle-aged woman who is preparing for a party in honour of her MP husband's friends and is heavily involved in detailed planning (fresh flowers, new dresses, room decorating, etc), and her antithesis, young war veteran, Septimus Smith. As these two go about their daily activities, Woolf zooms in on the minutiae thoughts and ideas that make up their psychologies. With each passing hour of this day, the focus shifts from one to the other, from the present to the past, from hope and frivolity to the fall from grace that taints young Septimus's life.

As the story starts the pair are having recollections about their past, Clarissa is thinking of Peter Walsh, a past lover she spurned in order to marry her current husband, and Sally Sutton, a friend of hers she was romantically involved with, and Septimus, who is out walking with his Italian wife Lucrezia, is thinking of the meaninglessness of life. Septimus's disturbed mental state is highlighted by his hearing voices, and having conversations with his dead friend Evans. His wife has arranged an appointment for him with a famous doctor, Sir William Bradshaw, and as they walk through the park the

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[500] Linden Peach, "'National Conservatism' and 'Conservative Nationalism': Mrs Dalloway (1925)", in: (ed.) Linden Peach, *Critical Issues; Virginia Woolf* (Macmillan Press, 2000) p.88.

suicidal Septimus recalls his life prior to the war, and his reactions to the death of his friend Evans.

As Clarissa mends her dress, Peter Walsh, whom she hasn't seen for years, unexpectedly drops by and a laboured conversation (though deceptively similar to light banter) ensues, where both are thinking of the events of the past. When Clarissa's daughter Elizabeth enters, the conversation ends and Peter goes for a walk in the park, ruminating over Clarissa's rejection of him, the events which led to him moving to India, and his failed first marriage. Peter passes Septimus and Lucrezia arguing and mistakes it for a lovers' quarrel.

Sir Bradshaw treats Septimus in an offhand manner and unsympathetically prescribes an enforced rural stay for him. Meanwhile, Richard Dalloway returns home after lunch, and the couple's failed attempts at honest communication are shown in his inability to express his love for her. Clarissa then goes to see her daughter, who is studying history with a Miss Killman, and the older women's jealousy and misunderstanding of each other are made apparent. The story then shifts back to Septimus who is at his apartment with his wife, awaiting the arrival of the men who will take Septimus to the asylum. At their arrival, Septimus, who does not want to go, hurls himself out of the window to his death.

The ambulance carrying Septimus passes Peter Walsh on his way to Clarissa's dinner, where all the novel's major characters (except Septimus and his wife) are present. Even after all her fretting, Clarissa seems to resent the hollow success of her dinner party, at which Sir Bradshaw announces the death of a veteran patient of his (Septimus). Clarissa

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[501] Though the names are exactly the same, this Clarissa is a completely different personality from Mrs

ponders on this suicide and blames the doctor for it; the dinner ends, the guests leave, and she is left alone with her excited husband.

By repeating images, symbols and metaphors such as those of the sea-waves of feeling, of joy, of life-sewing, building, mirroring, Big Ben, "Fear no more the heat o' the sun", and solemnity versus love, Woolf connects the fragmented bits of characters, choices, and the day itself with fluidity, kinetic energy and imagination to suggest her vision of the post-war English life of the contented but loveless Mrs Dalloway. "*Mrs Dalloway* is the first of Virginia Woolf's successful, mature, experimental novels, one that uses impressionistic technique and interior monologues like those of James Joyce or European writer Marcel Proust to reveal the personalities of her characters, Mrs Dalloway, Peter Walsh, and Septimus Smith."[502]

4.2.1.2   *To the Lighthouse*

To the Lighthouse,[503] the novel that "established Virginia Woolf as a leading writer of the Twentieth Century"[504] deals with the different versions of the life of one family, the Ramsays, as they pursue it in their summerhouse off the Scottish coast, on two days separated by the passage of many years, as examined through the eyes of its own members and their guests.

Dalloway in Woolf's *The Voyage Out.*

[502] Frank N. Magill (ed), *Masterpieces of Women's Literature* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996) p.267.

[503] There is some truth in the claim that *To the Lighthouse* is autobiographical in many of its aspects; although the action takes place on a remote Scottish island, it is easy to trace the many likenesses to the Stephens' own summer home in St Ives, Cornwall. The Ramseys' extensive and rambling intellectual household is also very close in spirit to the family in which Woolf found herself growing up. The demanding father figure, Mr Ramsey, seems also to have been modelled on Leslie Stephen, and his suffocating need for female company and reassurance.

The novel is divided into three parts and each part is in turn subdivided into sections. The first part, "The Window", takes place in a single day, and introduces the Ramsays and the guests joining them in their house on the Isle of Skye. The narrative is taken up with the different characters, and their personal thoughts and internal dialogues; James Ramsay's desire to visit the lighthouse, Mr Ramsay's refusal to allow this visit because of the weather, Lily Briscoe's musings as she paints, William Bankes, Augustus Carmichael, Minta Doyle et al., and, of course, Mrs Ramsay.

In the course of the second part of the novel, "Time Passes", ten years elapse, and the reader learns of the deaths of Mrs Ramsay and two of her children, Andrew and Prue. The house on the Isle of Skye is dilapidated and sits empty in its neglected state. This chapter closes with the old caretaker preparing the house for the arrival of the Ramsays and their guests.

The final section of the novel, "The Lighthouse", sees the longed-for trip to the lighthouse finally being realised by James, along with his father and sister Cam. Lily Briscoe, who is again visiting the Ramsays, completes the picture she started a decade ago, and on that note the novel ends.

Rachel Bowlby suggests that Virginia Woolf drew directly on psychoanalytic insights in much of her fictional writing. For Bowlby, *To the Lighthouse* is particularly interesting in this regard because Woolf said of its writing: "I suppose I did for myself what psychoanalysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long-felt and deeply felt

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[504] Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (New York: Harvest Press, 1983) intro by Eudora Welty, back cover.

emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest."[505] This declaration, in

Bowlby's estimation, gives one justification for the identification of Woolf with Lily

Briscoe, the daughter figure and artist, as the outsider who then "looks back at the relation

between her 'parents' and hers to them".[506]

4.2.2 Placing Virginia Woolf's Work in Its Socio-Historical Background[507]

There was a major change in social dynamics that characterised the life and literature of

almost all English-speaking countries in the era that is usually called the "modernist"[508]

period (roughly between 1914 and 1939).

Between the years 1914 and 1939 in particular, of course, there were many reasons,

besides the altered position of women, for both sexes, but especially men, to feel

anxious about the rapidly changing world in which they lived. The phenomenon best

expressed as "shock of the new" was profoundly disturbing to people who had been

born and brought up in comparatively serene late Victorian times, for "the new" in

this period included a scientific revolution that virtually transformed the physical and

social landscapes of Britain and America while producing the destructive technology

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[505] Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings* (1976) edited with an introduction by Jeanne Schulkind (London: Triad /Granada, 1982) p.94.

[506] Rachel Bowlby, *Feminist Destinations and Further Essays on Virginia Woolf* (Edinburgh University Press, 1997) p.57.

[507] Many aspects of Woolf's socio-historic background have already been covered in §4.1, which pertains to the definition of the Female woman writer. Therefore the focus here is expanded to include the many aesthetics movements that flourished at the time and were influential to the novels of Virginia Woolf.

that shaped World War I, the deadliest war yet fought in Europe. In addition, because "the new" in these years also implied a complete disruption of the few traditional ideas about God and human nature that had emerged intact from the onslaughts of nineteenth-century scepticism, it created widespread intellectual doubt and social alienation. Finally, because the scientific revolution that shocked early twentieth-century culture also meant the development of mass communication systems on a startling scale, it greatly intensified the rift between so-called high culture and so-called low (or "popular") culture.[509]

World War I was not the only disturbing international event that marked the years between 1914 and 1939, although it was the most striking. This period also witnessed the continuing decline of the British Empire, intensified isolationism in the United States, the speedy growth of controversial revolutionary movements such as anarchism, socialism/communism, the red menace of the Bolsheviks in the Russian Revolution of 1917, and, last but not least, the rise of European fascism first manifested by Benito Mussolini's takeover of Italy (1928) and Adolf Hitler's accession to dictatorship in Germany (1933), and the bloodshed of the Spanish Civil War (1936–39). All of this had a direct impact on British intellectual thought of the period, and increased the feeling that the old world order was coming to an end, and that in the modernist understanding, there were

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[508] Though vague, the term "modern" pertains to all aspects of creative art: poetry, fiction, drama, painting, music and architecture and all other visual media. Modernism began to get underway in the final decade of the 19th century; it peaked as an innovative and revivifying movement in the 1920s, and continued to have a wide influence internationally during much of the 20th century. While all aesthetic movements are mercurial in their nature, there is a gradual evolution that could be charted for modernism, and then a certain diminishing of impetus, where the energy gave way to post-modernism, roughly around 1940.

no "absolutes", or solid concepts that are immune to change, to paraphrase Huxley; it seemed to those artists, writers and intellectuals living in the modernist era that they were witnessing the birth of a "brave new world".

The experimental impulses expressed in literary manifestos were strengthened by the vast range of experimentation that was being conducted by artists in other media. Since the late nineteenth century, painters from Auguste Renoir, Mary Cassatt, Marie Laurencin, and Edward Munch to Georges Bracque and Pablo Picasso had used the techniques of impressionism, expressionism, and cubism to break down traditional modes of representing the material world, forgoing strictly pictorial images in favour of more abstract forms, determined either by unique individual perceptions or governed by large principles of design. It was during the modernist period, however, that the innovations of these artists began to seem most compelling to their literary contemporaries.

Equally crucial innovations marked the development of modernist fiction. As far as literature is concerned, modernism manifested itself in a breaking-away from established rules, traditions and conventions, and introduced fresh ways of looking at morality and mortality, the value of human life and this in turn led to greater experimentation in form and style. It is particularly concerned with language and how to use it (representationally or otherwise) and with writing itself. Most notable perhaps was the development in this period of the "stream-of-consciousness" novel, a genre that seemed to many readers quite

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[509] Even while these largely elite artists were striving to articulate manifestos, to experiment with style, and to pioneer new genres, however, a number of more popular literary modes and movements were developing (such as the Christie-esque mystery novel) which undoubtedly had a great impact on both the reading public and on contemporary novelists. The success of "popular" fiction further widened the gap between high art and mass culture, so that many of these serious writers' sense of alienation from the mainstream deepened, and many of them relied on other sources for their income, for example, screenwriting, as with F. Scott Fitzgerald.

as obscure as the fragmented and allusive poetry of Eliot and Pound but that was destined to become no less influential. Modernist fiction writers also undertook other reversionary strategies: what the critic Michael Hoffman has called Gertrude Stein's "abstractionism – a method of emphasizing language itself rather than its narrative components".[510]

4.2.3 Doubles, Mirrors and Madness: Female Evolution through Feminist Revolution

Mrs Dalloway follows the activities of the central character Clarissa Dalloway from early morning through to night, the narration jumping between her story and the more sensational narrative of the shell-shocked war veteran, Septimus Warren Smith, and his eventual suicide. Ostensibly, the two stories are not linked (Peach notes that "one of the most puzzling aspects of *Mrs Dalloway* for readers and for some critics has been the apparent unconnected nature of the two narratives")[511] and appear to merge only when Clarissa overhears a guest at her party talking of Septimus' death. Peach suggests that although "Septimus's introduction appears to divide the novel, as if he and Clarissa Dalloway exist in different narratives...the novel's different narrative threads interconnect in their exploration of the dominant fictions of post-war Britain."[512] Peach also proproses that the figure of Septimus can be seen as a *charniere*, or hinge, as described by Derrida in his essay "To Do Justice to Freud: The History of Madness in the Age of Psychoanalysis",[513] and goes on to explain that there are several dimensions to Derrida's concept, each of which is applicable to Septimus' role in the novel and the way in which

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[510] Gilbert and Gubar, *Norton Anthology*, p.178.
[511] Peach, *Critical Issues*, p.89.
[512] Peach, "'National Conservatism' and 'Conservative Nationalism'.
[513] Jacques Derrida, "To Do Justice to Freud: The History of Madness in the Age of Psychoanalysis", *Critical Enquiry*, XX (Winter 1994) pp.227-266.

he, as a character, fuses the different threads of the text. According to Peach's analysis, Septimus acts as a hinge in the technical sense, opening and closing: "he ushers in a new epoch while an older epoch is brought to a close. The narrator then assumes the role of gatekeeper of the today; the holder of the keys that open as well as close the door."[514] In the anatomical sense of a hinge-pin or pivot, Septimus is the axial point around which the actions of the novel circulate. The third meaning of *charniere* is derived from falconry, and it is the place where the hunter lures the bird. In that sense Septimus attracts the main concerns and debates which the novel is meant to raise. Where a character functions as a hinge, as Derrida says, there will always be "an interminable alternating movement that successively opens and closes, draws near and distances, rejects and accepts, excludes and includes, disqualifies and legitimates, masters and liberates",[515] which makes the stream-of-consciousness technique that the novel employs ideal for this purpose.

Toril Moi puts forth the idea that Woolf, being susceptible to bouts of mental unrest, tried to convey some of this psychological trauma in *Mrs Dalloway*, especially in the pivotal nature of the relationship between Clarissa and Septimus:

> Woolf herself suffered acute patriarchal oppression at the hands of the psychiatric establishment and *Mrs Dalloway* contains not only a splendidly satirical attack on that profession (as represented by Sir William Bradshaw), but also a superbly perspicacious representation of a mind that succumbs to 'imaginary' chaos in the character of Septimus Smith. Indeed Septimus can be seen as the negative parallel to Clarissa Dalloway, who herself steers clear of the threatening gulf of madness only at the price of repressing her passions and desires, becoming a cold but

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[514] Peach, *Critical Issues*, pp.109-110.
[515] Derrida, "To Do Justice to Freud", pp.227-266.

brilliant woman highly admired in patriarchal society. In this way Woolf discloses

the dangers of the invasion of unconscious pulsions as well as the price paid by

the subject who successfully preserves her sanity, thus maintaining a precarious

balance between an overestimation of so-called 'feminine' madness and a too

precipitate rejection of the values of the symbolic order.[516]

Clarissa/Septimus has the binary opposition of the mad woman in the attic, which in

Female hands has become the suicidal man, which could literally be seen as the masculine

and its demands in a woman's character being aborted. Thus, Mrs Dalloway's character

may be symbolic of purity, sensitivity, and reason, all of which lead her to accept her life

without question, while her double, Septimus Warren Smith, represents destruction,

passivity, and the fraudulent civility of urban life, and the barbarism of war, even despair

of life itself. Their juxtaposition is at the heart of Woolf's attempt to reveal Clarissa

Dalloway's true character as a woman in search of herself, threatened by the demands of

self and family. Whereas Smith commits suicide by leaping out of his apartment window,

Clarissa's is an emotional suicide that allows her a chance to believe that she is in control

of herself, her nature, and her identity. Clarissa and Septimus never meet but are connected

by the streets and activities of London and by the much repeated Shakespearean line "Fear

no more the heat of the sun / Nor the furious winter's rages", which clarifies Woolf's focus

on love, hate, apathy, and fear. The phrase is from *Cymbeline* (c. 1610), a play about deceit

and marital infidelity, which ends in love and reconciliation. Though Septimus does

commit suicide at the end of the novel, Clarissa finds some form of reconciliation to her

present by confronting her past and finally letting it go. That

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[516] Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, p.7.

it is Clarissa who is the main character, and Septimus merely a projection of her darker side is made obvious by Woolf's admission of her original intention for the heroine. In her introduction to the 1928 Modern Library edition of *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf admitted that originally Clarissa was to commit suicide at the end of her party, but later Woolf created the suicidal Septimus Warren Smith as Clarissa's double when her focus changed from a picture of a loveless woman bent on self-destruction to a portrait of conflicting demands of selfhood and love of others.[517]

A central metaphor in *Mrs Dalloway* is that of vision, sight, insight, windows, and mirrors: Smith is a mirror image of Clarissa; if she is without passion in her life, having rejected love twice (with Sally and then Peter) in order to maintain her tentative sense of self, Smith thinks he feels nothing while he is overwhelmingly passionate in his survivor guilt and his love of life and notions of goodness, distorted by the war. She dreams of love while gazing into her mirror and looking out of her window to connect with all life, while he sees the world from the outside and only rejoins humanity by killing himself to preserve the integrity of his soul, again by jumping out of the window.

Humm notes that,

> Ironically, throughout the novel, the reader senses Clarissa's fear of death, which occasions her peaceful life, given significance by Smith's act of throwing his own life away. His suicide leads to momentary treasures. It is the mirroring of passion and life that unifies his impressionistic vision of the falsity of clock time – single lives, as opposed to the true intuitive, flowing consciousness that connects all humanity. Thus Mrs Dalloway identifies with Smith at the precise moment of his annihilation and is

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[517] Magill, *Masterpieces*, p.349.

inspired to accept the ebb and flow of being, the profusion of hopes and fears, the joys and terrors of life.[518]

This falls in with *A Room of One's Own*'s portrayal of "woman as a mirror of man", where "Women as looking-glass is Woolf's resonant phrase describing how women are regarded as the 'Other' by men, and reflect back to how men want to see themselves".[519] This foreshadows Simone de Beauvoir's position in her book *The Second Sex* (1945), and as Showalter clarifies, "The argument of *A Room of One's Own* is that women are simultaneously victims of themselves as well as victims of men and are upholders of society by acting as mirrors to men".[520] It is unclear why this seems to be the case, whether it is because their fiction is a reflection of their day-to-day reality or because they are using their novels to demonstrate the negative effects of a patriarchal social and political system on the lives of women.

4.2.4 The Flight into Androgyny

In Showalter's chapter of the same name, she tries to deconstruct Woolf's obsession with achieving an androgynous vision as a writer. She concludes that Virginia Woolf's problems with accepting her own femaleness, along with her inability to reproduce, and her other, unconventional lifestyle choices, such as her bisexuality, were translated into an androgynous vision that instead of celebrating both masculine and feminine aspects of a human being's persona, denied both through the suppressive search for an androgynous ideal.

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[518] Humm, *Feminisms*, p.21.
[519] Ibid.
[520] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.256.

