

Mothers and Daughters in Arab  
Women's Literature

# Women and Gender

The Middle East and the Islamic World

*Editors*

Margot Badran  
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VOLUME 10

# Mothers and Daughters in Arab Women's Literature

The Family Frontier

By  
Dalya Abudi



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For my mother, Habbu Shami Abudi, who traveled  
light-years from the traditions of her upbringing in Baghdad  
to the values and mentality of modern life.

For my daughter, Shani, and my granddaughter, Anna,  
“I gaze at you tomorrow takes you where I could never go...”

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The impetus for this study came from personal experience. As both a daughter and the mother of a daughter, I found myself over the years slowly switching positions, from being on the offensive vis-à-vis my own mother to being on the defensive vis-à-vis my daughter. Why does my daughter have a hard time accepting me for who I am? Why did I, for the greater part of my life, have a hard time accepting my mother for who she was? These questions bewildered me, begging for answers. Thus I decided to set off on a journey to unravel the mysteries of the mother-daughter relationship. It was an adventurous journey that took me to distant lands, both literally and figuratively. I traveled to Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, and Jerusalem. I also traveled inwardly, looking deep within, into my hidden, private self. This is the untold story behind the many women's stories gathered in this work. It is my own individual story, and yet, in many ways, it is Everywoman's story.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION: WHY MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS?

Probably there is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has labored to give birth to the other. The materials are here for the deepest mutuality and the most painful estrangement.

Adrienne Rich<sup>1</sup>

#### *The Cathexis between Mother and Daughter*

One of the most popular Palestinian folk tales, “The Blue Charm and the Return of Jubayna,” tells of a childless village woman who, while she was making cheese, used to pray to God to give her a daughter as fair-skinned and round-faced as the cheese in her hands. God answered her prayers. She gave birth to a beautiful girl whom she called Jubayna. The mother loved her daughter dearly and raised her with the utmost care and devotion. To protect her from the evil eye, she hung a beaded blue charm around Jubayna’s wrist. Despite this precaution, Jubayna was kidnaped by gypsies and carried away to distant lands. The broken-hearted mother wept for her lost daughter until she went blind. As for Jubayna, after many wanderings she ended up tending geese in the pastures of a prince in a remote country. One day the prince happened to hear her singing while she was tending the geese and fell passionately in love with her. He took her from the pasture to the palace and made her his wife and princess. After a year she bore him a son. When the child was one year old, Jubayna confided in her husband how much she missed her mother and longed to see her. The husband gave her permission to visit her mother and, loaded with gifts, she set out on her journey back home. When she arrived at her village spring,

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<sup>1</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986), pp. 225–26.

her son became thirsty, so she asked a village woman to fetch her some water. The woman replied that the spring had dried since the day Jubayna had disappeared. Jubayna told her that the spring was running with water again. When the woman looked, she saw that water was gushing forth from the earth, and she understood at once that Jubayna had returned. A boy rushed to tell Jubayna's mother the good news, but the grief-stricken mother did not believe him. So Jubayna gave him the blue charm that encircled her wrist and sent him back to her mother. He put it in her mother's hands, and she smelled it and rubbed her eyes against it, whereupon they welled up with tears and sight returned to them. Then the mother and her daughter were joyfully reunited, and they all lived happily ever after.<sup>2</sup>

This Palestinian folk tale, which has many parallels in other cultural traditions, illustrates the centrality and intensity of the mother-daughter bond. Like the Greek myth of Persephone and Demeter, it lends itself to various interpretations: as a narrative of abduction, forced separation of mother and daughter, and ultimate reunion; as a metaphor for a girl's loss of virginity and transition into womanhood within patriarchy; as an allegory of a daughter's reconciliation with her lost self; and as a cyclical story of birth, death, and renewal on both the personal and the national level.

"The cathexis between mother and daughter—essential, distorted, misused—is the great unwritten story," wrote the poet Adrienne Rich in her seminal book, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, in 1976.<sup>3</sup> Rich's book was a watershed. In the quarter century since she wrote those words, an outpouring of publications on this topic has broken the silence. In the West, the mother-daughter relationship has become the subject of numerous studies, both academic and journalistic; it has emerged as a salient issue in feminist inquiry; and it has enjoyed much attention in popular culture.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This folktale appears in several versions. See Emile Habibi, "The Blue Charm and the Return of Jubayna," trans. Mohammad Shaheen, in *Journal of Arabic Literature*, xv (1984): 114–20; "Jubeinah and the Slave," in Inea Bushnaq, ed. and trans., *Arab Folktales* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), pp. 206–8; and "Jubaybani," in Salma Khadra Jayyusi, ed., and C. Tingley, trans., *Abu Jmeel's Daughter and Other Stories: Arab Folktales from Palestine and Lebanon* (New York: Interlink Books, 2002), pp. 63–76.

<sup>3</sup> Rich, *Of Woman Born*, p. 225.

<sup>4</sup> Andrea O'Reilly and Sharon Abbey, eds., *Mothers and Daughters: Connection, Empowerment, and Transformation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), p. 1.

But in the Arab world, the topic has remained shrouded in mystery and silence. The reason for this situation is the concept of privacy and sanctity of family life.<sup>5</sup> As the Moroccan writer Leila Abouzeid explains: “A Muslim’s private life is considered an *‘awra* (an intimate part of the body), and *sitr* (concealing it) is imperative. As the Qur’an says: *Allah amara bissitr* (God ordered the concealing of that which is shameful and embarrassing).”<sup>6</sup> Needless to say, the intense privacy surrounding personal, sexual, and family matters has been an impediment to research.

The anthropologist Suad Joseph attributes the paucity of information on intimate Arab familial relationships to the hypervalorization of the family: “In both scholarly research and popular culture the centrality of the family in the Arab world has been so axiomatic that there has been relatively little problematizing of the psychodynamics of family life.”<sup>7</sup> Those who violate the sacrosanct space of the family run the risk of being accused of disloyalty and betrayal. Joseph notes that, in view of this obstacle, the most profound insights into the forbidden grounds of Arab family life often come from autobiographical or semi-fictional accounts.<sup>8</sup>

This study examines how the mother-daughter relationship in Arab families is represented in Arab women’s literature of the last half century. I use both early and contemporary writings of female authors from across the Arab world to illuminate the traditional and evolving nature of mother-daughter relationships in Arab families and how these family dynamics reflect and influence modern Arab life. In exploring this topic, I offer a new perspective on Arab women writers—their position in society, their major interests and concerns, and their

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<sup>5</sup> Valentine M. Moghadam, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*, 2nd ed. (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2003), p. 124.

<sup>6</sup> Leila Abouzeid, *Return to Childhood: The Memoir of a Modern Moroccan Woman*, trans. by the author, with Heather Logan Taylor (Austin: Center for Middle Eastern Studies, University of Texas, 1998), p. iii.

<sup>7</sup> Suad Joseph, ed., *Intimate Selving in Arab Families: Gender, Self, and Identity* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999), p. 9. It should be noted that since the first part of the 20th century, feminists from different Arab countries have opposed the legal and behavioral family, criticized traditional family views and practices, and demanded reforms in family law. This activism shows that alongside hypervalorization of the family, there has also been critique and resistance, with varying degrees of success. See, for example, Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 124–41.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 9–10.

preferred forms of creative writing—while filling a void in the existing scholarship about intimate relationships between women in Arab families. To fully understand the ties that bind mothers and daughters, I analyze their relationship from various perspectives: psychological, feminist, cultural, religious, and political. I illustrate the myriad patterns of this primary bond and gauge its far-reaching implications not only for mothers and daughters but also for the family and the wider society. In the course of this study, many myths and stereotypes about Arab mothers and daughters are shattered, and new conceptions and definitions of the relationship between them are demonstrated.

Why mothers and daughters? There are several compelling reasons for focusing on this subject. First, the lifelong bond that is forged at birth between mothers and daughters is of importance to all women, whatever their ethnicity or background. This relationship is a central connection between women; it is also a central aspect of family life. An exploration of mothers and daughters sheds light on a key family relationship which is vital for the shaping of self, gender personality, and gender roles, and which has profound effects on women's individual development and choices. The subject, however, is of equal importance to men, especially fathers and sons, because they are major figures in the drama between mothers and daughters and the quality of their lives is affected by the mothers and daughters in their families.

Second, mothers (and in due course their daughters) play a pivotal role in bringing up children and socializing them as functioning members of society. Psychoanalytic theory recognizes that interaction with the mother, who is the child's primary caretaker during infancy and early childhood, has determining effects on the development of the child's personality. Patterns of mothering and child-rearing not only influence later adult behavior but are also decisive in producing the kind of "self" or "personality" that may be regarded as typical of a given society. Steph Lawler, in her insightful study, *Mothering the Self: Mothers, Daughters, Subjects*, focuses on the question of what it means to be a mother and/or a daughter. She observes that "issues of self and subjectivity are intrinsically bound up with these meanings, as mothers have become increasingly responsible for nurturing a specific type of self within the daughter (and the son)—in short, for mothering the self."<sup>9</sup> This observation is particularly applicable to

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<sup>9</sup> Steph Lawler, *Mothering the Self: Mothers, Daughters, Subjects* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 1; see also pp. 2, 56–57.

Arab families. As several Middle Eastern scholars have noted, in the Arab world, arguably to a greater extent than in the West, the child's mind and personality are shaped by the mother because during the first seven to nine years of its life, the child is entrusted entirely to the mother (or a female mother-substitute such as an older daughter or a grandmother).<sup>10</sup> The Tunisian social scientist Abdelwahab Bouhdiba emphasizes the overwhelming influence of the mother in traditional Arab Muslim society: "The first affective relations of the child, the first steps of life, the first forms of socialization, the apprenticeship of language, and the ways of living and behaving are left to the mother; it is for the mother alone to initiate the child into these experiences. The first bonds between the child and the mother are thus relations of exclusivity and monopoly."<sup>11</sup> The exclusive relationship which Arab mothers have with their children during the formative years of their lives calls for a thorough analysis.