Unlike the androgyny witnessed in the Feminist stage of consciousness,[521] the Female writers leaned towards a less physical and a more intellectual form. It is as if they wanted to achieve a unisex mental state, regardless of the physical attributes that each gender enjoyed: "The androgynous mind is, finally, a utopian projection of the ideal artist: calm, stable, unimpeded by consciousness of sex",[522] what Showalter calls "inhuman".[523]

Showalter goes on to say that for Woolf, "Maleness and femaleness seemed like two distinct principles, which Woolf came to relate to the extremes of her own personality."[524] This bisexual or androgynous leaning is obvious in *Mrs Dalloway* (as discussed earlier) through the splitting of the emotions of the protagonists into female "Clarissa"/ male "Septimus" aspects. This is elucidated further in Showalter's argument:

> At some level, Woolf is aware that androgyny is another form of repression or, at best, self-discipline. It is not so much that she recommends androgyny as that she warns against feminist engagement: "It is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly."[525]

Toril Moi suggests that "Herbert Marder conversely advances in his *Feminism and Art* the trite and traditional case that Mrs Ramsay must be seen as an androgynous ideal in herself: 'Mrs Ramsay as wife, mother, hostess, is the androgynous artist in life, creating with the whole of her being'."[526] She goes on to say that

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[521] See §3.2.9.
[522] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.289.
[523] Ibid., p.289.
[524] Ibid., pp.265-266.
[525] Ibid., p.288.
[526] Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, p.7.

The host of critics who with Marder read Mrs Ramsay and Mrs Dalloway as Woolf's

ideal of femininity are thus either betraying their vestigial sexism – the sexes are

fundamentally different and should stay that way – or their adherence to what Kristeva

would call a stage two feminism: women are different from men and it is time they

began praising the superiority of their sex.[527]

This is diametrically opposite to Showalter's position, which is that "a thorough

understanding of what it means, in every respect to be a woman, could lead the artist to an

understanding of what it means to be a man."[528] This, however, does not make a lot of

sense, and is an absurd claim on Showalter's part; following this train of logic, one would

apply the intensity of female experience to the male and one would come up with a

severely flawed male, much like the effeminate or excessively passionate heroes of the

Feminine stage.

Regarding *To the Lighthouse*, Moi follows Kristeva's model of deconstructed feminism:

> Read from this perspective, *To the Lighthouse* illustrates the destructive nature of a
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> metaphysical belief in strong, immutably fixed gender identities – as represented by Mr
>
> and Mrs Ramsay – whereas Lily Briscoe (an artist) represents the subject who
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> deconstructs this opposition, perceives its pernicious influence and tries as far as is
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> possible in a still rigidly patriarchal order to live as her own woman, without regard for
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> the crippling definitions of sexual identity to which society would have her conform. It is
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> in this context that we must situate Woolf's crucial concept of androgyny.[529]

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[527] Ibid., p.16.
[528] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.289.
[529] Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, p.12.

Moi insists that Woolf has eclipsed the requirements of the modern feminist artist, and that "she has understood that the goal of the feminist struggle must precisely be to deconstruct the death-dealing binary oppositions of masculinity and femininity".[530]

Yet Showalter is correct in her assumption of a state of apathy in Woolf's continued failure in confronting the question of what it means to be a woman:

> But whatever the abstract merits of androgyny, the world that Virginia Woolf inhabited was the last place in which a woman could fully express both femaleness and maleness, nurturance and aggression. For all her immense gift, Virginia Woolf was as thwarted and pulled asunder as the women she described in *A Room of One's Own*. Androgyny was the myth that helped her evade confrontation with her own painful femaleness and enabled her to choke and repress her anger and ambition.[531]

4.2.5 The Obsession with Inner Space: An Alternative Reality

Apart from their inability to agree on the merits of Woolf's androgynous leanings, Toril Moi is incensed at Elaine Showalter's refusal to engage herself "fully" with Woolf's work. She maintains that the latter's rejection of Woolf's work as a feminist manifesto stems from her refusal of modernist writings and her subverted insistence that truly "feminist" novels should be based on a "realistic"[532] form. "Showalter's traditional humanism surfaces clearly enough when she first rejects Woolf for being too subjective, too passive and for wanting to flee her female gender identity by embracing the idea of androgyny"[533]

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[530] Ibid., p.7.

[531] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.263.

[532] It would seem that in feminist realism the artist should concern herself with the here and now, with everyday events, with her own environment as reflected in the feminist movement (political, social, etc.) of her time. (This is important in debates between Moi and Showalter, since this is the type of realism that the latter insists upon, and finds to be lacking in Woolf's work.)

[533] Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, p.10.

which Moi later labels "part of patriarchal ideology. At its center is the seamlessly unified self – either individual or collective – which is commonly called 'Man'."[534] Moi then further expands this argument: "Implicit in such criticism is the assumption that good feminist fiction would present truthful images of strong women with which the reader may identify".[535] Virginia Woolf wanted women to "see human beings not always in their relation to each other but in relation to reality",[536] but Showalter found this tendency frustrating suggesting that Woolf "was advocating a strategic retreat, and not a victory; a denial of feeling, and not a mastery of it."[537] Moi then defends Woolf's stylistic choices, the very ones that Showalter attacks and says, "Through her conscious exploitation of the sportive, sensual nature of language, Woolf rejects the metaphysical essentialism underlying patriarchal ideology, which hails God, the Father or the phallus as its transcendental signified."[538] She continues this defence in her feminist appraisal of Woolf's use of the stream-of-consciousness method, "For Woolf, as for Freud, unconscious drives and desires constantly exert a pressure on our conscious thoughts and actions."[539] In the "Introduction" to the 2000 edition of *A Literature of Their Own*, Showalter defends her position against Moi's attack and says that her "theoretical questions...were historical and cultural"[540] because "the disciplines with answers for such questions were not philosophy and linguistics, but cultural anthropology and social history".[541]

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[534] Ibid., p.12.
[535] Ibid., p.9.
[536] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.285.
[537] Ibid.
[538] Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, p.16.
[539] Ibid., p.12.
[540] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.xx.
[541] Ibid.

In the last hundred years, theoretical debates about realism, and what is and is not "real" or "realistic" have been raging in all creative mediums, but during the post-war period (1920-1930s) the verisimilitude of a particular piece of art became an essential question in the quest for artistic purity. As far as literature and literary criticism are concerned, realism primarily implies the portrayal of life in pragmatic terms, without idealisation, or rendering things in a sentimental manner. Thus realism in fiction shies away from transcendental and supernormal elements, and obscure symbolism is abandoned so that the authenticity of experience is not overpowered by the descriptive process. For some Female writers this was translated as "the total obliteration of structured experience: nothing happens. It is just life going on and on."[542] Though it is hard to determine the charm in this form of story telling, it was nevertheless an exciting way to relate a mundane story, based on everyday events. By focusing on the innocuous, the unimportant details of existence, modernist writers highlighted for women the possibility of a new "reality". According to Showalter, Female writers resorted to the minute details of the inner space as a stylistic device, consciously, so that it would "reverse the orthodox argument that women have limited experience by defining reality as subjective"[543] so that women writers favoured the coherence theory of reality[544] over the correspondence. Realism occurs in another important context, namely psychological realism. This denotes fidelity in depicting the inner working of the mind, the analysis of thought and feeling, the presentation of the nature of personality and character. "The ultimate in psychological realism is the use of the

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[542] Ibid., p.242.
[543] Ibid.
[544] Philosophy distinguishes two basic concepts concerning reality: correspondence and coherence. The correspondence theory suggests that the external world is knowledge by scientific inquiry, by the accumulation of data, by documentation, by definition. The coherence theory suggests that the external world is knowable (or perhaps can be understood) by intuitive perception, by insight. Thus correspondence will require referential language; coherence, emotive language. The former will imply an objective point of view; the latter a subjective one. But as language interpenetrates, no absolute divisions are possible.

stream of consciousness method. This kind of realism too has often resulted in a kind of decadence as authors dig deeper and further and with greater relish into the psychological and erotic chaos of the conscious and subconscious territories."[545] The stream-of-consciousness writing technique provided the perfect vehicle for this kind of Female feminist exploration, as noted by Showalter: "The stream of consciousness technique was an effort to transcend the dilemma by presenting the multiplicity and variety of associations held simultaneously in the female mode of perception."[546]

"Stream-of-consciousness", a phrase coined by American philosopher William James in *Principles of Psychology* (1890) to denote the flow of inner experiences, has now become an almost indispensable term in literary criticism, and refers to that technique which attempts to display "the multitudinous thoughts and feelings"[547] which pass through the mind. The "stream-of-consciousness" novel generally focused on the mental processes: the thoughts, responses, and interior emotional experience of a novel's central character (although sometimes the writer switched points of view among several key figures). Reflecting the concerns of an era obsessed by the hypotheses of Sigmund Freud and the emerging field of psychoanalysis, the novelists who worked in this mode strove to represent not only the fluid movements of the surface of the mind, but also the unintentional disruptions of thought that signalled the imposition of subconscious material into the consciousness. James Joyce's *Ulysses*[548] (1920) was unquestionably the most

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[545] J.A. Cuddon (ed.), *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* (third edn, Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991) pp.771-776.
[546] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.260.
[547] Cuddon, *Penguin Dictionary*, p.919.
[548] In this novel, Joyce exploited the possibilities of this method in his account of the experiences (actions, thoughts, feelings) of two men, Leopold Bloom and Stephen Daedalus, during the twenty-four hours of June 16th 1904, in Dublin.

famous work in this mode; indeed the book represented a turning point in modern novelistic technique.

The effect of Joyce, among other writers on Woolf, is hard to dispute. "Since the 1920s many writers have learned from Joyce and emulated him. Virginia Woolf (*Mrs Dalloway* [1925]; *To the Lighthouse* [1927]) and William Faulkner (*The Sound and the Fury* [1931]) are two of the most distinguished developers of the stream-of-consciousness method."[549]

Like *Ulysses*, which Woolf had read in installments in 1919,[550] *Mrs Dalloway* was a stream-of-consciousness novel. Like Joyce's, Woolf's style is "impressionistic" in the sense that she uses interior monologue and individual glimpses that illuminate the souls of her characters while the pace of the plot slows down to a snail's crawl. By presenting apparently unrelated bits and pieces of characters, their actions and choices, and their interactions with others, Virginia Woolf forged a wonderful writing style that has affected the direction and focus of much twentieth-century literature.

Even in her other books, Woolf focuses on the inner psyche more than external events. For example, in *The Waves*, Virginia Woolf introduces six characters, three men and three women, who are struggling with the death of a beloved friend, Percival. Instead of describing their outward expressions of grief, Woolf draws her characters from the inside, revealing them through their thoughts and inner monologues. The chorus of their narrative voices blend together, establishing how alike we all are underneath. One cannot help but wonder how much her being a sometimes-mental patient influenced this aesthetic choice.

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[549] Ibid., p.920.

"Virginia Woolf, whose *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *To The Lighthouse* (1927), and *The Waves* (1933) were particularly notable examples of what Woolf called a 'tunneling' technique through which she 'excavated' the dreams and desires of her characters".[551] Thus, the reality portrayed in the novels is a very selective one. The events that take place in *To the Lighthouse* are presented either in an excruciating minute-by-minute account, or as lists of occurrences, so-and-so died, such-and-such took place, etc. Moreover, in *Mrs Dalloway*, though Clarissa's memories of her adolescent home, Bourton, is actually structured around two locations, again with no immediately obvious narrative connections between them, there is no account of Clarissa's marriage, of Elizabeth's birth, or of the move, and adjustment, to London.

Peach notes that "While there are many differences between Woolf's and James Joyce's work, as between the two modernists themselves, Woolf shared Joyce's realization that neither the fluidity of mind's activity – the jostling of memory, stimulus, projection and perception – nor the fragmentary codes of culture exist independently of the other".[552] Those critics who complain that *Mrs Dalloway* has no plot and only minimal characterisation are right in the sense that the events of a day in the life of a London society matron "have no point or significance in the grand scheme of life".[553] Similarly, except for Clarissa and Septimus, Woolf's characters are seemingly mere skeletons, stereotypical images of the spurned lover, the dull husband, the ruthless, power-mad doctor, and so forth. Yet Woolf deliberately creates a world in which the consciousness of a character is brought to the surface with all its insidious searches for identity, love, and

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[550] Clare Hanson, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Macmillan, 1994) p.13.
[551] Claire Tomalin (ed.), *Virginia Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway* (Oxford University Press, 1992) p.93.
[552] Peach, *Critical Issues*, pp.90-91.
[553] Magill, *Masterpieces*, p.349.

purpose. It is this flowing stream of images, thoughts, and feelings that engulfs the reader, who shares a conscious awareness of each individual's connections to all people over all time, as well as recognition of the individual's delicate sense of self, which is threatened by those very people and experiences. "Influenced by the work of the continental artists Maupassant, Turgenev, and Chekhov, these writers struggled to create a genre whose plot would reflect not the complexity of an extended chain of causes and effects but the purity of what Woolf called a 'timeless moment' or, in Joyce's words, an 'epiphany' (a revelation) that functions as the turning point of life."[554] Time and again we see Woolf's heroines, Mrs Ramsey and Mrs Dalloway, searching for this very "epiphany", this moment that gives it all, the chaos of their lives, meaning. For Mrs Ramsey, it comes at the dinner table, with her family and friends around her, enjoying their time as a direct result of her labours; years later, Lily Briscoe would get this same "epiphany" through her art work. For Mrs Dalloway, it is more elusive, although it does however come finally, at the novel's close, with what seems like an acceptance of her past and present, and the always-uncertain future.

4.2.6 Lesbianism and Female Self-Discovery

There are several lesbian or semi-lesbian relationships explored in the novels of Virginia Woolf. Through Clarissa's relationship with Sally Setton, Woolf incorporates into the novel not only an allusion to the radical feminist ideas of the 1880s, but also the way in which ostensibly radical female behaviour was eroticised in the 1920s. The significance of repeating the phrase "she sat on the floor"[555] demonstrates how Sally takes control of her own body. Such is her liberation that she no longer cares about the upper-class etiquette

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[554] Gilbert and Gubar, *Norton Anthology*, p.1216.

that dictated all "proper" female behaviour back then. Sally is representational of the quintessential New Woman in that her rebelliousness extends past physicality to include unorthodox intellectual choices too. Her transgressive talk of reforming the world and abolishing private property compounds her eroticism further.

Erotic fantasy enhances Clarissa's attraction to Sally, for she is drawn by the latter's "un-English" appearance: "It was an extraordinary beauty of the kind she most admired...a sort of abandonment, as if she could say anything, do anything; a quality much commoner in foreigners than in English women."[556] It is this non-conformist, un-English, lack of inhibition that makes Sally running naked from the bathroom so "admirable" to Clarissa. In fact, the prose halts after the word "admired" so titillatingly that it almost suggests the word "desired" instead, which is actually closer to Clarissa's true feelings for Sally, as the events of the novel later reveal. Peach suggests that "Sally introduces into the novel what Jean Braudillard calls an 'erotic nakedness', that characteristically 'inaugurates a state of communication, loss of identity and fusion'. But she is also introducing the eroticism and excitement that was so much a part of the 'Roaring Twenties' myth of itself, especially for those of the middle and upper classes."[557]

Whereas Clarissa accepts her attitude towards other women as something private and hidden within herself, Doris is more candid about her sexuality. It would be too simple, though, to regard Doris as Clarissa's alter ego. Despite her name, Doris Kilman retains in her relationship with Elizabeth Dalloway many of the features of heterosexual

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[555] Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, p.27.
[556] Ibid., pp.42-43.
[557] Peach, *Critical Issues*, pp.94-95.

relationships that Woolf found unpalatable – she expects Elizabeth to be subordinate to her will and it is her interests that are highlighted in the relationship. Clarissa and Doris enable Woolf to locate different discourses about same-sex relationships and to permit different attitudes and perspectives to circulate in the novel. Thus Clarissa's view of Doris's relationship with her daughter Elizabeth as a "degrading passion"[558] reflects not only her own jealousy of Doris, her regrets over her relationship with Sally and her own frustrations in her marriage to Richard, but equally importantly what Peach suggests was "the way in which same-sex relationships were a site of anxiety in post-war Britain",[559] which is evident also in the way in which Doris turns for a while to the church to try to assuage "the hot and turbulent feelings which boiled and surged in her"[560] before learning to trust her desires.

And it is this mistrust of lesbian desire, this fearful revolt against the system that teaches little girls to idolise their mothers and fear their fathers and feel nothing but what is blessed by the omnipresent eye of "polite" society that engages Woolf most. In *To the Lighthouse*, Lily appears to reject Ramsay in order to focus, as she paints, on the memory of his wife, especially her silent moment of intimacy with the departed lady: "The moment at least seemed extraordinarily fertile. She rammed a little hole in the sand and covered it up, by way of burying in it the perfection of the moment. It was like a drop of silver in which one dipped and illumined the darkness of the past."[561] The hole suggests both feminine sexuality and vocality – a mouth to be silently enjoyed and then silenced. Similarly, the illuminated darkness could be symbolic of the birth passage out of the womb, the last point

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[558] Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, p.166.
[559] Peach, *Critical Issues*, p.95.
[560] Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, p.162.
[561] Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1927) p.265.

of contact of woman and woman that was socially acceptable, and it is this aspect of lesbianism, this return to the mother that was most fascinating to Woolf. The pleasure that Lily feels as she sinks her head into Mrs Ramsay's knee is beyond the physical, it is a transcendental type of meshing two spirits into one, of finally having part of the male-orientated mother returned to the female daughter. Lily's desire for Mrs Ramsay points to a physical realm beyond the verbal where intimate communication is possible, and its transcendental qualities brings a metaphysical quality to the female-female relationships that was often difficult to re-enact in heterosexual partnerships.

4.2.7 Claims to Feminism

As the rise of interest in women's writing grew in the 1970s, there came a renewed interest in Woolf, her work, and what she symbolised to women. This was not a fixed proposition, for, as Showalter put it, "No critic can have the last word on Woolf: Virginia Woolf's story is reformulated by each generation."[562] Humm states that in her fiction "Woolf argues that women should refuse the values of patriarchal society, for example its authoritarianism and militarism, by opposing the traditions of dominant institutions such as higher education, the family and war". She goes on to say that "Woolf herself was actively involved in the pacifist Women's Cooperative Guild and refused national honors".[563] Thus, the first point of departure should be in stating that Woolf was truly feminist in her lifestyle, not only in her writing. How does Virginia Woolf's dealing only with the inner emotions and feelings of a woman fit in with Elaine Showalter's accusation of her inability to communicate with her feminine side enough to express it? Even if we accept that in *Mrs Dalloway* one finds a sort of "evasive" feminism, Lily Briscoe's feminist credentials are

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[562] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, pp.334-335.

indisputable. The problem of being a woman, a feminist, and an artist is portrayed clearly in Lily's ruminations on the placement of objects in her paintings, which is a core debate in *To the Lighthouse*. When she finally decides to "put the tree further in the middle",[564] she cannot lay it to rest, and frets about the authenticity, the truth of her work, and the thought returns to her at dinner when she is haunted by Charles Tinsley's refrain "Women can't write women can't paint."[565]

Jane Goldman suggests that the lighthouse is seen as a symbol of silent (feminist) resistance. *To the Lighthouse* examines the novel's central masculine subject now deprived of his feminine foil: "Ramsay's enlightened mind has lost its uxorial shadow, and it becomes a collective effort on the part of his children and guests to resist his demands for sympathy (and a replacement). By the close, he himself has become part of a new configuration of plural subjectivity: Mrs. Ramsay's shadow is overcome by Lily's Post-Impressionist colours";[566] his notion of the ever-expanding solar ball of masculine enlightenment[567] is challenged by her less apocalyptic understanding of enlightenment as interstellar: "little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark".[568]

Cam's presence on the final landing at the lighthouse is significant. Feminine participation was barred from the earlier expedition; in this sense, at least, the voyage eclipses the

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[563] Humm, *Feminisms*, p.21.
[564] Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p.132.
[565] Ibid., pp.134-135.
[566] Jane Goldman, "To the Lighthouse: Purple Triangle and Green Shawl", in *The Feminist Aesthetics of Virginia Woolf: Modernism, Post-Impressionism and the Politics of the Visual* (Cambridge University Press, 1998) p.159.
[567] Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p.59.
[568] Ibid., p.249.

fulfilment of the aspirations meted out in the first part of the novel. Similarly, although in some ways a completion of the one she started in the first part of novel, Lily's painting is a new one.[569] As in the first case, however, she constructs her art in a position threatened by male presence; and in seeing her canvas as a means "to ward off Mr Ramsey",[570] Lily may be again practising a feminist aesthetic: "A woman, she had provoked this horror; a woman, she should have known how to deal with it. It was immensely to her discredit, sexually, to stand there dumb."[571] In portraying the subtle difference between Lily's silent resistance to Mr Ramsay's implicit demands for sympathy and the compliant response she imagines would be made by Mrs Beckwith, that kind old lady who sketched, Woolf makes a clear distinction between the submissive art of the Victorian aunt and defiantly silent art of the new Female artist. Indeed, the feminist import of the woman artist's verbal silence is underlined by Lily's refusal to console Mr Ramsay – and perhaps also her refusal of sexual advances implicit in the analogy of drawing her skirts a little closer round her ankles –[572] while she clutches her brush, the instrument that renders her articulate in the realm of paint. (Cam and James also use silence against Mr Ramsay's "tyranny".)[573] As "a skimpy old maid, holding a paint brush on the lawn"[574] she may appear a transitional and composite figure made out of Victorian aunt and defiant feminist.

However, Woolf made clear her awareness that people were likely to read into the lighthouse a significance that wasn't there, and she even warned of this in her discussion of writing the novel:

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[569] Ibid., pp.231, 243-244.
[570] Ibid., p.231.
[571] Ibid., p.236.
[572] Ibid.
[573] Ibid., p.252.
[574] Ibid., p.258.

I meant nothing by the lighthouse. One has to have a central line down the middle of the book to hold the design together. I saw that all sorts of feelings would accrue to this, but I refused to think them out, and trusted that people would make it the deposit for their own emotions – which they have done, one thinking it means one thing while another, another. I can't not imagine symbolism except in this vague, generalized way. Whether it's right or wrong I don't know, but directly I am told what a thing means, it becomes hateful to me.[575]

Goldman seems to be aware of that and remains insistent that "Woolf does not dismiss altogether the possibility of meaning; it may have been important for her in the process of writing not to 'think out' its emotional significance but it is something she expects her readers to engage in; and she herself seems unhappy with only restricted meaning."[576]

4.2.8   Defeats to the Feminist Cause

Much of Woolf's failure to inspire truly independent Female heroines stems from her own flawed perception of what women were capable of achieving as elucidated in her non-fictional works, such as *A Room Of One's Own*. Virginia Woolf poses the hypothetical question that had Shakespeare a sister of equal genius she would have died uncelebrated, her talent undiscovered, because she would not have found the means to create. Woolf suggests that women need a room of their own (their own space, both physically and in the literary sense), and a fixed source of income (about five hundred pounds annually in Woolf's estimation), in order to have the freedom to create. Although Woolf is advocating women's liberation from the confines of their domestic and social roles, and though she is

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[575] Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (eds.), *The Letters of Virginia Woolf* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1975-80, 6 vols) vol. III, p.385.

pleading their case to an unsympathetic male dominated society, she is also undermining women's ability to function independently of this society. She is essentially asking that the world understand, that it give its permission almost, for women to express themselves. In retrospect this vision could have been more hindering than liberating. Did all male writers have such a set-up as the one Woolf deems necessary for women? Isn't true talent, whether in men or women, supposed to transcend all obstacles and create and achieve? A case in point is the contemporary writer J.K. Rowling, a single mother on governmental support who penned the Harry Potter chronicles and achieved multi-million dollar success. She certainly had none of Virginia Woolf's criteria for writing, and yet she managed to find the necessary time, and space, for writing. Perhaps it is an unfair example, given the advancements that British society has made in terms of the acceptable roles for men and women, and there is no doubt that the government's support of children in the case of the under-privileged was a useful factor in Rowling's case, but it still proves that women are just as capable as men of forging a place for themselves, without the latter's support or blessing, a vision that Woolf did not seem to have faith in.

Similarly, Showalter is accusatory in her position towards the author in that "Virginia Woolf was extremely sensitive to the ways in which female experience had made women weak, but she was much less sensitive to the ways in which it had made them strong."[577] This led to her being, in Showalter's estimation, so paranoid and apologetic in her writing that she begins to practise the internal censorship of the oppressed: "The most typical, I think, of the direction of Woolf's thoughts: it is men who mysteriously control these

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[576] Goldman, "To the Lighthouse", p.167.
[577] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.285.

fantasies by judging them harshly."[578] According to Showalter, Woolf has internalised the male censor, and Showalter points out Woolf's awareness of this: "The tone and the repeated allusions to men hiding behind the curtains in *A Room of One's Own* show a controlled awareness of a male audience."[579] Was it this nod to an invisible male critic that led Woolf to choose numbingly under-productive and insipid women to star in her most acclaimed novels? Showalter sees it thus:

> In one sense, Woolf's female aesthetic is an extension of her view of women's social role: receptivity to the point of self-destruction, creative synthesis to the point of exhaustion and sterility. In *To the Lighthouse*, for example, Mrs Ramsay spends herself in repeated orgasms of sympathy: 'There was scarcely a shell of herself left for her to know herself by; all was so lavished and spent'.[580]

However men, whether their presence be real or imagined, should not be the scapegoat that women writers in such a late stage of feminist consciousness blame for their failure to imagine an alternative reality for their heroines. Showalter accuses Woolf that "unable to ignore – much less transcend – the claims of female experience, and also unable to express them in her novels, she sought to evade them once more in a sexless secession from the male world".[581] This is the strongest accusation that Showalter levels against Woolf, indeed against the majority of the early Female artists she discusses in *A Literature of Their Own*. "Refined to its essences, abstracted from its physicality and anger, denied any action, Woolf's vision of womanhood is as deadly as it is disembodied. The ultimate room of one's own is the grave."[582] Showalter seems to suggest that Woolf antagonises the

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[578] Ibid., p.293.
[579] Ibid., p.294.
[580] Ibid., p.296.
[581] Ibid., p.294.
[582] Ibid., p.297.

female audience with her writing by being too far removed from them, in her day-to-day experience, and in her naive class bias and political assumptions. Showalter also points out how other critics (such as Q.D. Leavis) picked up on Virginia Woolf's alienation from her sex, and used it to attack her writing and, through that, her political and sexual views, in their reviews. Some of the later Female writers felt the same way; Lessing said of Woolf:

> I've always felt this thing about Virginia Woolf – I find her too much of a lady. There's always a point in her books when I think, my God, she lives in such a different world from anything I've ever lived in. I don't understand it. I think it's charming in a way, but I feel that her experience must have been too limited, because there's always a point in her novels when I think, "Fine, but look at what you've left out."[583]

It was not only the modern Female writers, but also the modern feminist critics who have found fault with Woolf's Female aesthetics. Kate Millett's dismissive reference to Woolf in *Sexual Politics* (1970) reads: "Virginia Woolf glorified two housewives, Mrs Dalloway and Mrs Ramsay, recorded the suicidal misery of Rhoda in *The Waves* without ever explaining its causes, and was argumentative yet somehow unsuccessful, perhaps because unconvinced, in conveying the frustrations of the woman artist in Lily Briscoe."[584]

However, there are many valid points that the hesitation in Woolf's Female-ness raises, ones that were valid to women's experience at the time. Abbott notes that "an important question posed by Mrs Dalloway is whether this new freedom really amounts to anything" and points out that shopping is the primary activity in *Mrs Dalloway* – the Dalloways,

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[583] Ibid., p.310.
[584] Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics* (London: Virago Press, 1970) pp.139-140.

Rezia, Miss Kilman and Hugh Whitbread all go shopping.[585] The attitude adopted towards

modernity in the 1920s in *Mrs Dalloway* is, in this sense, ambiguous. At one level it

appears to offer women opportunities but, at another level, it either defines them as

consumers or as participants whose roles are defined by its continual patriarchal control.

There were strict social and familial controls being exercised over "modern" women that

limited their access to whatever new freedoms they seemed to enjoy on the surface of

matters. This Woolf cleverly explores, much to her credit as a Female author, in her

portrayal of the important differences between the characters of Elizabeth Dalloway and

Maisie Johnson.

Nineteen-year-old Maisie, who has come to London from Scotland to take up a post at her

uncle's business in Leadenhall Street, represents women for whom in the 1920s there were

apparently new economic possibilities. Although the kind of post that she is entering is

probably clerical or secretarial work, her arrival in London is real. But in Elizabeth's case,

mounting an omnibus (one of the recurring symbols of post-war modernity in Woolf's

fiction), her opportunities are still the product of fantasy. For her, modernity is much more

of a spectacle. Of course, unlike Maisie, Elizabeth can fantasise in this way because of her

class and because her father is an MP. Maisie too is privileged but not to the same extent –

she has a relative who has a business in London and her family in Edinburgh can spare

her. But it is at the end of the novel that the difference between them comes important. As

Peach points out, "Richard Dalloway's declaration that Elizabeth is a 'lovely girl' reduces

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[585] Reginald Abbott, "Birds Don't Sing in Greek: Virginia Woolf and the Plumage Bill" in: (eds.) Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan, *Animals and Women: Feminist Theoretical Exploration* (Duke University Press, 1995) p.154.

her to the ideal female in the male gaze and suggest that she will follow her mother's role rather than Maisie".[586]

4.2.9   Literary Merits: Angry Softness

Both *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs Dalloway* demonstrate how the author meshes together the two simultaneously existing spheres of a woman's consciousness; the one concerned with the formalities of the external world, and the other with the equally demanding inner space. Woolf focuses on the latter, which in both women's case is heaving with relived memories, unrequited desires and the uncomfortable business of a woman's ageing, the loss of her physical charms, and the inevitable redefinition of the self that ensues.

The maturity and more ambitious plot structures employed by Woolf demonstrates the progression of the art of female narrative, and its achievement of autonomy from the male master narrative, even though it could resemble it, as Woolf's work could be viewed as resembling that of Joyce. "The narrative technique of *Mrs Dalloway*, in which an omniscient narrator conveys the thoughts and impressions of a number of characters and the focalisation moves between their different perspectives, has frequently been associated with the novel's emphasis on the fragile nature of "reality" and the problematic concept of an "autonomous full subject". However, its multivalent narrative point of view is also central to the novel's engagement with the difficulties of writing history. In Mrs Dalloway, the narrator speaks from some indeterminate later point in time. However, although the multivalence of the novel pluralizes the concept of history as well as the notion of "reality"

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[586] Peach, *Critical Issues*, pp.99-100.

and extends its imaginative reach back to the mid-Victorian period, an important dimension of the text is a dialogue between post-war and pre-war England".[587]

Again in *To the Lighthouse*, the reader is subjected to metaphors and images that can be experienced on various levels of meaning. Linden Peach puts forth the idea of interruption being a recurring trope in *To the Lighthouse*. This "interruption" occurs on a number of levels; indeed, even the circumstances surrounding the composition of the novel can be seen as a series of interruptions. Embedded in post-war England, *To the Lighthouse* speaks of an era composed of a myriad of interruptions – political, economic, technological and artistic – to English social and cultural life, not least in the apparent break with the Victorian era and its class and family structures after the First World War. The events of the novel itself are riddled with interruptions; the many planned landings at the lighthouse are threatened with interruption by poor weather, Mrs Ramsay's search through the Army and Navy Stores catalogue is interrupted by a frightening roar of the waves she had not previously noticed, even Lily Briscoe is frightened of being interrupted by Mr Ramsay coming down upon her. However, war and death as relayed in novel's middle section cause the most damaging interruptions in the novel, and in it, the use of parentheses interrupts the flow of the narrative up to this point.

Woolf's writing style was "...both revelatory in its content, as it was fresh and experimental in its technique."[588] It demonstrated how the Female writer succeeded in internalising the question of women's contribution in the literary field, and accepting her literary tendencies as a woman, with the female as primary choice of subject, etc, and used

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[587] Peach, *Critical Issues*, pp.90-91.

both aspects to produce mature works of fiction that are enjoyable away from the question of gender, and yet still able to remain true to a womanly canon.

4.3 Ḥanān al-Shaykh

Ḥanān al-Shaykh, a Lebanese journalist, novelist and short-story writer, was born into a Shiᶜite Muslim family, in the town of Nabātiyyah in southern Lebanon in the summer of 1945. She grew up in Beirut and later attended the American College for Women in Cairo, where she wrote her first novel, *Intihār rajul mayyit* (*Suicide of a Dead Man*). On her return to Beirut she had a successful career in journalism, working for *al-Nahār*, an important Lebanese daily newspaper supplement, and *al-Ḥasnāʾ*, a major women's magazine. She published her short stories in various periodicals. After her marriage, she moved with her husband to the Arabian Gulf where he was employed. However, she soon returned to Lebanon, and when the war broke out in 1975, she moved to London, finally settling there.

4.3.1 Ḥanān al-Shaykh's Work

Intihār Rajul Mayyit ("Suicide of a Dead Man") was Ḥanān al-Shaykh's first novel, which she published at just twenty-six years of age, in 1971. Whilst living in the Arabian Gulf she wrote her second novel *Faras al-Shayṭān* ("Praying Mantis") in 1975. This was followed in 1979 by a collection of short stories, *Wardat al-Ṣaḥrāʾ*, (literally "Desert Rose", but translated into English as *The Story of Lulu*). In 1980, al-Shaykh brought out her first major novel, *Ḥikāyat Zahrah* (*The Story of Zahrah*, translated into English in 1986). It is a daring picture of the life of a girl who is neither attractive nor romantic, and whose experience in Lebanon, in Damascus, in Africa, and later in the civil war in Beirut,

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588 Maureen Howard (ed.) in her introduction to *Mrs Dalloway* (New York: Harvest Press, 1981) p.vi.

is representative of the degradation and near-destruction of her family and her country. The novel was banned in some Arab countries, which led to a wider readership for smuggled copies. 1986 was the year of her next book, *Misk al-Ghazāl* (translated as *Women of Sand and Myrrh* in 1989). *Barīd Bayrūt* came out next in 1992 (translated as *Beirut Blues* in 1995). *Aknus al-Shams ʿan al-Suṭūḥ* was a short story collection that came out in 1994, and was then published in English as *I Sweep the Sun off the Rooftops* in 1998. Published in 2000 was the novel *Innahā Landan yā ʿAzīzī* (published in English as *Only in London*), and her latest novel (published in 2002) is *Imra'atān ʿalā Shāṭi' al-Baḥr* ("Two Women on the Seashore"). Besides English, her novels have been translated into French, German, Dutch, Danish, Italian, Korean, Spanish and Polish.

4.3.1.1   The Story of Zahrah

As neatly summarised by Roger Allen, "Ḥanān al-Shaykh's novel, *Hikayat Zahrah*...serves as just one of a whole series of works that recount the agony of a society in the process of tearing itself apart."[589] The book is split into two parts: "The Scars of Peace", (which is split into five further sections) which deals with Zahrah's situation in pre-war Lebanon and "The Torrents of War", which deals with her situation during the war.

The story follows Zahrah's troubled childhood, accompanying her mother on adulterous rendezvous, and fending off her father's tyranny and abuse – both physical and emotional. With puberty comes the first of Zahrah's descents into psychological breakdowns, after being molested and raped by close relations and family friends. Zahrah escapes from her

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[589] Roger Allen, *The Arabic Novel*, p.62.

family in Lebanon to Africa, in order to live with her exiled uncle Hāshim, but his unwanted attentions bring out a second breakdown and drive Zahrah into an ill-thought-out marriage to the latter's friend, Mājid.

Here there is a break in the narrative, where the rest of the action is played out from the points of view of the two men and we learn of Zahrah's unhappy marriage and escape back to Lebanon, away from her sexually demanding husband, after a third breakdown perpetuated by Mājid's discovery of her lost virginity, and his constant questioning of her over its loss, and then his frustrating indifference to those very circumstances.

In Lebanon, Zahrah is grilled by her parents about her break-up with Mājid. She realises that there is no peace to be had amongst her own people, and goes back to Africa, with every intention to force her marriage to work. This resolve falters upon her return however, and she realises that this idea was a failure from its inception, and leaves Mājid for good, returning to Beirut just as the civil war is breaking out.

With the war, Zahrah is finally liberated from the demands of fitting a role for women perpetuated by rigid patriarchal society. As her parents conveniently escape to the village, she breaks free from the confines of normality and becomes "sane" for the first time in the mad logic of war. Zahrah pursues a sniper called Sāmī and has a torrid and exhibitionist affair with him, making love in full view of everyone. There is a mechanical element in their relationship and yet Zahrah is able to achieve her first orgasm, her first pleasure in his grasp, the grasp of death.

Her downfall occurs when he impregnates her, in spite of the birth control pills she was taking, and she only realises this four months into the pregnancy – too late for termination. Desperate to resolve this issue, especially since this is the narrative point at which her parents choose to reappear, Zahrah goes to Sāmī for help. He placates her enough for her to leave him, and as she is walking away unloads a number of bullets into her, killing both Zahrah and their baby.

The novel is considered a milestone in both the author's career, and in the body of work of contemporary Arab women writers. It is of great relevance to this study in that it not only displays many evolutionary traits in the achievement of Arab feminist consciousness, but, along with the next novel *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, makes use of the stream-of-consciousness method discussed at length previously.