Third, the mother-daughter relationship is the most intimate, intense, and lasting female relationship. It is a bond that forms part of nearly every woman's life. All women are daughters; most women also become mothers. Notwithstanding the centrality of the mother-daughter relationship to women's identity, in most contemporary societies women are defined in terms of their relationships to the men, rather than the women, in their families. This is particularly true for Arab societies. "If we are asked about the identity of a certain woman," remarks the literary critic Khalida Sa'id, "we would reply that this is the wife, the daughter, or the sister of so and so.... What is the woman? She is the female of the man, the mother, the wife. In short, she is defined in relation to the man, for she has no independent existence. She is being defined in terms of the other and not as an autonomous person."<sup>12</sup> That male scholarship has ignored and obscured relationships between women is by now axiomatic among feminist critics.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Hisham Sharabi, in collaboration with Mukhtar Ani, "Impact of Class and Culture on Social Behavior: The Feudal-Bourgeois Family in Arab Society," in L. Carl Brown and Norman Itzkowitz, eds., *Psychological Dimensions of Near Eastern Studies* (Princeton, N.J.: Darwin, 1977), pp. 242, 245-46; Gary S. Gregg, *The Middle East: A Cultural Psychology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 182-83, 225.

<sup>11</sup> Abdelwahab Bouhdiba, "The Child and the Mother in Arab-Muslim Society," in Brown and Itzkowitz, *Psychological Dimensions of Near Eastern Studies*, p. 128.

<sup>12</sup> Khalida Sa'id, "Al-Mar'a al-'arabiyya: ka'in bi-ghayrihi am bi-dhatihi?" in idem, *Al-Mar'a, al-taharrur, al-ibda'* (Casablanca: Nashr al-fanak, 1991), p. 70.

<sup>13</sup> Suzanna Danuta Walters, *Lives Together, Worlds Apart: Mothers and Daughters in Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 7, 235.

Writing about mothers and daughters serves the dual purpose of amending the lacuna in male-defined history and at the same time contributing to consciousness raising in society about how women's lives are shaped and influenced by their interaction with other women, especially other women in the family.

My fascination with this topic derives from additional considerations. The traditional Arab family is often referred to as "Arab society in miniature" for the reason that the same structure, values, and sets of relationships prevail both within the family and within the wider society.<sup>14</sup> Given this analogy, a study of the mother-daughter relationship illuminates how the family and Arab society act on and react to each other. Such a study opens a window into the most intimate aspects of Arab culture and society. In particular, it reveals the inner workings of the patriarchal system—its ideology, institutions, moral code, gendered and aged domination, sexual division of labor, and mechanisms of reproduction. As mothers pass the baton of family life to daughters, understanding the dynamics between them enables one to assess the potential that this powerful bond holds for changing the patriarchal family and thus the fabric of Arab society. The overarching aim of the study, then, is to show that the family embodies the ultimate frontier in the Arab world. As both an object of reform and an instrument of change, the family, especially its female members—mothers and daughters—can play a major role in the march toward progress in Arab societies.

Furthermore, through the lens of the mother-daughter relationship it is possible to examine larger issues concerning Arab women, such as their role in social reproduction and in the preservation of the status quo. Broad changes currently underway in different parts of the Arab world—particularly those changes brought about by the process of modernization and its opposing wave of Islamism—are profoundly affecting the status and lifestyle of Arab women and the ties between mothers and daughters. The changing patterns of interaction between Arab mothers and daughters serve as an indicator of the changing rhythm of life in Arab societies wrought by socioeconomic transformations, the ongoing confrontations with new, opposing value systems,

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Halim Barakat, *The Arab World: Society, Culture, and State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 118; Sharabi, "Impact of Class and Culture on Social Behavior," pp. 244–45.

and the struggle for freedom and independence. Most intriguingly, in exploring the mother-daughter relationship I offer a rare glimpse into the separate world of women.<sup>15</sup> I address the complexity of female bonding, the issue of solidarity and sisterhood, and the challenge of women's liberation in a volatile region of vital significance in world affairs.

### *Conceptual Considerations and Underlying Assumptions*

Like any interpersonal relationship, the mother-daughter dyad must be considered in the specific context—family, culture, society—in which it is embedded. In this regard, the patriarchal social order, the Islamic belief system, Arab values, customs, and traditions, as well as psychodynamic forces within the family all play a role in shaping the mother-daughter relationship. Additional factors such as setting (bedouin, rural, or urban), class, occupation, age, generation, and education, further affect the interaction between mothers and daughters. As a result, the mother-daughter relationship manifests many patterns, often quite contradictory, which reflect the intense yet complex nature of this bond. A perennial theme in Arab women's literature, the mother-daughter relationship is largely depicted as oscillating between a variety of opposite poles: love and hate, blame and guilt, tenderness and anger, intimacy and estrangement, solidarity and animosity, harmony and conflict, bonding and separation, devotion and betrayal, oppression and empowerment, sacrifice and exploitation—to mention just a few examples. These dichotomous representations reveal that the mother-daughter relationship is problematic and far from the idealized image portrayed in the folktale of "The Blue Charm and the Return of Jubayna." By exploring intimate portraits of mothers and daughters in Arab women's literature, I hope to demystify the ties between them, illuminate the dual, both positive and negative, potential of this bond, and dispel the taboos, myths, and stereotypes that surround it.