4.3.1.2   *Women of Sand and Myrrh*

This novel's importance to this thesis lies in its departure from the confines of the Lebanese civil war, a theme prominent in many of al-Shaykh's works. In the fact that the four narrators of the novels are women (who each in turn take up one of the four chapters in the novel), and they are discussing each other's lives as women, this Isle-of-Lesbos insularity mirrors the situation of women in this Gulf state,[590] and how it revolves solely on socialising with other women. Moussa-Mahmoud writes of the first narrator Suhā, "the Lebanese 'modern' woman used to living in Beirut and Europe, has no outlet for her

tremendous energy in the rich, highly technologized, but socially cramped Gulf State."[591] She is forced to face uncomfortable discoveries about herself, her marriage, and about the other women around her. The destructive energy of their repressed sexuality makes her long for her war-torn country, preferring its mortal hazards, to the moral ones in the land of sand and myrrh.

The second thread of narrative is taken up by a young Saudi serial divorcee, who has finally found the courage to break out of her cycle of being returned to her marital home following a divorce only to be married off again by her family, by having achieved a measure of economic independence through the opening of a hair salon. This character, Tamr, is supposed to portray the "salt-of-the-earth" true Bedouin woman, who rises above the various, intricate oppressive traditions that dictate how she must live her life, and manages to follow a maze of loopholes in the law, through emotional blackmail and sheer determination, that leads her to a more independent, feminist, state of existence.

The focus of the story is then taken over by another alien, this time a stranger to the Arab world itself, an American middle-aged woman called Suzanne, who exploits the strictly segregatory conditions of life in this Gulf state to her own benefit. She is the only woman in the novel who is not only perfectly happy to be where she is, but fights to remain there, preferring the world of clandestine love affairs, desert rendezvous, and an endless stream

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[590] It is obvious from the various descriptions in the novel that this unnamed Gulf state cannot be any other country than Saudi Arabia (for example, the fact that women cannot leave the country without their husbands' written consent, a law that is in effect only in Saudi), which is where the author lived for some years with her husband.

[591] Fatma Moussa-Mahmoud, *Little Guide to Arab Women Writing*, extract from *International Guide to Women's Writing* (Bloomsbury and Prentice Hall, 1992) pp.98-100.

of young lovers, to going back to the Midwestern US state from which she and her husband came, and returning to being just another housewife.

Lastly, the narrative is taken up by Nūr, a stereotypical product of the morally corruptive influence of the sudden influx of petrol money into the traditional Gulf states. Nūr completes the claustrophobic cycle of women, surrounded by women, seeing only women, that the book attempts to portray, through being the lesbian partner of Suhā who the novel opens with. She is symbolic of the lost purity of the desert people, the squandering of the opportunities that their wealth had given them through the pursuit of the latest fashions, all-night revelries and the search for an endless stream of wasteful, pointless distractions from the oppressive realities of life in the desert state.

Through each of the four women, the reader not only learns the intricate social and psychological make-up of the various characters, but also has the added dimension of seeing each of them through the eyes of one another, and witnessing how their inner world resembles, or falls far from, their day-to-day reality. Al-Shaykh also uses this strictly female narrative panel to demonstrate how through their being women, in a state which persecutes them simply for being women, their differences dissolve until they begin to resemble each other. This is further fostered by the unified narrative tone of the novel; for though their ideologies, level of education, and world exposure are diametrically different, as narrators their words are the same, their expressive ability and their descriptive method is one.

4.3.2 Placing Ḥanān al-Shaykh's Work in Its Socio-Historical Background

When it was drafted in the early 1940s, the constitution for the Lebanese state was essentially a Utopian project. It placed its faith and fragile future on a precarious power pyramid, which aimed to dispense political authority through the various communities which made up the Lebanese people: Maronite Christian, Orthodox Christian, Sunni Muslim, Shiᶜite Muslim, Druse. The other tiny minorities that nevertheless made up a part of this state, such as Catholic Christian and Armenian, had to put up with little or no political representation. This government system never managed to achieve the delicate balance it was supposed to due to a number of factors; for example, vast differences in the distribution of wealth among the different communities, differential birth rates, with the poorest ethnic groups, like the southern Shiᶜites, having much larger families than their northern Maronite counterparts, dissimilar patterns of emigration, to the Gulf States, Africa and Europe, and the general mayhem caused by the influx of Palestinian refugees from 1948 onwards. Although there were outbreaks of communal strife prior to the 1970s (in 1958, for example), a full-scale civil war did not erupt until 1975.

Since the various guerrilla groupings feeding the war machine involved both political and religious affiliations, it was only natural that foreign factors would intervene, and soon become embroiled in supporting the cause of one community or another. Lebanon became a melting pot for various ethnic groups, all in strife with each other, all on Lebanese soil.

"Beginning in the late 1960s Israel made retaliatory attacks against the Palestinians and the Lebanese. In 1978, and again in 1982 it launched a full scale invasion of Lebanon."[592] When the Israelis marched into Lebanon, swiftly followed by an inevitable American involvement, this added a whole new dimension to the battleground, since it became not only pan-Lebanese, but an international battle with many disastrous webs. "Thus the conflict was able to transform and renew itself throughout the 1980s, involving differing configurations and alliances both local and international".[593] For the people of Lebanon, the enemy was supremely within, and with increasing outside influence the conflict seemed to have been removed from the Lebanese themselves and become Syrian/ Iranian/ French/ American/ Palestinian/ Israeli (with Lebanon serving as the battleground), and there could be no arbitrative attempts.

Yet, parallel to the horrors of this conflict, real life was always taking place in a near-normal fashion, as commented on by Makdisi:

> Schools, universities, shops, etc., carried on a daily routine unconnected with the
> fighting, though governed by its schedules and the geography of boundaries which it
> created. Though government was effectively suspended, the militias did not interfere
> with the routine running of the affairs of non-combatants, and a kind of political/ social
> vacuum existed in which people lived out their lives and solved their own problems.[594]

The outcome of this unique turn of events was that there was a "strangely civilized"[595] social order in "this almost perfectly anarchical state".[596] And so the women of Lebanon

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[592] Amine Gemayel, *Rebuilding Lebanon* (Center for International Affairs, Boston: University Press of America, 1992) p.1.
[593] Allen, *The Arabic Novel*, p.62.
[594] Jean Said Makdisi, "The Mythology of Modernity: Women and Democracy in Lebanon" in Yamani, *Feminism and Islam*, p.246.
[595] Ibid.

were much closer to the events of war, the shelling, the bombing, the rape and the massacres, than those in World-War-One Britain. Whereas the former had the male absence to fill, the sceptre of war, though frightening, loomed only as a distant threat, something for the men to worry about; the women were confined to positions of healing and replacement. For the Lebanese woman, it was often the case that the male would leave, under political or religious persecution, or for lack of financial opportunity in war-torn Lebanon, and she would be left to fend for herself and her family, in the direct assaults of war. This meant that the war around her was both directly affected by and affecting her existence, and her continued exposure to the amoralities of the battle meant that it was magnified and diffused. The relegation of civil war to a disruptive local event, much like bad weather, or an exceptional traffic accident, made the Lebanese experience all the more poignant; to immune themselves from the constant and seemingly irresolvable strife and killings, they no longer felt the war, or allowed its grim reality to grind their lives to a halt, and it is within this overt denial of war's existence (brilliantly portrayed in al-Shaykh's *Beirut Blues*) that the woman Lebanese artist articulates her struggle.

4.3.3   From Babushkas to Barbies: The Problematic Status of Women in Lebanon

In the past fifty years conditions have been favourable in Lebanon for the entry of women into most professions, including art and fiction, which were previously the exclusive domain of men. Given Lebanon's high level of social freedom and modernisation, as well as the backdrop of ethnic and religious diversity that has enforced some measure of democratic flexibility, Lebanese women have been able to move beyond, and at an

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[596] Ibid.

accelerated pace, the repressive traditions that to this day hamper the development of many of their Arab sisters. Although there are still some rural areas which practise these stultifying traditions, their proximity to urban areas have forced a kind of collective mindset, one reinforced by Lebanon's high literacy rate, and the profligate and penetrative influence of the mass communications media that gives women a greater physical and intellectual mobility than perhaps elsewhere in the Arab world. Lebanon has also been receptive to Western influences, no doubt owing to its vast and politically powerful Christian population, which has created an energetic cultural fusion within society that further encouraged female "liberation".

Within the framework of such apparent advantages, women in Lebanon have been able to assume a role well beyond that of their conventional status. Yet the outward symbols of liberation must not be confused with the achievement of a truly equal status. Helen Khal notes that "beneath the surface of this progressive attitude, however, there still remains an active core of traditional response which, emotional in essence and without rational control, continues to manifest itself in certain aspects of female (and male) behaviour".[597] As *The Story of Zahrah* demonstrates, Lebanese women themselves are the first to blame for allowing such a dichotomy to occur in that they will always subordinate their will to men, escaping, as it were, to the toilets, or through silent madness, to the least healthy place, in order to avoid confrontation. "Despite vocal protestations to otherwise and conditioned as she has been to accept the inevitability of her acquiescent female position,

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[597] Helen Khal, *The Woman Artist in Lebanon* (Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, 1987) p.22.

our woman professional is often uncomfortably closer in practice to the restricting image of traditional woman than her announced liberation pretends."[598]

This unfortunate female tendency is always reinforced by the *Sī 'l-Sayyid*[599] mentality of the typical Arab male, even if he is a socially evolved Lebanese, "a male whose culturally inbred ego status dominates the relationship and insists that first and foremost she remain a woman, with any other interest beyond him and family to be considered as no more than a secondary and dispensable diversion."[600] Therefore, when Suhā in *Women of Sand and Myrrh* complains to her husband Bāsim that she feels intellectually cramped in the Gulf state where they reside, he interprets it as her being bored because she has nothing to do, and his solution is to provide her with menial jobs, such as overseeing a local grocery, rather than taking her discomfort seriously. This is further juxtaposed with the flashbacks that al-Shaykh provides to the couple's courtship, when for all practical purposes they were on a seemingly equal footing. Al-Shaykh seems to suggest that, deprived of their genteel, pseudo-progressive foils, even educated Lebanese men are chauvinists, and not only the wife-beating, backward example she draws in Zahrah's father.

It is through the very nature of the "liberated" Lebanese woman that this dichotomous tendency exists. Jean Makdisi discusses the false dichotomy

> which pits "modern" against "traditional" women. In this vision, a "modern" woman is usually and loosely, not to say carelessly, defined as one who is "educated" and/or "working", and/or "well-dressed". I used each of these words with self-conscious caution and they are, though apparently simple and naive, in fact loaded with hidden

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[598] Ibid.

[599] The main male protagonist in Najīb Maḥfūẓ's trilogy, this name has now become synonymous in Arab minds with the stereotypical Arab patriarch par excellence.

[600] Khal, *The Woman Artist*, p.22.

meaning and are responsible for half the falseness of the false dichotomy. The "traditional" woman, in this same view, is often but not necessarily wearing national costume, or, if she is Muslim, even Hijab; she looks after her home and children, and is dependent on her husband for her livelihood."[601]

Makdisi follows this train of thought to uncover another pre-existing notion on which the myth of liberated woman is based. She explains that "'modern' women are loosely identified with Europe and America, as modernity itself surely and more directly is".[602] This is in keeping with the preliminary visions of modern women that were first put across the Arab world by the *nahdah* male promoters.[603] The problem with the myth of modernity as it affects Lebanese women in Makdisi's estimation is that it is built on the faulty premise that the less covered-up a woman's body is, the more "liberated" she is assumed to be, without regard to social accomplishment, political representation, or her role in the advancement of women's issues such as childcare and marital abuse. "The logical conclusion of such an argument would be that the most uncovered woman, i.e. one wearing the flimsiest of bikinis, is by definition 'freer' than her covered counterpart, though she may be lying on the beach for months at a time with the sole aim of improving her suntan."[604] This kind of confused desire for being liberated, and the signifying of her "liberation" through undeniable emulation of the West, is very clear in the yearnings of al-Shaykh's heroines. For in the final count, what is Zahrah's burning desire? What, along with the sharpened sense of purpose awakened by the war, actually happens to invigorate her self-awareness? Sex: extra-marital Western-style sex, of the anonymous, damn-the-consequences style. It was not the first time that Zahrah was touched by man, indeed, even

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[601] Makdisi, "The Mythology of Modernity", p.238.
[602] Ibid.
[603] See §1.4.2.
[604] Makdisi, "The Mythology of Modernity, p.242.

with the one she was most attracted to, the one who "seduced" her, Malik, she did not feel

sane, or pleasured. The sniper was not a gentle lover; indeed he raped her with a lot more

brutality than her molesters had ever done. It could very likely have been the sniper's

mysterious identity, and the possibility that he was a Christian that attracted Zahrah to him.

Her cries of pleasure invoking her father's name in hate as the sniper violates her, mirror

her resentment of the Shiᶜite community surrounding her, a theme repeated in many of al-

Shaykh's other stories. In *Beirut Blues*, Asmahān makes love out in the open to her

Christian friend's cousin at a wedding held in East Beirut. She openly articulates her desire

to be free, to be allowed to drink, to be one of "them",[605] "they" being the liberated

Christian community. In *Only in London*, Lamīs, one of two main female protagonists,

struggles to break the culture barrier, to become accepted by her lover Nicholas's English

friends,[606] to be part of that "other" that the Arab modernists always seem to be chasing. It

is this disjointed sense of liberation, the coffee shops and restaurants that Suhā misses in

Women of Sand and Myrrh, that distort the image of any real sense of freedom for women.

It is the same questionable "freedom" that Elizabeth Dalloway ponders on atop the

London bus in *Mrs Dalloway*.

4.3.4   War as Liberator in the Novels of Levantine Women Writers

According to Makdisi, "the status of women as individuals peaked during the war and has

gone into a sharp decline since the war ended".[607] This sentiment is repeated in many of

al-Shaykh's works, in the character of Asmahān in *Beirut Blues*, and in a passage from

Only in London, where the homosexual Samīr says that he has tasted true freedom in

London:

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[605] Al-Shaykh, *Beirut Blues*, trans. Catherine Cobham (New York: Anchor Books, 1996) p.18.
[606] Al-Shaykh, *Innahā Landan yā ᶜAzīzī* (Beirut: Dār al-Adab Press, 2001) p.365.
[607] Makdisi, "The Mythology of Modernity", p.236.

without needing a war to break out so that everybody is occupied with it, and leaves you alone to act as you please, without feeling guilty or ashamed, and without needing to resort to a double life that drives you in the end to repression and depression.[608]

Showalter, when describing the Female writer Doris Lessing's work, concluded that in her novels, war causes the ultimate "breakdown of civilization; sex and gender are irrelevant in terms of this human disaster".[609] This idea is used in al-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahrah* to great merit. War, through its dehumanising aspects, breaks down the barriers between the sexes so that the repressed gender can be free, albeit temporarily, from the confines of its prescribed social roles. So, Zahrah flaunts her own sexuality, parading near-naked on the open balcony to attract the sniper. It is important to note that this was a man she had chosen, and not vice versa, so that not only has she broken free of the submissive female mould, she has inverted the sexual roles so that she is the one in pursuit of man as an object of sexual gratification. In the chaos of war, it seems that al-Shaykh wants to say that Zahrah's true personality finally emerges. And what a personality! Wanton, sexually voracious, shameless and seemingly fearless (it is hard to determine which of those two aspects prompts her to hide her birth control pills in her brother Ahmad's sock).[610] Following this argument further, it is easy to disagree with McKee's analysis that "al-Shaykh's victimized heroine, Zahrah in *Ḥikāyat Zahrah*, may be seen as the pock-marked and abused embodiment of the ravages of war on Lebanon."[611] Zahrah's skin significantly clears up during the war, not at the eruption of hostilities, as McKee suggests, which means that her dermatological condition is not symbolic of the ravaged motherland, as

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[608] Al-Shaykh, *Innahā Landan*, p.218.
[609] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.308.
[610] This raises the question that if this is the behaviour of Lebanese women free from all familial restrictions, maybe it is out of necessity that men must keep them under such tight control.

McKee proposes,[612] but of her own moral degeneracy that was suppressed prior to the war, and found itself liberated through the sick behaviour that the war allowed. Close reading of the text reveals that Zahrah's skin problem actually clears up after her parents leave and when she is able to consummate her sexual relationship. Thus, her skin being at war with itself is symbolic of both parental repression and the suppression of her sexuality. Moreover, Zahrah is not only the victim of a morally degenerate household, she has become the classic product of one, morally degenerate herself. Fatma Moussa-Mahmoud's reading of her skin status is closer to the truth: the ugliness within becomes the ugliness without: "Zahrah...is...a neurotic victim of violence and fear. Raped and morally degraded, the ugliness of her experience erupts in spots and sores on her skin."[613] Yet we must not allow ourselves to fall into the Feminist myth of victimisation, and with it, the sentimentalisation of women's writing. Zahrah is just as bad as she chooses to be, there is no child-rapist in the war, there is no parental figure abusing her, there is only her free will, and her free will is anarchic.

In her discussion of Wendy Chapkis's work, Miriam Cooke says that "she writes that when women become combatants, the military myth provides an avenue to personally transgress gender boundaries or as a means to project the erotism onto male objects of desire".[614] She goes on to discuss how the literature of war enables women to become combatants by "creating women who challenge gender norms by playing men's roles or wearing men's clothes, or more subtly by refusing society rules for proper conduct for

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[611] McKee, "Political Agendas", p.106.

[612] See: Elizabeth McKee, *Narrative Structure and Triangular Desire in the Novels of Levantine Woman Writers 1951-1991* (PhD diss., University of London, 1995). In fact, if McKee was angered by Accad's and Cooke's unwillingness to read politically into the novel, she may have just trapped herself in the opposite extreme, i.e. reading too politically and finding symbolic correlations where they do not exist.

[613] Moussa-Mahmoud, "Little Guide", p.13.

[614] Miriam Cooke, "Death and Desire in Iraqi War Literature", in Allen et al., *Love and Sexuality*, p.188.

women. This change from observer to combatant is often erotically marked."[615] Although the women in al-Shaykh's *Women of Sand and Myrrh* are not in an actual war, the circumstances surrounding them are war-like. They are, for the most part, under house arrest, held captive in their own homes by the many obstacles to women's mobility that are in effect in this Saudi Arabia-esque Gulf state.[616] Their way of life as well, in the case of the indigenous characters, has been completely upturned by the influx of armies of strangers and foreign civilisations seeking out the wealth available in their lands, and turning their own world around. And so, we have the character of Nūr, wearing a male robe, and sneaking out of her house in the still of night to pursue her reluctant, female no less, lover. And then there is Suzanne, the American housewife, scouring the shopping malls and grocery stores for new lovers, setting up businesses and getting things done with all the aggressiveness and assertiveness of a testosterone-mad male. Even the Lebanese Suhā, the most aware of these characters of the effect this insularity has on her, has been driven by boredom and the lack of stimuli into the arms of a female lover.

Cooke elucidates further this cross-gender war-provoked tendency: "It is at the moment that these...heroines recognize that participation in the war gives them freedom, self-control and the chance to affirm as *other* than expected that they experience erotic desire and pleasure."[617] This is different to men's war experience in that "whereas the men's desire is activated by battle participation that *confirms* gender identity, women's desire marks the assumption of a role that is in *contradiction* with social expectations of gendered behavior."[618]

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[615] Ibid.
[616] See footnote 599.
[617] Cooke, "Death and Desire", p.190.
[618] Ibid.

War, as a topic, also proved to be liberating to the Female authors, who could now merge real events with symbolic stances or mental states without having to resort to something that was outside the normal range of experience of their own native societies. Where other feminist writers were creating outlandish and exceptional storylines, such as that of Firdaws in al-Sacdāwī's *Woman at Point Zero*, to demonstrate in an awkward and not entirely convincing manner the damaging effects of patriarchal society on female protagonists, war provided Lebanese authors with a fertile source of believable horrors that would demonstrate the outcome of the repressive patriarchal code much more effectively. "The civil war in Lebanon proved to be a rich source of raw material for Syro-Lebanese women novelists, who found in it an echo of their own internal strife. Their heroines are able to go through intense experiences of their own without being overshadowed by men."[619] Similar to the English women who found themselves freed from the normal constraints of their typical, peace-time existence, these heroines were placed in the abnormal position of having decreased male supervision, or social scrutiny, so that they were free to become "heroines of the *kawābīs* (nightmares)"[620] that raged around them, their experience to become equal to that of the male propagators of this nightmare.

4.3.5 Madness and Desire: Female Codes in the Search for Self Identification

In her handling of the novel, Cooke discusses Zahrah's apparent madness thus:

> The heroine of Ḥanān al-Shaykh's novel *Ḥikāyat Zahrah*...experiences *jouissance* as she transforms herself from observer to participant. Zahrah, a young woman who bears the

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[619] Zeidan, *Arab Women* Novelists, p.227.

scars of incest and rape, has inured herself to pain through psychological distancing that others call madness. She allows no one, and particularly not men, to come close to her and floats alone over the surface of life.[621]

Once Zahrah is able to identify and articulate her desires (whether social or sexual) she no longer thinks herself mad. Therefore, her madness, al-Shaykh seems to suggest, is a direct product of her repressive surrounding, and not necessarily as Cooke believes, a result of the abuse she received as a young girl. Even though Sāmī the sniper rapes Zahrah in a rough mechanical manner, Zahrah manages to convince herself that he is making love to her, [622] and the pains that the sniper took to make Zahrah more comfortable (bringing in a blanket at one point so that she won't be lying down on the bare floor), it is not simply a change in his attitude that makes Zahrah enjoy herself sexually, or brings her back to this violent man time and again. It is the fact that there is nobody watching over her, judging, controlling, standing between her and the fulfilment of her dreams and fantasies. With the war, everybody around her, especially the male authority figures, is too busy with their own agendas and worries to pay attention to what Zahrah is doing, and so she is free to follow all her whims, even to their basest ends.

Cooke sees Zahrah's motivation in her physical relationship with the sniper as being altruistic. In her account of the story, Zahrah's concern for her neighbours' lives is the driving force behind her seeking out the sniper:

> When her neighborhood is plunged into a violence over which a sniper reigns supreme,
>
> she begins to move out of her shell. Seeing others in pain makes her feel less alone,

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[620] Ibid.
[621] Cooke, "Death and Desire", pp.189-190.
[622] Ibid.

more willing to be touched. With time she adopts responsibility to those around her. Despite warnings, she ventures out into the menaced streets and makes her way to the building out of which the sniper is said to be operating. If she can distract him even for a while, she will have saved one innocent person's life. Crazy, alienated Zahra has decided to enter the fray, to become a combatant. Despite terrible fear that gives rise to hallucinations of her own death, she arrives at the building and climbs to the roof. He rapes her. Accustomed as she is to sexual abuse, she feels nothing, or almost nothing. Yet the experience is not so bad that she does not return. Day after day, she trudges back to the building and up the stairs for a ritual re-enactment of the first encounter. Each time she is there, and each time less reluctantly, she convinces herself that she is doing what she is doing so as to defend her neighbors. However, she is also sensing something unusual happening to her body.[623]

Even if Zahrah's original intentions were based on concern for those around her, it is not the reason she trudges back to this madman day after day. She is on a rush from the fact that she is finally in control of her destiny: she goes of her own free will to the lair of death every day and comes back alive. As Cooke puts it,

> Zahra...has become a combatant who has found erotic pleasure in that role. She has not witnessed death while being constantly in its presence. She can thus imagine that the emblem of war's senseless killing is not a death machine but rather Sami, a man she would like as a husband for herself and as a father for their unborn child.[624]

In a sense Zahrah's actions at this point, her expectations and the way she reacts to what is going on in her life, are more a sign of insanity than her withdrawal or her silence, or any behaviour on her part prior to this point in the narrative. She is pursuing a killing machine,

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[623] Ibid.
[624] Ibid.

freely risking her life, and for what, to be boorishly used and discarded by this man she hardly knows, and when he impregnates her, she goes to him truly believing that he will change into her saviour. It is clear that the war does not cure Zahrah's mental malady, but that it makes her more unstable than ever before. It is only her perception of herself that has changed, and her ability to control her own life, make decisions (no matter how warped), and carry them through without being questioned, hindered or stopped that causes her to believe that she is not mad. The lack of censors at this point is also important in this self deceptive state: the war has rendered everyone too self-involved to track down Zahrah and examine her behaviour, there is no one to tell her that what she is doing is madness, and so she has no reason to doubt herself anymore, all her "mirrors" are gone, and with no males for her to become a reflection of, she is drawn to Sāmī, and becomes "sane" in his perverse logic of war.

At one point in their narratives, all four narrators of *Women of Sand and Myrrh* question whether they are losing their sanity. Whereas the two outsiders Suhā and Suzanne find that they are insane when they catch themselves acting out of character, the two indigenous characters find themselves to have taken their own characters to unprecedented extremes. Nūr cannot believe what she is doing when she finds herself risking life and limb out on the streets all alone at night trying to break into Suhā's house. In Tamr's case the madness is of a more subtle and protracted kind for it is enmeshed in her mother's own unstable mental health, which takes up a lot of the narrative. The stubbornness she displays, and the unheard-of defiance to the familial male figure of authority (in this case her brother Raᶜd) find their way into her mother's psyche, so that Tamr's would-be madness is projected onto her mother, along with the latter's unending frustrations that she is utterly unable to express. It is as if whereas the protracted stay in this oppressive atmosphere changes the

foreign women's behaviour into something erratic and immoral, a certainly corruptive influence, the native women become more emphatically what they originally are, as if in response to the influence of these foreign elements, these messengers of freedom, into their repressive surroundings.

As an Arab Female writer, al-Shaykh handles the question of a woman's identity always within the framework of the greater search for a national identity. If woman is the mirror of man, and man has no idea who he is, how can woman be expected to know who she is supposed to be. The men in this Gulf state are suffering from post-oil anxiety, they are in the process of redefining themselves, like Muʿādh, Suzanne's bedouin lover, or Ṭāriq, Nūr's Western-educated husband. They are unsure of who they are supposed to be and this causes a kind of schizophrenia in their behaviour; they are something else out of their countries, and something else within, they are different people when they are in their own homes than the ones they are in public, they are devout Muslims and fear Allah's wrath in all they do, and yet they succumb to every vice with great flourish. Even Suhā's and Suzanne's husbands become oddly impassive in this strange land. The Lebanese man's quest for money makes him blind and deaf to his wife's frustrations, even her odd behaviour does not raise his curiosity, and so it is not surprising that Suhā finally reaches a stage where she no longer cares about anything, and "nothing can hold her attention for a long time".[625] In David's case, the passivity is even stranger, and it is unclear what kind of a commentary al-Shaykh is attempting to make over the American white-collar workers who take their families out with them to the Gulf. From the first night of her arrival, David arranges for Suzanne to spend the night with one of his acquaintances, and throughout her

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[625] Al-Shaykh, *Misk al-Ghazāl* (Beirut: Dār al-Adab, 1983) p.34.

stay seems not to mind her endless love affairs that are carried out in their home, and in front of their ten-year-old son. It is an odd arrangement that even Suzanne wonders about constantly and even fights with her husband over time and again even while she is carrying on her torrid affair with Mu^{c}ādh. Her fantasies of marrying the Arab man and being his second wife are not only utterly impractical and unlikely (Mu^{c}ādh's interest in her has waned to the point that she needs to resort to theatrical blackmail to get him to visit her) they are also an obvious and urgent backlash to her husband's apathy. The more he seems not to care about her, the more desperate and morally deprived she seems to become, eventually turning into a sexual predator who can only see this Gulf state as a minefield of young male bodies eager to fulfil her megalomaniac urges. She, an American woman, has inverted the stereotype of the sex-crazed Gulf man by becoming one herself.

4.3.6 Lebanon through the Looking Glass: Selective Realism

In *Sexuality and War: Literary Masks of the Middle East*, Evelyne Accad suggests that the unconscious world revealed in the novels of the female author is a projection of that author's social and political reality.[626] From a position that she sees as being similar to Moi's indignation at Showalter, McKee explains how Accad sees "the novels in her study as being directly representative of the physical reality from which they emanate...[and so] Accad glibly reduces all writing, both men's and women's, to mirror-image of expressions of society and human behaviour".[627] She expounds in great detail on how al-Shaykh (among others) "produced literary works that exhibit complex structural patterns that at once reproduce and subvert the rigidly patriarchal gender systems of their societies".[628]

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[626] Accad, *Sexuality and War: Literary Masks of the Middle East* (New York University Press, 1990) p.36.
[627] McKee, "Political Agendas", p.108.
[628] Ibid., p.110; also, McKee, *Narrative Structure*.

In portraying the protagonist's madness, the events of the novel seem to suggest that the figure of Zahrah goes through the same war on a psychological level as that of the motherland, and so one becomes a euphemism for the other. This would indeed provide a very neat solution to most of the social and moral dilemmas presented in the novel with the inner conflict being representative of the outer, etc. But is Zahrah Lebanon? The use of females as national symbols is an age-old tradition, from French revolution paintings to Haykal's *Zeinab* (1912/13) on a local scale, but in feminist fiction this takes on a problematic dimension. Zahrah may be an emblem for war-torn Lebanon on one level, certainly the essence of Lebanon is interwoven so closely with this particular text, in its folkloric songs, in the dialects of its characters, and more importantly its political history, and the effect of the war on its people, but she is also an autonomous *ḥikāya*, or story, in her own right. Consider all the events that take place in her young life, just within the confines of her terribly dysfunctional family: adultery, rape, incest, marital violence; Zahrah has all the elements for a most bizarre tale without the need of any war, no matter how poignant or heart-wrenching. This is further refuted by the diabolical elements that emerge in her character with the outbreak of war.

It is true that all events taking place in Lebanon are related by Zahrah, while those of Africa are told by her and the two men, so that her escape to Africa is also an escape from the narrative.[629] In exile, it seems, Zahrah's hold on her story loosens and other viewpoints can be used to shed light on events that seem obscure in her rendition. Yet, this discrepancy in the tale sheds new light on Zahrah's role as narrator. Never a very reliable

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[629] Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists*, p.206.

one from the start, the two "male" chapters signify that what Zahrah relates is not in fact what is going on, it is always what she "thinks" is going on. An important difference, especially when the person doing the "thinking" is mentally unhinged, has been undergoing ECT[630] sessions where the brain is fried, and who can with impunity relate the thoughts and attitudes of others (such as her brother Ahmad) towards her. As Cooke notes:

> Zahrah was torn between a past made murky by time, and a present with which she was never fully in touch. Her dislocation is brought in others' reactions to her: all assumed she did not understand what was going on. But Zahrah's comments on these assumptions reveal something else – not that she did not understand but that she did not relate. With leaden passivity she had closed out the world.[631]

When the outside world is closed out, by default, only the inner one remains, and so the reality Zahrah presents is selective, subjective, a Female trend highlighted by Showalter. Zahrah refuses to interact with those around her and so she creates her own little reality where she is hero, martyr and villain all in one. As she portrays herself growing saner at the onset of war, the reader realises that she inhabits two worlds: an imagined one where we have her interior monologues, recollections and often strange interpretations of events, and the exterior one, where the bloodbaths are taking place, and the sniper is taking random lives, and the radio, a constant reminder of "outer" reality is a thin thread linking the heroine to the socio-political reality of wartime Beirut. Much like Clarissa Dalloway's character in Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, Zahrah refers time and again to windows, mirrors, and looking out at things from the frame of a window – further signalling her distance, both literal and metaphorical from the events taking place around her. Her explicit desire to become a window herself, and ensure that she remains unscathed by the events around

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[630] Electroconvulsive therapy.

her, which "people can look [through] and find everything outside to be in motion"[632] seems to be a reference to her own role as narrator, as the vehicle through which people can "see" this story of a Lebanese Shi'ite family's multifarious struggles pre- and post-civil war. Zeidan says that "Zahrah the narrator makes use of the nexus of familial relationships to provide the reader with a picture that is a reflection of the ills of the larger society."[633] Many critics[634] have found great symbolism in the act of Zahrah's mother placing her hand over the young girl's mouth in the opening paragraph of the novel. This same mother who not only sows the seeds of degenerate behaviour in her young daughter by taking her on trysts, and exposing her to the seedy underbelly of female sexuality early on in life, has no problems ending an offspring's life, and perversely she leaves the aborted foetus to fester in an open dish, in full view of her neighbours. Zahrah's brother masturbates openly in front of her, and turns a deaf ear to her protests. In this sense we can interpret the sick behaviour of mother, father,[635] family friend, cousin, and uncle towards Zahrah and towards each other prior to the eruption of the civil war as mirroring the national events that were a build-up to that very same conflict. Lebanon against itself is Zahrah's family, and sometimes Zahrah herself, picking her acne to cause facial scarring, waging war against each other.

4.3.7 Claims to Feminism

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[631] Cooke, *War's Other Voices*, p.50.

[632] Ḥanān al-Shaykh, *Ḥikāyat Zahrah* (Beirut: Dār-al Adab, 1980) p.213.

[633] Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists*, p.239.

[634] See Allen, *The Arabic Novel*, p.50; Cooke, *War's Other Voices*, p.56.

[635] In fact it is only Zahrah's father out of all the characters in the novel who does not act in a shockingly sexually explicit manner, yet he is the one drawn with most ridicule, and obviously the one most despised. His only morally reprehensible acts are his physical violence towards his wife, whom he suspected of cheating on him, and his favouritism towards his son.

Accad says that "when I questioned al-Shaykh in 1983 about the implications of her work, she replied that her only concern was with its aesthetic quality; she was not aware of the feminist message. Nevertheless, the message is there strongly: without at least a rudimentary sense of identity, is it possible to have any sense of rebellion?"[636] This question reaches the zenith of its intensity when applied to the problem of women in countries where the national sense of identity has been torn asunder by various factors. The Lebanese women she portrays have been driven out of their homes by their spouses' mercenary ambitions, and the fact that they were facing problems in being who they were in the ethnic melting-pot that is Lebanon. As Sabry Hafez points out, those such as Ḥanān al-Shaykh belong to what he labels the "voiceless" classes, one of which is the "poor Shiʿite community in the south of Lebanon".[637] Her novel *The Story of Zahrah* deals with this very community both in Beirut, and in the South of Lebanon, and in Africa. When Lebanon as a whole turns against itself and begins to be torn apart by the various communities from which it is made up, it is only natural that its young men become death-thirsty and chaotic creatures, and its women take this opportunity to explore who they might be, could be, without the constant patriarchal supervision that makes up their peace-time existence. That is why Zeidan claims that:

> Possibly the most impressive work in the history of Arab women's novels is Ḥanān al-Shaykh's *Ḥikāyat Zahrah* (*The Story of Zahrah*, 1980), which is remarkable not only in its portrayal of life during the civil war in Lebanon (presented in the second part of the novel), but also in that it is a milestone in terms of its feminist commentary on Lebanese

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[636] Accad, "Rebellion, Maturity, and the Social Context", p.241.
[637] Hafez, "Women's Narrative", p.170.

society in general. For the first time in this literary tradition, nationalist and feminist causes are treated as inseparable and equally critical.[638]

The way in which *The Story of Zahrah* is related is just as important in achieving this dual purpose as its content, as explained by Allen: "for each of these facets – topic and mode of presentation – presents the reader with a degree of ambiguity and complexity that contributes in no small way to the success of this novel as a reflection of a woman's truly fractured society".[639] And so, we have Hāshim's interruption of Zahrah's narrative to relate his own version of what Zahrah means to him, how she is the physical personification of Lebanon, which makes him want always to be closer to her, and which causes his socially dubious behaviour. "His lack of self-awareness and sometimes misdirected social consciousness, along with his own experience under oppressive conditions, make it difficult to view him as simply Zahrah's harasser."[640] In this particular insistence al-Shaykh illustrates that it is not only men's abuse and tyranny that is oppressive, but their suffocating love as well. In Zahrah's refusal to accept her role as an emblem of the yearned-for motherland, in her continual turning away from men who seek to cast her in one role or another, and in her choice of Sāmī as lover, a man to whom she represents nothing more than an instrument of sexual fulfilment, Zahrah, if incapable of choosing her destiny, is at least capable of rejecting that which is forced upon her by the men in her life. In this negation of her roles, Zahrah gains her only measure of autonomy prior to the all-engulfing mayhem of the war.

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[638] Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists*, p.205.
[639] Allen, *The Arabic Novel*, p.231.
[640] Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists*, p.208.

As for *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, its subject matter is a vivid portrayal of what the *International Herald Tribune* claimed: "religion, sex, marriage, housekeeping as they really are in the great golden age of the desert." The very style of its writing, reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's multi-narrator perspective, is a testament to its feminist contribution. Hafez feels the same way:

> The elaborate network of first-person narrative, in which the text allows the four women to speak in turn giving voice to the voiceless, reflects in its structure the compartmentalization of women and their struggle to break out of all forms of social confinement. The very structure of the novel in which each section conveys a sense of independence while at the same time being an integral part of the whole reflects a degree of sophistication in the author's feminist vision.[641]

There was, however, an imminent danger in using such a writing-style that unfortunately al-Shaykh does fall into in this novel. Even when the narrator changed, the writing style remained uniform, arguably to maintain the spirit of solidarity of experience amongst those women, but it becomes an almost jarring error when the differences in educational background and cultural temperament of the women does not seem to effect their deprecatory perspectives.