Several conceptual considerations guide this study. First, it is important to stress the dynamic nature of this relationship, which evolves

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<sup>15</sup> By this I mean a fresh and original vantage point that has not yet been explored before. Naturally, I am building on the work of many other scholars in the social sciences and those who have examined women's roles and relationships in Arab women's fiction.

over the entire life cycle of women, from childhood through adulthood to old age. Throughout these developmental stages, the mother-daughter relationship is gradually renegotiated and redefined as both mother and daughter adjust to changes in their needs and abilities. Second, it is necessary to rectify the imbalance in emphasis on the mother as the active member in this dyad and the daughter as the passive one. Both mother and daughter play vital roles in the relationship, alternately being active and passive, depending on the stages and circumstances of their lives. Although it is usually the mother who serves as a role model for the daughter, it is not uncommon for the daughter, once she has become an independent adult, to introduce her mother to new ways, concepts, and values. The interdependence and reciprocity that characterize this relationship imply that the mother can be the key to the daughter's liberation and vice versa. Third, it is just as necessary not to overemphasize the role of the daughter to the exclusion of the mother. Indeed, while the mother-daughter relationship has been a prominent topic in feminist inquiry, most of the analyses have centered on the daughters' testimonies, with the result that the daughter's narrative has dominated the critical debate. As Steph Lawler observes, "A contemporary (Euroamerican) focus on child-centeredness has privileged the daughter's story over the mother's. Instead of two voices, we have so often been left with one voice which claims to tell the whole story."<sup>16</sup> This study aims to give due consideration to both mother and daughter, allowing each one to speak for herself and tell her own story. Lastly, since ideas about mothers and daughters undergo change over time within any given culture, it is important to identify such changes and to understand how they relate to specific developments—cultural, social, political, economic—in the society at large.

Most importantly, the Western reader must begin by discarding any preconceived notions about the mother-daughter relationship. It is a widely held belief in Western cultures that a daughter remains closely attached to her parents even after her marriage whereas a son's ties to his parents weaken with marriage as he turns his loyalty and devotion toward his wife. "My son is my son till he gets him a wife, but my daughter's my daughter all the days of her life" runs a common English saying. This popular sentiment, however, does not apply to Arab culture, where custom dictates that a daughter's allegiance will

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<sup>16</sup> Lawler, *Mothering the Self*, p. 15.

be to her husband's family when she marries,<sup>17</sup> and where the mother-son relationship is recognized as particularly close and strong. Several factors enhance the strength of the mother-son bond in Arab culture. First, owing to the extended and patrilocal nature of the traditional Arab family, a newly wed couple takes up residence in the home of the husband's family. Thus only the son continues to live with his parents, whereas the daughter leaves the parental home upon marriage (except if married to her paternal cousin, or *ibn 'amm*) and joins the household of her husband's family. Furthermore, because the Arab family is patrilineal (descent is traced through the male line), the daughter is a member of her father's family, but unlike the son, she cannot pass this membership on to her children, who take their father's surname. This situation explains the meaning of the colloquial Arabic saying *ibnak ilak wa-bintak la* (literally, "Your son belongs to you but your daughter does not"), which is quite the opposite of the English saying "My son is my son till he gets him a wife, but my daughter's my daughter all the days of her life." Hence, cultural sensitivity is crucial in interpreting the mother-daughter relationship in Arab families. Nothing can be taken for granted; while some patterns of interaction may turn out to be similar to those observed in Western families, others may prove to be completely different, if not opposite.

Many insights from feminist scholarship inform this study. Central among them is the assumption that mothering in a patriarchal society is not gender neutral. The psychologist Jane Flax argues that the type of mothering women provide in a patriarchal context depends on the sex of the child. By this she means that because men are more socially esteemed than women under patriarchy, the mother tends to relate differently to male and female children. "It is not only that the mother might value a son more, reflecting the higher social esteem enjoyed by men," she says, "but the mother, knowing the difficulty of being female in a man's world, might also wish that for the daughter's own sake, she could have been born male. Yet because the mother identifies so strongly with a girl child, she also wants the child to be

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<sup>17</sup> See the testimony of the Coptic Christian Alice in Nayra Atiya, *Khul Khaal: Five Egyptian Women Tell Their Stories* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1982), p. 49. It should be noted that custom does not always reflect on-the-ground reality, which may vary according to individual circumstance, class, education, and geographical location.

just like her.”<sup>18</sup> In Flax’s view, the mother’s inner conflicts are likely to interfere with her ability to be emotionally available to her daughter, a situation which is problematic for the daughter’s psychological development.<sup>19</sup> These observations are of particular relevance to traditional Arab culture which, being patriarchal and patrilineal in nature, defines the value of women in terms of their capacity to bear children, especially sons. Although many parts of the Arab world are rapidly changing, this cultural norm still persists. As Suad Joseph points out: “In most Arab societies it is by birthing a son that a woman makes her claim to status.”<sup>20</sup>

Gender, then, is central to this study. In Arab Muslim societies, the lives of both mothers and daughters are largely shaped by gender identity and gender positioning. The Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi, in her classic study *Beyond the Veil*, writes that gendered boundaries of space divide the Muslim social order into two parts: the universe of men, consisting of public spaces, and the universe of women, comprising the domestic sphere of the family. This gender-based spatial division reflects the society’s hierarchy and power allocation, or more simply, the subordination of women to men. Male-female relations are further governed by strict rules and regulations, including sexual segregation, female seclusion, and veiling. These measures are employed to ensure noncommunication and noninteraction between members of the opposite sex. Mernissi notes that gender inequality is especially manifested in the different moral standards applied to men and women, whereby men enjoy considerable laxity in sexual matters while women must abide by a rigid sexual code.<sup>21</sup> As a result, a traditional Muslim social environment consists of two distinct and separate societies, male and female, each with its own rights and obligations, roles and rewards, customs and practices. These separate societies do not mix or mingle; it is only in the family circle that closely related men and women can meet.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Jane Flax, “The Conflict between Nurture and Autonomy in Mother-Daughter Relationships and within Feminism,” *Feminist Studies* 4, no. 2 (1978): 175.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173. See also Nancy J. Chodorow, *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 45–65.