4.3.8   Anti-Feminist Strategies

Much like Virginia Woolf, al-Shaykh's feminism was of a "reluctant"[642] kind. Ironically, it is in al-Shaykh's depictions of men that she is most damaging to the Female image of feminism. The men she draws, from the cuckolded father in *The Story of Zahrah*, to the

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[641] Sabry Hafez in: ed. Tracy Chevalier, *Contemporary World Writers* (1993) p.147.

spoiled and shallow Aḥmad, to the sniper Sāmī, are all mere shells, mere caricatures that

the women characters cannot be compared to, or thrown into relief through the formers'

uxorial shadow. Granted, she attempted to give a more three-dimensional aspect to the

characters of Uncle Hāshim and Zahrah's estranged husband Mājid, through allowing

them to narrate Zahrah's story in their own words for two chapters of the novel. Yet, they

are no closer to being "real" people than the father, the brother or the lover. Both Mājid

and Hāshim are shown to be emotionally stunted, socially inept human beings whose lives

revolve around two axes: Zahrah, and the physical (and in Hāshim's case emotional)

release she provides for them, and their socio-economic position in their homeland

Lebanon. Hāshim is obsessed with the politics that have created the circumstances which

made his stay in Lebanon hazardous, and Mājid can only define his relationship with

Zahrah in terms of a step up the social ladder he wishes to ascend. However, even these

half-baked portrayals are significant; as Zeidan points out, "their stories make it difficult to

view Hashem and Majed as stereotypical 'bad' men"[643] which is positive in that it

demonstrates a movement away from radical "feminist" thought, in that man is not

necessarily the enemy, he is just a confused conspirator.

In *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, al-Shaykh inverts the prevalent social order so that the male

characters are marginalised, passive, apathetic, and impotent as it were, and the women, all

suppressive social traditions notwithstanding, roam unchecked doing as they please in

covert defiance. Occasionally a brother, such as in Tamr's case, or a husband, as in Nūr's

case, would enter the picture, and try to put a stop to this imprudent activity, but in this

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[642] Charles Larson, "The Fiction of Ḥanān al-Shaykh, Reluctant Feminist" in *Literary Quarterly of the University of Oklahoma*, 1 (Winter 1991).
[643] Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists*, p.207.

softly-spoken women's world the men are like mirages: seen from a distance, they seem to have great promise, but the closer one inspects them the blurrier they become, disappearing altogether when pressed, like Bāsim and David, the "foreign" husbands. In fact, the only male character who is dynamic and depicted in an honest, multi-layered way is Muᶜādh, Suzanne's Bedouin lover. Muᶜādh is the only man in both books who is drawn with as much depth and psychological realism as the women. This results in him being not only a sympathetic and likeable character, though a womanising drunk, but in the book gaining its only successful male-female interplay. Yes, Muᶜādh is severely flawed: he is a mass of contradictions, invoking God's name right after he finishes making love to the American, even his work is meant to highlight his dichotomous nature (his job is censoring and confiscating immoral pictures and goods), but al-Shaykh reminds the reader time and again of his generosity and of his gentleness towards his wife. In giving Muᶜādh an abhorrent, syphilitic end, it seems as though al-Shaykh did not know how to deal with this monster she created, this loveable bad man, and therefore decided to fall back on the Feminine strategy of punishing the wayward rebellious Angel of the house, and damaging the one mature male-female relationship of the two novels.

Female authors have come to terms with their Femaleness, although,

> Zahrah notes, as have other literary female protagonists, the preferential treatment accorded to her brother Ahmed by her parents[644]...unlike other heroines, Zahrah does not begin to consciously despise her femaleness. Instead, during her youth she interprets the oppression and abuse she suffers as being purely the results of bad luck and of her

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[644] This treatment is always translated in terms of bigger food servings, and the prioritising of the male siblings' education over the females', as in Nawāl Saᶜdāwī's fiction.

own individual flaws; thus she internalizes these experiences and feels she must accept

abuse from others and even add it to herself.[645]

Nevertheless, the early Female artist has not managed to draw a female character able to

successfully[646] confront her oppressor, and thus, is destined to become her own worst

enemy. Helen Khal, a Lebanese artist, attempts to explain this shrinking violet tendency in

the Female artist by drawing attention to

> the contradiction of her dual function, a condition which remains an unconscious
>
> irritant and is often a trying obstacle in the fulfilment of her professional role. As
>
> she attempts to move beyond an existing male-female hierarchal condition towards
>
> that ideal state of equality to which she aspires frustrating conflicts arise...She is
>
> seeking a private world of her own, independent and secure from the invasion of
>
> outside controlling forces. In her art she attempts to resolve the painful tensions in
>
> her life, to express a true image of herself, her needs and aspirations and, in doing
>
> so, assert her identity and achieve her ultimate liberation.[647]

In this way, we have the enforced detachment, the madness, the shutting out of the real

world, and the stubborn relegation to the sidelines, to the world of the interior: the only

world these unfortunate heroines are allowed to control.

4.3.10   Literary Merits: Angry Softness

Al-Shaykh, like the writers in this stage, has found her Female voice, and thus her works

exhibit a maturity that was lacking in the previous stages. She is able to articulate the

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[645] Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists*, p.206.

[646] Though Zahrah does lash out at Hāshim, accusing him in her "ostrich voice" (p. 43) of touching her inappropriately, in his retelling of these events the reader becomes aware of how inappropriate Zahrah's own actions were, with her long, detailed letters to her uncle, and with her decision to move to Africa to live with her bachelor uncle, she would at least have encouraged such behaviour. Even more disconcerting is the sense one gets of Zahrah's account being not necessarily the most realistic or reliable one, especially compared to the accounts of Hāshim and Mājid.

[647] Khal, *The Woman Artist*, p.22.

struggle of the Arab woman as a creature of unique circumstances, and within the broader

national framework of both the civil war and the attempt of the Arab countries to find their

footing in a sea of options.

There are various indications of the sophistication of the both the ideological arguments in

the two novels, and the literary devices used to present them. In *Hikayat Zahrah* the

author delves into the psychology of the main protagonist and both men who take up the

narration in the middle of the story, using various techniques; interior dialogues,

flashbacks, stream of consciousness passages. This is all undercut with the disjointed

narrative that reflects the displacement and isolation of the main characters back to the

reader. This sense of alienation inspires an even greater pathos as it is mixed with the

multi-viewpoint that is available to the reader, yet denied the characters themselves.

In *Women of Sand and Myrrh,* al-Shaykh takes this a step further, so that it is not only the

narrators that are different (and so the multi-viewpoint), but they are all relating events that

have been shared and defining each other further through their own attempts at self

definition. So, the reader nowsees Tamr not only in how she presents herself, but in how

the other women see her, and what her actions towards them betray of her own character

and so on.

Al-Shaykh's ability to fuse her angry awareness of women's mistreatment in society

within stories whose plot-lines deal with larger socio-political issues has "confirmed her

position as one of the most talented women writers in the Arab world."[648] Her

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[648] Ḥanān al-Shaykh, *The Story of Zahrah* (Quartet Books, 1991) back cover.

commitment to shedding light on the confused status of women in the modernised Arab world is never of the jarring, shrill, "I'm making a point" quality inherent in the Feminist stage, and yet its message is defined strongly enough so as not to be overpowered by the softness of the fictional female tone.

4.4   Conclusion

Showalter suggests that:

> With the relaxation of taboos on the open discussion of female sexual experience, and with women's increased interest in themes of menstruation, masturbation, abortion, and childbirth, there developed a critical backlash that insists that freedom for the woman writer means a masculine range of experience and subject. There has been a revival of the Victorian idea that female experience is narrow and insignificant, and that in deliberately opting to portray it the novelist diminishes her own potential and restricts herself to a cultural ghetto.[649]

This is an example of Female liberation turning against itself, becoming a new tool for belittling female experience and opening up a new avenue for patriarchal repression. It is as if men were saying: now that you have easy and open access to all sorts of experiences of life (i.e. male-oriented experiences), don't you see how limiting (i.e. inferior) it is to write about being a woman? In the extensive passage Elaine Showalter quotes from Elisabeth Hardwick,[650] there is an illuminating revelation that men's experience will always be intrinsically different from that of women because they have opposing desires to women's; they define courage and vice and sexuality in terms that are foreign to the female vision. Not superior, not necessarily more morally defunct (though that is often the

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[649] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.318.
[650] Ibid., p.317.

case) than the female one. "Even in Hardwick's terms, it is now possible for women to have some of the violent male experiences she valued so highly as literary material, to write, if they wish, about war and torture",[651] which is what both the writers discussed here decide to do.

However, where Hardwick sees a disadvantage, for the Female writers discussed here, lies the opposite. It is not limiting to women that they do not want the same things as men do, it is in the differences of how women express what they want, how they define bravery, and the fact that they are as free from the shackles of male bravado as the latter are from the chains of domesticity, that their creative genius lies. Modern women know enough about the world to appreciate that law degrees can bring them the respect and social acclaim they deserve and put them on an equal footing with their male peers in a way that "enduring brutality, physical torture, unimaginable sordidness"[652] (to quote Hardwick) would not; it would only grant them pity where it would grant men respect. Thus, the Female writers take men's domains – war, sex, political and material victory – and find a new feminine, feminist-female way to express it. "It is obvious," Virginia Woolf said, "that the values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the other sex".[653] Therefore, it is not surprising that she, as a Female writer, should choose to focus on those values that make the same experience for her as real as it is for a male writer. Her search for an androgynous vision is but an attempt to bridge this gap between a male perspective and a female one, and one whose failures and pitfalls she was well aware

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[651] Ibid., p.318.
[652] Ibid.
[653] Humm, *Feminisms*, p.224.

of: "As a result, women come to question the 'normality' of their feelings and to alter their judgments in deference to the opinion of others."[654]

This takes us back to the argument presented by Elisabeth Hardwick, and a defence of Woolf's position:

> Yet the deference and confusion that Woolf criticises in women derive from the values she sees as their strength. Women's difference is rooted not only in their social circumstances but also in the substance of their moral concern. Sensitivity to the needs of others and the assumption or responsibility for taking care leads women to attend to voices other than their own and to include in their judgment other points of view.[655]

And that is exactly what the two Female novelists discussed here do: Woolf in covert, subliminal, womanly manner; al-Shaykh in a grotesquely explicit and graphic one.

4.4.1 Similarities

Showalter states that in the Female stage,

> Women were claiming that men's allegiance to external "objective" standards of knowledge and behavior cut them off from the "real reality" of subjective understanding. Just as the Victorians had maintained that women were too emotionally involved and anarchic to judge personality, let alone history, women now sweetly hinted that men were too caught up in the preservation of a system to comprehend its meaning.[656]

It is apparent that both writers' introduction of a more intimate version of reality into their works was an attempt to give the internal world, the connection that all women feel with

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[654] Ibid.
[655] Ibid.
[656] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.243.

the immediacy of their emotions, more validity than it had acquired in the work of male authors. This world too, these authors seem to say, deserves attention, recognition and analysis. It is not only what their heroines do, but why and how, and under what circumstances, and what they wanted to do but couldn't, and what they tried to do but failed, that is important in the telling of their stories. How a woman feels is sometimes as crucial as what she does, if not more so, these Female writers argue, and to deny the validity of this alternative experience is to deny woman the chance to express herself as she truly is.

Also noted by Showalter is that

> for all their new awareness, the heroines of this fiction remain victims; indeed they are victimized by their awareness. Whereas the heroines of Victorian fiction often did not perceive that they had choices, and in fact had only a selection of bad options, these heroines are confronted with choices and lack the nerve to seize their time.[657]

This is an anti-feminist device used by both Virginia Woolf and Ḥanān al-Shaykh; even with choices, women choose to become victims or annihilate themselves. The problem with the early female writers is that they could not find a harmonious solution for the independent woman's existence. Autonomy and annihilation go hand-in-hand, whether the annihilation be physical (Zahrah) or emotional (Clarissa Dalloway). Both used madness to portray how easy it is for women to let the mask of sanity suppress the emotions that they themselves feel uncomfortable with, and how society strips them of this mask when they cross the lines of "acceptable" female behaviour. As Cooke put it, "this absence, this madness, becomes the narrator's room of her own where none can reach her". In her discussion of the Feminine writers, Showalter states that "madness is explicitly associated

with female passion, with the body",[658] therefore, many of the mad Female characters

have used their bodies in perverse ways, such as in engaging in homosexual relationships.

Also the two's lesbianism revolved around the "shock of the new" as it were, finding an

emotional and physical release from the constant suppression that such an oppressive

atmosphere creates in the individual.

Hafez states that "there are numerous textual strategies capable of undermining the rising

discourse of traditionalism and furthering the secular"[659] such as using "the polyphony of

narrative voices neither to establish the various facets of truth nor to demonstrate its

relativity, but to defer any application of patriarchal binary thought".[660] This is a technique

that is popular with the Female writers, and both al-Shaykh and Wolf use it to great merit.

The author uses other voices besides Zahrah's to tell her story from various angles, much

like Woolf's techniques in both novels discussed here. Also, both writers were familiar

with war and its devastating effects, and it had a great impact on them, and on their

writing:

> Much of the most intensely disillusioned World War literature however was written not
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> during but after the war. Works like Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), a
>
> portrait of an artist made important by a war wound, as well as Lawrence's *Lady*
>
> *Chatterley's Lover* and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), a profile of a society
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> lady shadowed by a portrait of a young man made mad by the war, suggest the many
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> ways in which this [war] had deadened or sickened both participants and onlookers. For

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[657] Ibid.

[658] Ibid., p.122.

[659] Hafez, "Women's Narrative", p.171.

[660] Ibid., p.172.

many thinkers, moreover, such alienation widened into a deeper sense of cultural fragmentation.[661]

The loss of identity felt by both was matri-centric in that it always revolved around the feelings of each writer longing to forge a connection with the estranged mother figure. "Since early childhood Zahra...had developed an obsessive attachment to her mother. Her mother was the orange of which she was the navel."[662]

4.4.2 Differences

There are a number of ways in which the two writers were different besides the obvious ones: those of time, culture and critical acclaim. Virginia Woolf's output was always concerned with challenging the mainstream modes of writing, with questions of language structure and character psychology. At the time of her novels *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* she was involved, along with her peers, with the larger picture of experimental writing, on the cusp of modernist and postmodernist eras.

For al-Shaykh, writing as she is in the post-postmodern age, these aesthetic questions are no longer as relevant as the message she wants to get across, which is far more pertinent than its mode of delivery, and so the language is more simplistic and straightforward than Woolf's. Al-Shaykh is concerned with relaying as "honest" a depiction as possible, and so she steers away from fancy linguistic deconstruction so as not to detract from the realistic portrayal. Going back to the arguments of style versus content of Moi and Showalter, al-Shaykh's hesitancy to commit to a fancy writing style may be part of a more Feminist

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[661] Gilbert and Gubar, *Norton Anthology*, p.1216.
[662] Cooke, *War's Other Voices*, p.50.

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throwback that fears any embellishment on "actual" accounts will lessen the empathetic interplay between reader and character.

Last but not least, although both artists fall into the "early" Female category in terms of the level of awareness their heroines display, and the maturity of the text's involvement with the various intricacies of each of their social lives, Ḥanān al-Shaykh's work would no doubt display many of the tendencies of the "late" Female artist, with her frank and quite graphic depictions of female sexuality, and the ability of her heroines to articulate her desires openly, in both the verbal and the physical sense.

Most importantly, Woolf and al-Shaykh are simultaneously united and separated by their noncommittal stance towards feminist literature. The Arab Female writers, as represented by al-Shaykh, "are disturbed by not only what they perceive as the antagonistic, overly anti-male stance of some feminist critics, but also by a sense of frustration that their writing is somehow being marginalized, almost ghettoized, into a female literary enclosure in which they are disenfranchised from the mainstream."[663] So that al-Shaykh not only shirks away from the label "feminist", she does not want her writing to be lumped in together with that of other women, she does not want to be part of a collective "female" experience. Woolf on the other hand, though she, like al-Shaykh, disapproves of the genre of a strictly "female" voice, and prefers an androgynous writing style, is nevertheless a champion of the uniquely "female" experience, and is the first to document it as a tradition, in *A Room of One's Own*, to which Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* pays homage.

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[663] McKee, "Political Agendas", pp.133-134.

5

Angry Words Softly Spoken

5.1   Conclusion

Although the idea suggested in the title would seem to be a fairly straightforward one, it is worth elucidating the concept of "softness" and its implications in this literary feminist context. Although the traditional description of women as being "soft" or "softer" than their male counterparts has been discredited by the feminist movement the world over, the term still has a feminine undertone that cannot be ignored. Women are, for the large part, smaller in frame then men, of a less muscular build and their chemical make-up seems to suggest that they are more vulnerable than men, especially with the fragile state of the female body in the birthing process, and so, inevitably, softer.

Women's voices too, literally and metaphorically, are lower in timbre and not as deep as men's, and so in that way, too, softer. In a more literary context, this study has charted[664] how the language of women, their diction and choice of subject,[665] is thought to be "softer" and so distinct from that of men. In many instances their language is solely that of emotion, and therefore it is of a more metaphysical nature than that of men, in that it deals with less tangible, less material aspects, and therefore "softer". The adjective "soft" is also important in a creative sense through its usage in the phrase "softening the blow", where harsh reality is diffused through the tools of fiction and tempered into a "softer", subtler

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[664] See chapter 1.
[665] Following the French feminist argument of "difference", then this softness is an inevitable part of the female blueprint, see §1.2.1.

and more appealing format, which is often greater in its persuasive abilities than a list of statistical facts. This duality of meaning encapsulated in the term soft makes it ideal for regulating the emphasis on a "womanly" tone or a successful literary result throughout this study.

As for the anger, or the angry words, they are part and parcel of any revolutionary manifesto. Without anger, there is no motivation, no momentum, and no steady progress towards change even should a desire for it exist. At all three stages of feminist consciousness there is anger; it's just that the quality of this anger, or, more accurately, the form in which it is presented, is modified and perfected linearly through the three stages, so that the two elements inherent in the title go hand-in-hand in gauging the literary quality of the work in hand, as the sections entitled "Literary Merits" at the end of each writer's section would demonstrate.

In this study, the application of Elaine Showalter's theory of the evolution of feminist consciousness in the novel form has been always accompanied by the trajectory of softness and anger, which has something of a cyclical nature. In the Feminine stage, women writers displayed a covert, unarticulated brand of anger, more akin to desperation or a consuming sadness, so that the anger is muffled by the overwhelming softness in the writer's tone, and in the exaggerated delicacy in which the matter is dealt with.