<sup>20</sup> Joseph, *Intimate Selving in Arab Families*, p. 187.

<sup>21</sup> Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society*, rev. ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 137–42.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* See also Elizabeth Warnock Fernea and Basima Qattan Bezirgan, eds., *Middle Eastern Muslim Women Speak* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977), p. xxv; Raphael Patai, *Golden River to Golden Road: Society, Culture, and Change*

This study proceeds from the assumption that the sexual segregation that pervades all aspects of life in traditional milieus has profound implications for the relationships between women in general and mothers and daughters in particular. In traditional milieus, women are always in the company of other women, family members or otherwise, throughout their daily activities, be that in the extended household, the segregated school, or the segregated workplace. In this female world, women rely heavily on other women to reduce their isolation and develop a support system. Elaborate networks of friendship and kinship provide them not only with an avenue for social activities but also with a source of help in times of need. Obviously, the availability of a female world and its resources to adult women is a great asset. However, the intense social interaction which characterizes this world can be a burden. For example, there is constant pressure on the individual to accommodate the wishes and demands of other women, as well as to abide by the principle of reciprocity in visits, gifts, and favors.<sup>23</sup> The social scientist Mervat Hatem cautions against “romanticization of this female world, which has its own tensions, violence, and exploitative relationships.”<sup>24</sup>

Hence the question: Is the reality of the female world conducive to women’s solidarity and unity or, conversely, to women’s divisiveness and animosity? Does the female world become a site of female empowerment or of female oppression? This question is highly relevant to the mother-daughter relationship, which is variously described in feminist literature as the “essential human relationship,”<sup>25</sup> the “most private and the most formative of women’s relationships,”<sup>26</sup> and the “foundation upon which all future relationships with love objects are based.”<sup>27</sup> Given that the mother-daughter relationship in Arab families

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*in the Middle East*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1969), pp. 115, 384, 463, and idem, *The Arab Mind* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1983), p. 128.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Soraya Altorki, *Women in Saudi Arabia: Ideology and Behavior among the Elite* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 99–106.

<sup>24</sup> Mervat Hatem, “Toward the Study of the Psychodynamics of Mothering and Gender in Egyptian Families,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 19 (1987): 301.

<sup>25</sup> Rich, *Of Woman Born*, p. 127.

<sup>26</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 19.

<sup>27</sup> W. R. D. Fairbairn, cited in Nancy J. Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 79.

is embedded in a specific cultural context, one would expect it to show different patterns from those of its Western counterpart. For example, one might expect to find a higher level of mutual support and understanding between Arab mothers and daughters—or, perhaps, more conflict and hostility. While it is logical to assume that this female world will show great diversity and complexity in interpersonal relations, as typical of any society, this assumption must nevertheless be borne out by evidence from Arab women's literature.

The separate female world exists in traditional milieus throughout the Arab region, of course. But it is important to note that it persists even in modernizing milieus, where socioeconomic changes have led to desegregation and a shift from the extended family form to a nuclear family. Mervat Hatem points out that “while nuclear families and modern work and educational settings exist, they do not necessarily serve to undermine the strength of the separate male and female worlds, which are constantly recreated to provide the nurturance needs not satisfied by the institution of patriarchal marriage.”<sup>28</sup>

What brings Arab mothers and daughters together and what drives them apart is the main concern of this study. Since the relationship between mothers and daughters is not an island but part of the fabric of family life, it must be described, explained, and understood in the context of the Arab family: its structure, basic features, and core values.

### *Defining Basic Terms*

Numerous scholars, both Arab and Western, have struggled to answer the question: Who is an Arab? The prevailing view considers the linguistic criterion to be the most important component of Arab identity: an Arab is anyone who speaks Arabic as his or her native tongue and consequently feels as an Arab.<sup>29</sup> The distinguished historian Albert Hourani, for example, notes that Arabs are “more conscious of their language than any people in the world” and that “most Arabs, if asked to define what they meant by the ‘Arab nation,’ would begin by

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<sup>28</sup> Mervat Hatem, “Underdevelopment, Mothering and Gender within the Egyptian Family,” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 8, no. 1 (1986): 57–58.

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, “Arab Language and Culture,” in Michael Adams, ed., *The Middle East: A Handbook* (New York: Praeger, 1971), p. 174.

saying that it included all those who spoke the Arabic language.”<sup>30</sup> He emphasizes that a full definition would require additional information, especially a reference to a certain process in history in which the Arabs played a leading part.<sup>31</sup> The sociologist Halim Barakat suggests a broader definition in which the sense of Arab identity of the great majority of citizens of Arab countries is based on “what they have in common—namely, language, culture, sociopolitical experiences, economic interests, and a collective memory of their place and role in history.”<sup>32</sup> He also takes into account the divisiveness and diversity of affiliations which characterize Arab identity.<sup>33</sup> In view of the above, it is proper to conclude that an Arab is a person who identifies as such on ethnic, linguistic, and cultural grounds. The plural form, *Arabs*, refers to the ethnocultural group at large.

The term *Arab world* refers to the Arabic speaking countries stretching from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to the Arabian Sea in the east, and from the Mediterranean Sea in the north to the Horn of Africa and the Indian Ocean in the southwest. Encompassing North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Fertile Crescent, the Arab world covers an area of 5.25 million square miles, comprises 22 states, and has a population of 350 million people. Needless to say, the diversity that marks such a large region with numerous communities and subcultures makes it difficult to generalize about its inhabitants.

The Arab world constitutes the core area within the Middle East. It is divided geographically into two major parts: the Mashreq, or Arab East, which lies in Southwest Asia, and the Maghreb, or North Africa. Historically and culturally, these parts of the Arab world have developed differently. Domination by European colonial powers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries contributed to this division. The countries of the Mashreq were mostly under British colonial rule (e.g., Egypt, Palestine, Iraq), while those of the Maghreb (e.g., Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco) were largely occupied by the French. French colonial rule explains the problem of biculturalism prevalent in the Arab countries of North Africa. While in the Mashreq the predominant language of the inhabitants is Arabic and the majority of literary works are

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<sup>30</sup> Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age: 1798–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 1.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Barakat, *The Arab World*, p. 33.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 32–33.

written in Arabic, those coming from North Africa are mostly written in French, which is accepted as the medium of the educated classes.

Arabs differ in terms of geography, nationality, political system, ethnicity, religion, class, lifestyle, and social custom. Although Islam is often associated with the Arab world, not all Arabs are Muslim, and fewer than 15 percent of all Muslims are Arab. The Arabs consider themselves the core of the Muslim nations because they were the originators of Islam and those who spread it in the world. While the overwhelming majority of Arabs are Muslim, there are sizable numbers of Arab Christians who live primarily in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, Palestine, and Sudan. Islam is the established state religion in many but not all Arab countries. Islamic law is dominant in the legal system in some countries, especially those of the Arabian Peninsula, while others have secular codes. However, personal status laws, or family laws, remain under the jurisdiction of Islam (for Arab Muslims) and Christianity (for Arab Christians) throughout the region. Sectarian affiliations abound in the Arab world: while the majority of Arab nations adhere to Sunni Islam, Iraq has a Shia majority and Lebanon, Yemen, Kuwait, and Bahrain have large Shia minorities. Other notable sectarian groups are the Alawites of Syria and the Druze of Israel and Syria, who are considered Arab but not Muslim. Among the diverse ethnic groups within the Arab world are the Berbers of North Africa, the Kurds of the northern regions of Iraq and Syria, Circassians, and Armenians. Formerly there were significant numbers of Jews who lived throughout the Arab world, until their mass emigration following the establishment of the Jewish state in 1948. Two of the largest Muslim nations in the Middle East, Turkey and Iran, are non Arab.

Politically, different forms of government are represented in the Arab world, most of them authoritarian. Some of the countries are monarchies, others are republics. Saudi Arabia and Sudan are Islamic states, whereas Tunisia is a progressive state. Economically, there are rich, oil producing countries (OPEC), particularly the four Persian Gulf states of Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Qatar. In addition, Iraq, Bahrain, Algeria, Libya, and Western Sahara have significant reserves of petroleum. This situation creates disparities between oil rich and oil poor countries, leading to extensive labor migration from the latter into the former.

On the whole, the Arab world exhibits a great deal of plurality and heterogeneity. As Barakat sums it up: "The Arab world in its present circumstances does not constitute a single coherent system or civil

society as much as a multiplicity of societies.”<sup>34</sup> These societies differ not only from one Arab country to another but also internally, from city to village to tribe. Generally speaking, patriarchal modes of domination tend to be weaker in modernizing milieus (e.g., urban areas) and stronger in traditional milieus (e.g., the countryside). Everywhere, class and educational differences affect people’s attitudes and practices.

Defining the Arab family is not a simple task. The difficulty lies in the immense variation in family forms and functions in Arab societies. The social scientists William C. Young and Seteney Shami acknowledge that “anthropologists no longer try to arrive at a universal definition of the family; decades of research in a wide variety of societies have demonstrated that no matter how we formulate a definition of ‘the family,’ there will always be exceptional cases which do not conform to it strictly.”<sup>35</sup> In their view, the most useful approach to the study of the Arab family is to go beyond description, whether statistical or ethnographic, and focus on understanding the processes or mechanisms that produce certain characteristics and forms of families in certain circumstances.<sup>36</sup>

This study discusses the characteristic features of Arab families while highlighting the changes in traditional family patterns that have occurred in recent decades. The diversity encountered among Arab families results from a constellation of factors, including lifestyle (bedouin, rural, or urban), class, level of education, as well as religious and sectarian affiliation. In describing aspects of Arab family life, I have relied on the myriad depictions provided in the works of Arab women writers included in this study.<sup>37</sup> Using these texts as a primary source of information enabled me to place the discussion in a historical context and trace changes in traditional family patterns over time. I have also drawn on ethnographic and sociological studies available on the