As feminist consciousness grows, the anger becomes more powerful, and almost drowns out the softness in its urgency to be expressed. It is as if the writers of the Feminist stage were so afraid of their own womanhood and weakness (read "softness") that they suppressed everything that could be related to their traditional attributes. As a result their

literary outpourings were denied that kaleidoscopic quality that the softness brings in their incessant drilling of the sharp, shrill message of anger. In taking on the male "hardness", its direct speech rhythms, the novels lost out on being enjoyable over a longer period of time, and though they succeeded in their "educational" missions, they did not manage to survive the test of time as great works of literature do.[666]

With the final, Female stage, the anger has been refined and redressed with the tools of "softness" so that a delicate balance between the two elements has been achieved where one does not engulf, but rather complements the other. The result is a more coherent, mature agreement that is a more complex read than the two previous stages, so that the ideology behind the feminist debate is reshaped in the reshaping of the literature. Where softness exists, in the Feminine and Female stages, the writers are comfortable with their identities, and embrace the fact that they are women ready to use the womanly tools at their disposal, and the literary quality is much better than when the softness is eclipsed by anger, as in the Feminist stage.

That is not to suggest, however, that the categories provided in applying both these theories, Showalter and the trajectory of anger and softness, fell neatly into place. In the course of writing this thesis, many problems emerged that have to be taken into account in reviewing this study as a whole. Many are concerned with the cross-border nature of the field of comparative studies itself, whereas others were related to problems facing the Arab woman writer, and others still with the humanist nature of Showalter's study. Starting with

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[666] The works of the English women writers of the Feminist era are now largely disregarded in a literary scholarship sense except within the field of feminist studies; it is too early to tell whether al-Saʿdāwī's work will stand the test of time.

the latter, we can see how there is a marked problem in the universal (i.e. Western humanist) mode in academic feminism, which unfortunately tends to taint any attempt to articulate a cross-boundary comparative feminist study. Perhaps it is the lack of an independent Arab feminist theoretical framework that makes it imperative to rely on Western feminist definitions even in an ethno-centric context that requires a more specific theoretical treatment, because ultimately the universal can only be known and/or examined through the subjective or the personal. As Showalter says:

> The problem of autonomy that the woman novelist faces is, to name the extremes, whether to sacrifice personal development and freedom as an artist to a collective cultural task, or whether to sacrifice authenticity and self-exploration and accept the dominant culture's definition of what is important to understand and describe.[667]

This is as true of English women writers as it is of Arab ones. And it is the one thing that transcends all cultural and socio-political boundaries, and even unites a universal female tradition through the boundaries of time.

As to the divisions that Showalter suggested in *A Literature of Their Own*, they are not as immutable as they first seem to be. Elaine Showalter says in her synopsis of the tripartite structure of *A Literature of Their Own*:

> these are obviously not rigid categories, distinctly separable in time, to which individual writers can be assigned with perfect assurance. The phases overlap; there are feminist elements in feminine writing, and vice versa. One might also find all three phases in the career of a single novelist.[668]

This may be especially true for Arab women writers because of the fact that they come from different countries, which had different agendas and timetables for the extent of

"liberation" awarded to women at any given point in time. This also affected the rate at which they gained access to a proper education, and how their own sense of a uniquely Female consciousness emerged.

Similarly to English women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, some of the contemporary Arab female writers felt that "their experiences were an unpardonable intrusion...using themselves more as case-histories than as unique examples of personality and achievement."[669] The self-fashioning of eighteenth-century women, according to Nussbaum, was "inevitably bound up in cultural definitions of gender as well as in their subversive thoughts and acts of resistance to those definitions",[670] much like modern women writers in the Arab world. Elaine Showalter suggests that

> Victorian feminine novelists thus found themselves in a double bind. They felt humiliated by the condescension of male critics and spoke intensely of their desires to avoid special treatment and achieve genuine excellence, but they were deeply anxious about the possibility of appearing unwomanly. Part of the conflict came from the fact that, rather than confronting the values of their society, these women novelists were competing for its rewards. For women, as for other subcultures, literature became a symbol of achievement.[671]

This is especially relevant to Laylā al-ᶜUthmān because she was raised in a conservative patriarchal household in which the women's place was most definitely the home. By her own admission[672] her father banned her from going to school when she reached the sixth

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Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.318.
[668] Ibid., p.16
[669] Sanders, *Private Lives*, p.15.
[670] F. Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject: Gender and Ideology in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1989) p.133.
[671] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.21.
[672] Personal interview with al-ᶜUthmān (March 1999).

grade. Raised with two sets of unfriendly step-parents she found an outlet in writing, through which she could express herself and seek acceptance from society (if not from her immediate family) for who she really was. Her belief in the importance of femininity in the traditional, Anglo-American sense of the word, i.e. for a woman to remain physically vulnerable and pleasing to the eye as a way of confirming her identity, is a symptom of that wish to avoid "appear[ing] unwomanly".[673]

Showalter goes on to say that "The novelists publicly proclaimed, and sincerely believed, their anti-feminism. By working in the home, by preaching submission and self-sacrifice, and denouncing female self-assertiveness, they worked to atone for their own will to write."[674] Although this may apply to some Arab women writers, it cannot be said to be true of Laylā al-ʿUthmān, whose outspokenness and audacity recently landed her with a suspended jail sentence in early 2000. On the contrary, she seems to enjoy flaunting her self-assertiveness; she was ostracized by her family for twice marrying outside her country (a move frowned upon by traditional Kuwaiti society and which remains controversial in modern Kuwaiti society), and is openly critical of the "blatant hypocrisy"[675] practised in Kuwait.

Showalter also says: "The training of Victorian girls in repression, concealment, and self-censorship was deeply inhibiting, especially for those who wanted to write."[676] This certainly applies to Laylā al-ʿUthmān; the problem is that it also applies to the Arab writers of the two following stages, and one may go as far as to say that it applies to all

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[673] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.21.
[674] Ibid, p.23.
[675] Personal interview with al-ʿUthmān (March 1999).
[676] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.25.

Arab women. Most Arab women, as nineteenth-century English women, live in a society where they suffer internal conflict because the prevailing social conditions force them to develop the silent public persona of the pleasing, obedient girl, which conflicts with their private anger. Here, Sharabi notes the importance of father-fear: "The father, the prototypical neopatriarchal figure, is the central agent for repression. His power and influence are grounded in punishment".[677] Through their writing, the imprint of this fear of the patriarch emerges: "It [fear] resides in our walls and foundations, in our vaults and our domes, between our keys and our locks...It is in every drawer, no head is free of it and its stamp is on every literary text."[678] Mostaghanami explains that for her the decision to write implied a conscious crossing of the borders imposed by society, and for this it was a perilous journey.[679] There is a kind of censorship that is applicable to women only: being accused of having no *sharaf* ("honour"); a good Muslim woman must be *masturah* (a word meaning "chaste", with connotations of "hidden" and "silent"). Breaking that silence and speaking out has a heavy price. The history of the censorship of women's writing by the social, political and religious institutions in the Arab world is infamous; some women who dare to cross the sexual, textual divide suffer slander, prohibition and imprisonment. While male writers' frequent use of explicit images goes largely unpunished, Arab women face much tougher measures in some Arab countries. In the United Arab Emirates, Ẓabyah Khamīs was jailed for the writing of allegedly transgressive poetry, and the works of Ḥanān al-Shaykh and Nawāl al-Saʿdāwī as well as other writers are banned in some Arab countries.

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[677] Hisham Sharabi, *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society* (Oxford: OUP, 1988) p.41.
[678] Alia Mamdouh, "Creatures of Arab Fear", in Faqir, *House of Silence*, p.69.
[679] Ahlam Mostaghani, "Writing against Time and History", in Faqir, *House of Silence*, p.58.

Repression and fear, however, may have other repercussions, as Showalter goes on to elaborate: "but, the repression in which the feminine novel was situated also forced women to find innovative and covert ways to dramatize the inner life, and led to a fiction that was intense, compact, symbolic, and profound."[680] Certainly in the works of al-ʿUthmān such as *Fathiyah Chooses Her Death* and *Wasmiyyah Emerges from the Sea*, the female protagonists, though meek and overpowered by circumstance, try to find liberation in choosing their demise over life in a repressive patriarchal society. These characters symbolise the purity of the female steeped in Islamic beliefs, and Hafez says of them: "The heroine is the epitome of the silent woman who has internalized the male belief that the silent female is by definition chaste, for verbal intercourse leads inevitably to sexual intercourse,"[681] an idea reinforced by the *ḥadīth*: "*ṣawt al-marʾah awrā*", literally meaning that women's voices are shameful. Whether this "shameful" voice can be extended to include women's writing is unclear, since one of the Prophet Muḥammad's favourite poets was a woman (al-Khansāʾ), though it must be stressed that she devoted most of her poems to eulogising her two dead brothers and to praising the Prophet.

Regarding English women, Showalter states that:

> The feminists challenged many of the restrictions on women's self-expression, denounced the gospel of self-sacrifice, attacked patriarchal religion, and constructed a theoretical model of female oppression, but their anger with society and their need for self-justification often led them away from realism into oversimplification, emotionalism, and fantasy. Making their fiction the vehicle for a dramatization of wronged womanhood, they demanded changes in the social and political systems that

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[680] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.23.
[681] Hafez, "Women's Narrative", p.163.

would grant women male privileges and require chastity and fidelity from men. The profound sense of injustice that the feminine novelists had represented as class struggle in their novels of factory life becomes an all-out war of the sexes in the novels of feminists.[682]

In al-Sa'dāwī's first novel *Memoirs of a Female Doctor*, her writing is spontaneous and occasionally awkward, and, in a manner typical of al-Sa'dāwī, spirited in its militant feminist theme, full of anger and revolution and the fight for justice in the patriarchal world of the male oppressor. This is echoed in what Showalter describes as the world viewpoint of the feminists, who "...saw the world as mystically and totally polarized by sex. For them, female sensibility took on a sacred quality, and its exercise became a holy, exhausting, and ultimately self-destructive rite, since woman's receptivity led inevitably to suicidal vulnerability."[683]

Although there are many similarities between the Victorian feminists and the Arab feminists of the 1960s and the 1970s, there are certain impacts that this hundred-year time-gap had imparted on the latter that created obvious discrepancies between the two. The Arab feminists were aware of the new developments in the Western feminist movement, and were influenced by them. Showalter says of the English feminists that "they glorified and idealized the womanly values of chastity and maternal love, and believed that those values must be forced upon a degenerate male society."[684] Although the modern Arab feminists exalted the same virtues and believed that the male society was indeed degenerate, they didn't necessarily "buy into" the constraints that these virtues imposed upon women. Nawāl al-Sa'dāwī views chastity and maternal love as two more chains that

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[682] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.29.
[683] Ibid., p.30.

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patriarchal society uses to tie women down and further subjugate them, and uses crass and violent sexual imagery in many of her novels (for example *Two Women in One*) which mirrors Showalter's Female authors' insistence "upon the right to use vocabularies previously reserved for male writers and to describe formerly taboo areas of female experience."[685] Yet al-Saʿdāwī's obsession with the poor and with downtrodden, fallen women and prostitutes, and her many essays on the butchery involved in traditions such as female circumcision, mirrors the Feminists' incessant social commentaries.

Elaine Showalter's comment: "in their insistence on exploring and defining womanhood, in their rejection of self-sacrifice, and even in their outspoken hostility to men, the feminist writers represented an important stage, a declaration of independence, in the female tradition"[686] can be applied to all Arab woman writers because "Muslim sexuality is territorial: its regulatory mechanisms consist primarily of a strict allocation of space to each sex".[687] There are many factors which contribute to this duality, including the specificity of the Arab-Islamic culture. The public and the private spaces are neatly divided in many Arab countries (especially now with Islamic revivalism). To expose the inner self publicly is to risk losing the respect of the family, immediate community and society at large. When writers commit their lives to paper they go against a culture which is based on concealment. To cross the defined border and encroach on traditionally male space is to risk being accused of being a loose woman, and of playing to the tune that the West wants to hear. The departed Egyptian short-story writer and critic Yūsuf Idrīs launched an attack on women writers such as Ḥanān al-Shaykh and Alīfa Rifʿat (whose

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[684] Ibid.
[685] Ibid., p.35.
[686] Ibid., p.31.
[687] Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, p.137.

works were translated into English): "Some of the books by Arab women writers were chosen by Western publishing houses only because they show the ugly sexual frustration which Muslim women suffer from...They are sexually explicit."[688] This is an accusation which has been levelled at Nawāl al-Sa'dāwī on more than one occasion of her recent, frequent appearances on an Arab satellite channels talk shows.[689]

"English women (or at least those women who were over thirty, householders, the wives of householders, occupiers of property of 5 pounds or more annual value, or university graduates) were given the franchise in 1918 by a government grateful for the patriotism during world war one."[690] This must have affected the literary outpourings of British women who came around and after this stage. Arab women on the other hand live in twenty countries, which spread from the Gulf to the Atlantic Ocean. Many of them have not won the right to vote, or they live under totalitarian regimes where no voting as such even takes place. The effect of this on their literary outpouring might have been detrimental in that it has forced them to remain stuck in the angry (second-class citizen) feminist mode that their British counterparts have managed to surpass. "In the 1960s the female novel entered a new and dynamic phase, which has been strongly influenced in the past ten years by the energy of the international women's movement."[691] The relevance of relating this to Arab women writers is that it is around this time period that many of the well-known Arab women writers began writing. This may explain why many women writing at this point in time were writing in a style that clearly resembled the first two stages of female consciousness. While British women writers historically and linearly

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[688] Yūsuf Idrīs, "al-Jins al-Islāmī" in *al-Ahrām* newspaper (27 February 1989).
[689] Al-Sa'dāwī has made frequent appearences on MBC, LBC, Future Television, and she has also appeared on Orbit. Interestingly, she has yet to appear on Egyptian Satellite TV.
[690] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.23.

progressed towards this Female phase of consciousness, most Arab women writers were just starting to delve into expressing and exploring themselves through their writing.

Much like the *écriture féminine* that Cixous referred to,[692] the Arab Female discourse works is concerned mainly with the female body – or rather bodies: women in their homes, women going about their business, in the kitchen, with their mates, and at their lowest as prostitutes and prisoners, are the subject of their novels, which may have prompted many Arab readers (and critics) to dismiss fiction by women as simply autobiographical, and focused on the relationship between the sexes.[693] These testimonies show that the need of Arab women for autonomy has become more urgent and is being articulated in different ways, including through such autobiographical narratives. Showalter notes that

> The contemporary women's novel observes the tradition of nineteenth-century realism, but it also operates in the contexts of twentieth-century Freudian and Marxist analysis...we are beginning to see a renaissance in women's writing that responds to the demands of Lewes and Mill for an authentically female literature, providing 'women's view of life, woman's experience'.[694]

Fadia Faqir says that the male Arab critics have praised the writing of Hudā Barakāt as being "genderless".[695] This implies, within an Arab context, a woman writer who has broken away from "female" identity and writing, which is perceived as the inferior narrative of the first person, romantic fiction and infantile style. In *The Stone of Laughter* (1995) Barakāt says of her conscious attempts to subvert the Arabic language: "Perhaps

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[691] Ibid., p.35.
[692] §1.2.1.
[693] Moussa-Mahmoud, "Little Guide".
[694] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.35.
[695] Faqir, *House of Silence*, p.11.

what I mean is that when I write I step outside my gender, outside any gender."[696] Her

novel was praised by both male and female reviewers, one of the latter even commented

that it "does not fall into the trap of 'feminist literature'."[697] This only serves to show how

hostile the Arab world still remains towards any suggestion of overt feminism in any

literary capacity. Women writers are encouraged to let go off their femaleness and, like

Barakāt, "step outside" of their gender.

Finally, the main problem with applying Elaine Showalter's model in *A Literature of Their*

Own may be owing to the bigger, more general problem of applying Anglo-American

criticism to Third-World literature, in that the former is "supported and operated by an

information-retrieval approach to 'third world' literature which often employs a

deliberately 'non theoretical' methodology with self-conscious rectitude."[698] Most Arabic

literature in the twentieth century has been influenced by politics. The course of the

twentieth century is punctuated by uprisings against British occupation in Iraq, Egypt and

Palestine, and by French occupation in Syria and Lebanon. In the second half of the

century the three Maghreb states, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, waged a war of

independence against the French. The tragedy of Palestine, the plight of the Palestinian

people and the repeated defeats of the Arabs, both military and political, with the dual

tones of disillusionment and alienation, is a recurring theme in many of the literary

offerings. After the defeat in the 1967 war with Israel, the pan-Arabists and socialist

sentiments began regressing, to be replaced gradually by Islamic revivalism. The work of

younger women writers is marked by a new feminist discourse. They have come to realise

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[696] Huda Barakat, *The Stone of Laughter* (Reading: Garnet Publishing, 1995) p.14.
[697] Faqir, *House of Silence*, p.21.
[698] Spivak, "Three Women's Texts", pp.175-6.

that the male revolutionary discourse, which tied women's liberation to national liberation and the growth of democracy, has failed to produce any concrete results. Lina Badr said on Women's Day 1990 that after twenty years of active participation in the Palestinian resistance, women's subordinate status has hardly changed, and that in the Arab world, gender still represents a social class.

"In their use of material from life, they were in bondage to the feminine codes of love and loyalty...Contemporary women novelists are also feminine in their preoccupation with the conflict between personal relationships and artistic integrity."[699] Elaine Showalter demonstrates how even the late Female writers still displayed aspects of the Feminine, the Feminist, and even the early Female. Thus, although there was a linear progression from one phase to the next, there were still certain attitudes and tendencies that would surface in a later stage that belonged to an earlier one, for example Feminine or Feminist tendencies in a Female writer. This becomes of greater relevance when dealing with the Arab women writers covered in this study since many of them display characteristics of the preceding or precluding phase simultaneously.[700] In this way, these divisions have a greater ideological value than they do in real terms. There is also the fact that the latest of the English novels discussed here is almost a century old. Although the developments that have occurred since have been discussed,[701] there has been no room for an in-depth analysis of the many important changes that have taken place. As Showalter notes,

> Women artists of the 1990s have found a genuine freedom to explore anger and
> adventure. Those in midcareer exult in the medical and technological advances that have
> prolonged youth and health, and added, as Margaret Drabble comments, 'ten years to

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[699] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.302.
[700] This is discussed in more depth in the conclusion to each chapter.

every plot'. Women novelists have joined the mainstream as postmodern innovators,

politically engaged observers, and limitless storytellers.[702]

This is equally true of contemporary Arab women writers, especially those that were

selected for the purposes of this comparative study. The Arab women writers chosen for

exploration in this thesis display what Elaine Showalter calls the "extreme stereotypes of

women's writing-chaste withdrawal into the psyche or militant and erotic feminist

polemic."[703] This is essentially a Female categorisation, and so we are faced with all the

Arab women writers being at a slightly more evolved stage of feminist consciousness than

the English women writers chosen: a by-product of the historical time difference between

them. It does not mean that the Arab woman writer at any given stage is a better author, or

more developed stylistically than her English counterpart; in fact, most critics would be

(unfairly) tempted to deem the opposite true. All of the novels by Arab women writers

discussed in this thesis were written prior to the Gulf War of 1990. In the past fifteen years,

from the mid-1980s onwards, there have been huge changes across the board in many

social, political and cultural aspects of the Arab world that have had a profound effect on

the literature of the period, especially that of women, whether written by or about women.