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>35</sup> William C. Young and Seteney Shami, “Anthropological Approaches to the Arab Family: An Introduction,” *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 28, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 1.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>37</sup> The texts that I analyze in depth are (in chronological order): Andrée Chedid’s *From Sleep Unbound* (Egypt, 1952), Latifa al-Zayyat’s *The Open Door* (Egypt, 1960), Samar Attar’s *Lina: A Portrait of a Damascene Girl* (Syria, 1982), Hanan al-Shaykh’s *Women of Sand and Myrrh* (Lebanon, 1988), Fadwa Tuqan’s *A Mountainous Journey* (Palestine, 1985), Alia Mamdouh’s *Mothballs* (Iraq, 1986), Fatima Mernissi’s *Dreams of Trespass* (Morocco, 1994), and Miral al-Tahawy’s *The Tent* (Egypt, 1996).

topic.<sup>38</sup> In synthesizing the various sources, I have taken care not to portray the family as a monolithic institution but rather to emphasize the dramatic adaptations it has undergone since the colonial period.

In a nutshell, the rapid socioeconomic changes currently in progress throughout the Arab world have had profound effects on the Arab family. Industrialization, urbanization, public education, women's participation in the waged labor force, and legal reforms in the personal status codes have undermined traditional family patterns, relationships, and roles. The economic pressures that have forced women into the workplace, for example, have also driven men abroad as migrant laborers, thus creating households which are headed by women. Access to public education has affected women's fertility rates and age at marriage, decreasing the former and postponing the latter; it has also promoted egalitarian views of marital relations. In addition, there has been a slow transition, especially in urban centers, from an extended family unit to a modified version or a nuclear family. These trends show that the Arab family is reorganizing in response to modern pressures. How men and women are coping psychologically with the changes in their traditional roles is an important, though yet little explored, dimension of the changing situation.<sup>39</sup>

One of the fundamental premises of this study is that the mother-daughter dyad is embedded in a web of family relationships which must be examined to gain a complete picture of the family context. An understanding of the interrelationships among family members, specifically how members interact with each other and what the rules of relating are, is central to the understanding of the mother-daughter relationship. Three major relationships operate within the family: the marital relationship, the parent-child relationship, and the sibling relationship. Each of these relationships has a different set of mutual rights and obligations, as well as distinct patterns of communication and interaction, the totality of which weaves the fabric of family life. Family dynamics both shape the mother-daughter relationship and are affected by it. The weak marital bond observed in traditional Arab Muslim families, for example, is compensated by a strong mother-son relationship, a situation that often produces resentment in the

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<sup>38</sup> See the bibliography for select titles.

<sup>39</sup> Elizabeth Fernea, "And How's the Family?" *Arab Perspectives* 15 (1984): 13-17; Daniel Bates and Amal Rassam, *Peoples and Cultures of the Middle East* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1983), p. 231.

daughter and possibly alienation from her mother. The strong mother-son relationship is commonly also the cause of animosity between the daughter-in-law and her mother-in-law, a situation that disrupts the emotional climate in the extended family and infuses it with tensions. It soon becomes apparent that an analysis of the mother-daughter relationship necessitates an examination of the numerous family forces that affect female family members in various stages of their lives: fathers to daughters, husbands to wives, brothers to sisters, sisters to sisters, and often relatives beyond the nuclear family such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and even surrogates such as nannies, neighbors, and friends. Given that all women are daughters and that almost all daughters become mothers, the discussion is inextricably bound up with women's role/position in the family, and by extension, in the wider society.

Still, what goes on inside the family is not merely the sum of its interrelationships. Many external factors have a reverberating impact on the functioning of the family and individuals within the family. Cultural norms in particular play a pivotal role in determining how a family operates—what tasks it must fulfill and what strategies are appropriate for achieving them. Gender socialization, for example, the sexual code, rites of passage into womanhood, the custom of arranged marriage, and the concept of motherhood are all grounded in the patriarchal values of Arab culture. Understanding these values is therefore indispensable for understanding the forces that shape the mother-daughter relationship.

Finally, the family is the site where the sense of self of mothers and daughters is shaped. It is highly pertinent to consider how the experience of selfhood, especially the search for personal identity and personal fulfillment, affects the relationship between them. "Many theories about the self hold that one's sense of who one is, or one's conception of self, emerges in the context of the interpersonal relations experienced in one's family, social networks, and culture," write Susan M. Anderson et al.<sup>40</sup> The interactional dynamics that are established by the family and are internalized by the individual during the formative years are so central to self-definition that "family programming may

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<sup>40</sup> Susan M. Anderson, Inga Reznik, and Serena Chen, "The Self in Relation to Others: Cognitive and Motivational Underpinnings," in Joan Gay Snodgrass and Robert L. Thompson, eds., *The Self Across Psychology* (New York: The New York Academy of Sciences, 1997), p. 233.

be thought of as the foundation of the complex development of self.<sup>41</sup> Not only do intimate relationships with family members produce the most distinctive characteristics of the self but they also provide models for one's future interpersonal relations.<sup>42</sup> Hence, to understand why mothers and daughters in Arab families behave the way they do, it is necessary to analyze the family context. An analysis of the family organization, hierarchies, and boundaries will shed light on adaptive or maladaptive thoughts, feelings, and actions of individual family members.<sup>43</sup>

### *Sources, Methods, and Approaches*

This study draws on a wide variety of sources to explore the relationship between mothers and daughters in Arab families. These sources include psychology, sociology, ethnography, feminist theory, history, religion, folklore, and literature. I synthesize ideas from these various fields and bring together strands of thought and debate that are frequently kept apart because of disciplinary boundaries.<sup>44</sup> In doing so, I broaden the picture of mother-daughter relationships and offer several vantage points on the manner in which they are constructed, negotiated, and redefined. Such an integrative approach is more productive in illuminating the many interlocking facets of the relationship, although it presents a more formidable task.