There is a curious pull in diametrically opposite directions being witnessed in modern

Arab society. Because of the homogenisation of world cultures in the throes of the current

wave of globalisation that the world is witnessing, and with the life-changing impact of the

internet, and its unfettered access to an uncensored[704] exchange of information, and the

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[701] See §4.1 ("Female" chapter).

[702] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.323.

[703] Ibid., p.331.

[704] Although there are nowhere near as many Arabic sites as there are English, there are many controversial, political and even erotic ones. The fact that many sites can be maintained, and mass emails can be sent anonymously makes it the perfect medium for subversive activity, especially in the Arab world.

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influx of satellite TV channels,[705] the average Arab citizen is being exposed to all sorts of audio-visual stimulation that would have been undreamt of even a decade ago. At the same time, there is a marked leaning towards more conservative behaviour; the disappearance of physical contact in Arab movies and TV series, and the increased influence of Islamic leanings across the board of Arab societies are just two symptoms of that. Nevertheless, there is a bolder attitude being shown towards tackling tricky or taboo social subjects in the literary and audio-visual arts. *Imra'a mā* by Hālah al-Badrī is a novel that discusses the validity of marriage as an institution in the Arab world, and *Asrār al-banāt*, a movie by director Majdī Ahmad ᶜAlī, discusses the dysfunctions of teenagers growing up in a schizophrenic society where ultra-conservative behaviour rubs shoulders with exaggeratedly "liberal" attitudes and the problems that face young women especially because of this. (In the latter, there is even a scene where an "Islamic" doctor performs an unrequested clitoridectomy on the teenage Yāsamīn while delivering her illegitimate love-child).

Evelyne Accad suggests another path by which to view the progression of the emergence of feminist consciousness in the works of Arab female authors. She suggests that it begins with a "preoccupation with bicultural anxiety",[706] where Arab women writers are faced with uncomfortable questions of modernity and retaining authenticity. This is further compounded by all things feminist in the Arab world being viewed with suspicion as a Western import. There is a sense that Arab women writers still strive for acceptance outside their society, that they will only feel validated if their work is noticed and gains

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[705] The Arabic satellite channels are mostly government-owned and so promote "information" or news that is basically part of the national agenda of a specific country or ruling faction.
[706] Accad, "Rebellion, Maturity and the Social Context", p.224.

acclaim in the West. Al-Shaykh and al-Saʿdāwī are particularly susceptible to such accusations; as al-Saʿdāwī, the "angry" darling of the Western media, herself states, "There is no serious critical (literary) movement in the Arab world now, I benefit more from what is written about me in the West."[707] Such condescending sentiments, with their blatant disrespect for the very critical body that she accuses of disregarding her work, are unfortunately typical of writers such as al-Saʿdāwī, and other male and female writers who have achieved any measure of success in the West. By favouring the obviously biased Western perception of herself, al-Saʿdāwī perpetuates the ironic double standard, this belief that a prophet is better understood outside his people, that is holding back literary development in the Arab world, perhaps more than any gender-based literary bias. This question has also been inevitably bound up in the very problems that face women writers around the world in what their contribution should consist of, what is expected of them as women in both the cultural and moral sense, and how they should further the cause of their sisters in their work. As Showalter remarks,

> The task of radical women's literature should be to replace the secondary and artificial images women receive from a male chauvinist society with authentic and primary identities. Such a literature would be directed toward other women and would opt to describe revolutionary life-styles. It would challenge the sexist bases of language and culture.[708]

Has the English woman writer achieved this? According to the 1970s' Showalter, "no"; or at least not to the extent of her American counterpart. Writing in the 1970s, Elaine Showalter said:

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[707] Interview by Sayyid Maḥmūd, *Zawāyā Magazine* (Trial Issue, Cairo, October 2001) p.6 (my translation).
[708] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.315.

The Women's Liberation Movement has not yet had the impact on English women

writers that it has had in the United States and in France. Strongly socialist, the English

movement has rejected the idea of hierarchy, and therefore there have been no

charismatic feminist leaders, as there were for the suffragettes. The media in England

have been slower to publicize the movement; one or two natural spokeswomen such as

Germaine Greer have been sensationalized and discredited; radical feminists have

tended to scorn newspapers and television, which, despite distortion and exploitation,

have carried the messages of the new feminism with remarkable speed to small towns in

America.[709]

As for the Arab world, Accad questions the degree of involvement of Arab women writers

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the plight of women in the area. Many of them are insulated from the worst conditions

in their countries by wealth, education, and social position. For the women novelists, the

usual resolution is to allow female characters to escape through expatriation or some

limited form of bi-cultural self-expression.[710]

Is this not true of women writers in England, especially Feminist and Female ones? Both

Woolf and al-Saᶜdāwī claimed to be socialist, and came up with highly impractical, and

sometimes dangerously radical solutions, for women's liberalisation, while separated from

the everyday obstacles that less fortunate women faced. Safe in their elitist ivory towers,

they were both looking at the problem of women in their societies through intellectual

binoculars. Showalter states that "Woolf's fundamental contribution to feminism is her

argument that gender identity is socially constructed and can be challenged and changed,

and that gender inequality begins very early in the patriarchal family which in turn leads

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[709] Ibid., p.313.
[710] Accad, "Rebellion, Maturity, and the Social Context", p.242.

to, and underpins, fascism".[711] It is problematic at times to establish a woman writer's

feminist credentials using only her fiction when her other writings spell a clearer picture.

This poses the question: Is the fact that women writers' fiction is not as feminist as their

political writings a reflection on the metaphorical and evasive nature of fictional writing

itself, or is it a self-survival strategy, where women writers save their open attacks on

patriarchal society for other creative writing mediums to ensure maximum

readability/publishing acceptance? Showalter suggests that "In the 1930s Woolf tried to

deal with the problem by splitting her writing into 'male' journalism and 'female'

fiction."[712] Some Arab women writers used this dichotomous measure to solve the very

problem that faced Virginia Woolf; for example, both Laylā al-ʿUthmān and Ḥanān al-

Shaykh have written many articles as journalists that express a much more openly socially

subversive view than their fiction does, and Nawāl al-Saʿdāwī has written volumes of non-

fictional work on the plight of women in the Arab world. There are marked discrepancies

between the political and fictional writings of all artists discussed. This created a further

limitation in determining the "feminist" political aspects of these women writers, in that

this study did not cover their non-fictional works in great detail, which for both the English

and the Arab writers were profuse and contained much more delineated opinions, and at

times considerably more radical views. Moi comments that "A Kristevan approach to

Woolf, as I have argued, would refuse to accept this binary opposition of aesthetics on the

one hand and politics on the other, locating the politics of Woolf's writing precisely in her

textual practice. That practice is of course much more marked in the novels than in most of

the essays."[713] Also, many of these writers, both English and Arab, wrote many short

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[711] Humm, *Feminisms*, p.21.
[712] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.291.
[713] Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, p.7.

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stories, poetry and drama that could not be explored here due to the focus being solely on the novel form.

Some patterns, stories and symbols appear in the trans-border (whether cultural, geographical or temporal) language of women's writing. All six of the women writers discussed here depended on a strongly autobiographical element as the main skeletal background to their works, and, with the exception of the Female stage, it was obvious that the main female character in the novel was always the author herself, or, at the very least, spouting what the author herself would have said or done in such a situation and not behaving as an independent character. The syphilitic baby is an image used both in Ḥanān al-Shaykh's *Women of Sand and Myrrh* and earlier in Grand's *The Heavenly Twins*. However, whereas in the latter it was emblematic of the corruption of the male sex and the conspiracy of silence surrounding them and how its consequences are fatal for women, in the former its implications are much wider. The syphilitic baby in *Women of Sand and Myrrh* serves as a socio-political commentary on the corruptive influence of the West on the traditional, hospitable cultures such as the Arab one. This is not strange considering the tendency of Arab writers as a whole to include a certain reference to the colonising influence of the West, now no longer a physical reality[714] but a cultural and an intellectual one. The genre of feminine confession, with the close intimacy that arises as a result between the fictional narrator and the reader, was a technique employed by many of the women writers discussed here, from Brontë's "Reader, I married him"[715] to Nawāl al-Saʿdāwī's *Woman at Point Zero*. The self-reflexive questioning inherent in *l'écriture*

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[714] One must, however, keep in mind the presence of American military bases peppering the Gulf states, and how the promise of its foreign aids programs affects the political decisions of many other Arab countries.
[715] See §2.2.13.

féminine is a linking point between all these women writers, along with the use of psychological tools such as disjunction, the depersonalisation employed when describing painful episodes, and the use of subjective structures (such as autobiography) to try to portray an objective truth.

Humm notes that "Although in *Three Guineas*, Woolf disclaims the label 'feminist', it is only the past history of the term from which Woolf shied."[716] The "past history" refers to the militant suffragist activities, and the excessive male-bashing antics of these so-called "feminists". The word became a pejorative label in the 1930s as feminism was deemed unfashionable and unpatriotic, and this is perhaps the association that the term carries for Arab woman writers, and the reason they shy away from the term too. In addition to this is the negative pro-West connotations that are carried into anything that does not fit the outwardly submissive female that mainstream Arab-Islamism requires. This is an especially acute problem for writers in the Female stage.[717] There was also a fear of social retribution that men did not have to worry about when it came to women discussing their thoughts and feelings in a frank manner. "Men, her reason told her, would be shocked. The consciousness of what men will say of a woman who speaks the truth about her passions had roused her from her artist's state of unconsciousness. She could write no more."[718] In this excerpt from *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf projects her own discomforts onto the anonymous figure of the woman artist, and uses the latter to excuse her own self-censorship, of which she was aware.[719] This is a common factor between all women writers, including the Arab ones.

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[716] Humm, *Feminisms*, p.21.
[717] Discussed in §1.2.3.4.
[718] Showalter quotes Woolf in *A Literature of Their Own*, p.292.
[719] Discussed in §4.2.8.

Showalter tells us that

> Contemporary British women's novels are set all over the world, and reflect the
> international stylistic influences that come with a global culture and the new
> Europe...British women writers come from hybrid and multiracial backgrounds –
> African, Caribbean, Indian, and Asian. Finally women's fiction is no longer restricted to
> the social and domestic.[720]

The same is true of modern Arab novels. In fact with the high incidences of political exile

for Arab intellectuals, it is more likely than not to be set or written outside the native

country or outside the Arab world, or even for it to be written in a foreign tongue, most

commonly English (for example, Ahdaf Soueif) or French (Fatima Mernissi).

Furthermore, Arab writers have access to a multiplicity of countries, political regimes and

social agendas that they can claim as their own (to a certain extent) and feel confident

enough to internalise, comment upon and explore in the twenty Arab countries, of which

only one would be their native home. Even when bearing in mind the Commonwealth

countries, it is hard to come up with a similar multiplicity of cultural experience for any

British novelists, especially those writing prior to the postmodernist era.

There are problems beside the socio-historical aspects of the two, such as the marked

difference in the volume of writing: the English writers wrote much bigger books (triple-

volume novels at times), whereas the majority of the Arab women writers wrote much

shorter novels, except in Ḥanān al-Shaykh's case. All three Arab writers are living and

writing in the post-modern era, whereas none of the English ones were, and there were

discrepancies based on this.

Moreover, there were essential differences in cultural association and categorisation, for example, that of the Arab man. In *A Literature of Their Own*, Elaine Showalter makes the following point:

> Women have generally been regarded as 'sociological chameleons', taking on the class, lifestyle, and culture of their male relatives. It can, however, be argued that women themselves have constituted a subculture within the framework of a larger society, and have been unified by values, conventions, experiences and behaviors impinging on each individual. It is important to see the female literary tradition in these broad terms, in relation to the wider evolution of women's self awareness and to the ways in which any minority group finds its direction of self-expression relative to a dominant society, because we cannot show a pattern of deliberate progress and accumulation.[721]

If we take Showalter's suggestion as fact, and accept that in general women define themselves as opposite to man, then, before we can examine what makes the situation of Arab feminists unique, we must first of all examine the Arab man, and the roles prescribed for the two in typical Arab communities. Lyana Badr writes, "when I was in the first years of flowering, my mother warned me against standing for too long in front of the mirror. She elaborated her point by explaining that desire is a dangerous thing for a girl in our society."[722] The role prescribed for the Arab boy is different from that prescribed for the Arab girl, and the application of social standards and restrictions is made selectively and depends on whether the person in question is male or female, poor or rich, middle, lower-middle or working class; in short, it is inversely proportional to the degree of disadvantage. The male is generally encouraged to have double standards and satisfy, albeit in secret, his

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[720] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.322.
[721] Ibid., p.11.

sexual needs; the girl, however, has no future without her "virginity", which is a prerequisite for marriage, and without which she has no recognition or legitimacy within her community. Thus, penalising female sexual activity is the main method of preserving social and religious order within most Arab societies.

Showalter furthermore makes the point about the tradition that lies behind women writers:

> In trying to deal with this recognition of an ongoing struggle for personal and artistic autonomy, contemporary women writers have reasserted their continuity with the women of the past, through essays and criticism as well as through fiction. They use all the resources of the modern novel, including exploded chronology, dreams, myth, and stream of consciousness, but they have been profoundly influenced by nineteenth-century feminine literature, sometimes to the point of rewriting it. *The Game* builds on the Brontës' childhood narratives of Angria and Gondal; Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) retells the story of Bertha Mason; an anonymous Lady has even finished Jane Austen's *Sanditon*.[723]

This is an interesting point, but how can it be applied to Arab women writers who have a much shorter "literature of their own" to build upon? Since the history of the Arabic novel is relatively young, do they resort to male models? And if so, are they not eclipsing English women writers by being able to transcend sexual boundaries and achieve a true bisexual literary synthesis?

According to Showalter, "British women writers have both forged female mythologies and transcended them. Moreover, the boundaries between women's popular commercial

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[722] Lina Badr, "The Story of a Novel or Reflections of Details in the Mirror: Between Awareness and Madness", in Faqir, *House of Silence*, p. 27.
[723] Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.302.

fiction and high culture are less rigidly drawn."[724] This "female market", with the emergence of a voracious female readership, has greatly affected the landscape of modern British literature and the avenues available to English women writers. Contrast this with the still limited readership (whether male or female) in the Arab world, and the drawbacks of a high illiteracy rate, along with the relatively high censorship measures, and a clearer picture emerges of the pressures facing Arab writers, more acutely the women ones, to ensure that their writing survives censorship measures, and is still thrilling enough to boost what must be somewhat low sales figures. Also, there are no women's presses, such as Virago, in the Arab world, so women writers to some extent are under the control of the male publisher, which is very Feminine.

Many of the Arab women writers discussed here have had to face social and political persecution of the kind that none of the British writers discussed here were ever close to being exposed to. Both al-ᶜUthmān and al-Saᶜdāwī faced serious trials pertaining to their being declared *kāfirs* (apostates) because they had offended the Holiness of God. The latter was thrown into jail and had her governmental position revoked and her offices shut down. Both were, and still remain, denied official recognition by their countries, even when in al-ᶜUthmān's case she had already been publicly declared the recipient of an outstanding contribution award in 1999 in Kuwait. Her latest book, *al-ᶜusᶜus* ("The Coccyx") is still awaiting permission from the Kuwaiti Ministry of Media's censorship board.

As this thesis draws to a close there are certain things that have made themselves apparent. Firstly, the pressing need for a new system through which to evaluate the contribution of

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[724] Ibid., p.323.

women writers. The mandate of "we are different and so we are oppressed, we are not so different and so we demand rights, we gain rights and so we are ready to accept that we are different", like the conflicts in the Middle East, is becoming somewhat jaded and will not be effective in harnessing the fruition of the labours of both the writers and the academics involved. If accepting differences is the ultimate goal of the feminist endeavour, or indeed the mark of a mature Female writer, then perhaps the Feminine writers were better at it, even though they lacked the sufficient "awareness" to appreciate those differences. If the celebration of a writer's Femaleness is truly her ability to accept and express a unique womanly voice that is complementary to, and not in competition with, that of man, then was the struggle merely a Sophoclean exercise? Secondly, women around the world are products of their own societies and not their gender. In spite of the fact that they all menstruate, all are made to feel inadequate because of the sexual burden of breasts and wombs, and on that basis they are discriminated against. The women writers discussed here lived in societies in which there existed a dissymmetry in the power relations between the sexes, due to factors of literacy, religion and economic dependence, as well as social norms, and the acculturation of the female body. Although their brothers are treated better and so on, ultimately, all these women writers see themselves as emblematic of their nations first and of women second. All the heroines in the novels discussed here, from Jane Eyre to Clarissa Dalloway, exhibit signs of determined Englishness. Even the Arab writers, though more bitter in their assertions, are adamantly Arab, and then Lebanese, Egyptian, Kuwaiti; Ḥanān al-Shaykh herself stated as much in an interview with Evelyn Accad in 1983.[725] These fictional heroines are presented to the reader as women but not in a universal context. Although some aspects of their political plight, and many of the

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[725] Accad, "Rebellion, Maturity, and the Social Context", p.241.

emotions they have, are universal, they are presented rather as loco-specific entities. They are either British women or Arab women first and foremost, with the sense of identity being impressed upon by the former first and the latter only as a far second.

Comparative literature is the perfect medium for bridging this gap however, since it should ideally span both national circumstances that are unique to the experience of a specific writer in her area and those inter-textual relations and relations unique to the female experience that transcend both national and temporal borders. When we look at women writers collectively we can see an imaginative continuum, the recurrence of certain patterns, themes, problems, and images from generation to generation. By bringing them together slowly, a picture emerges piece by piece of the arrival of a new Female consciousness that is universal to the human condition; a Female condition best explored and recorded through stories of women by women precariously hanging in the balance, under threat of the omnipotent patriarch (be he family head, or governmental institution), not unlike the tales of that mother of all story-tellers, Shahrazād.

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