The main body of material for this study comprises works of literature written over the past half century by women writers from across the Arab world. These texts not only paint penetrating portraits of Arab family life but also offer fascinating insights into the psychodynamic forces that shape intimate family relationships. Among the various literary works included in the discussion are autobiographies, memoirs, biographies, novels, short stories, essays, and poems. A large number of texts are analyzed in depth to find out how the

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<sup>41</sup> C. Margaret Hall, *Individual and Society: Basic Concepts*, 2nd ed. (Boonsboro, MD: Antietam Press, 1981), p. 5.

<sup>42</sup> Anderson et al., "The Self in Relation to Others," p. 233.

<sup>43</sup> Stephen A. Anderson and Ronald M. Sabatelli, *Family Interaction: A Multi-generational Developmental Perspective*, 3rd. ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2003), pp. 42-44.

<sup>44</sup> This approach is adopted from Shelley Phillips, *Beyond the Myths: Mother-Daughter Relationships in Psychology, History, Literature, and Everyday Life* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), pp. x, xix-xx.

mother-daughter relationship is represented and experienced by women, what kinds of patterns it manifests, and in what ways it influences the course of female development and family life. As these literary texts are written by and about women and narrated from the perspectives of both adult women and adolescent girls, they provide a wealth of information about the subject of this inquiry.

The literary works were selected on the basis of several criteria. To begin with, they had to be written by and about women so as to depict the female experience from the female perspective. Naturally, the mother-daughter theme had to figure prominently in these texts, or at least to form part of the narrative. In addition, the voices of both mothers and daughters had to be represented in this selection in order to paint a balanced picture. I also strove to introduce women writers from different generations and from different parts of the Arab world, though Egypt, which is the most populous Arab country and the center of Arab cultural life, is more largely represented. The literary merit or artistic quality of the text was also an important consideration. I made a great effort to include a variety of genres and styles of writing, early publications as well as more recent ones, and works by both established and emerging authors.<sup>45</sup> While these objective criteria guided the selection of texts for discussion, the ultimate decision was also influenced by personal taste—an unavoidable factor in such a process.

In this study, works of literature are treated as documentary evidence. The decision to use literary texts as a source of knowledge and information was largely dictated by the intense privacy surrounding family life in Arab societies. As mentioned earlier, the domain of family life is regarded as sacrosanct, and those who open it to public scrutiny are branded as traitors and are ostracized. The vehicles of fiction and poetry allow writers, especially women writers, to examine their personal lives and at the same time shield themselves from potential accusations of betrayal. "Fiction and poetry retain the screen of apparent non-accountability," observe Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke. "Intimate and critical reflections can be safely expressed in a form that appears to draw attention to itself rather than to the author

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<sup>45</sup> To allow the Western reader who is not versed in the Arabic language access to this body of literature, I have indicated in the bibliographical data of each literary work whether it is available in English translation.

and her message. These can be powerful vehicles for feminist thought, especially when invisibility is needed or sought."<sup>46</sup> As a number of well-publicized trials of Arab women writers demonstrate, not always can these vehicles protect them from the watchful eye of the censor.<sup>47</sup> Still, resorting to fiction and poetry does enable them to engage freely in self-analysis, a process which facilitates self-liberation. Further, the blurry line separating the factual from the fictional in creative literature highlights the immense power of this medium to bridge the gap between the self and reality, to transcend reality by recreating it, and to give an individual reality a more universal meaning.<sup>48</sup>

There are additional merits to using literature as a source of knowledge and information. Literary texts paint intimate portraits of a given society, depicting all aspects of life and components of reality. In recounting the concerns and interests motivating the characters, whether real or imaginary, the writer chronicles the times and circumstances of their lives, including the political system, prevailing customs and traditions, religious beliefs, social norms, and popular attitudes. The literary scholar Trevor Le Gassick calls contemporary imaginative literature "the most revealing window into the closest workings of a society's values and orientations."<sup>49</sup> The novelist and sociologist

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<sup>46</sup> Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke, eds., *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), p. xl.

<sup>47</sup> The Lebanese Layla Ba'labakki, for example, published her collection of short stories, *Safinat hanan ila al-qamar* (A Spaceship of Tenderness to the Moon), in Beirut in 1963. A few months later, the Lebanese vice squad visited every bookstore that carried her book and all the remaining copies were confiscated on the grounds that her stories contained erotic descriptions. She was then brought to trial on charges of obscenity and endangering public morality. Although she was eventually acquitted, she stopped publishing works of fiction since then. (For transcripts of the trial, see Fernea and Bezirgan, *Middle Eastern Muslim Women Speak*, pp. 280–90.) The Jordanian Suhayr al-Tall published her short story, "The Gallows," in Amman in 1987. The surrealist story, in which the male sex organ is depicted as the hangman's noose, landed her in court on the charge of offending the public sensibilities. After a bitter trial, she was convicted, fined, and sentenced to prison. (For an English translation of her story, see Dalya Cohen-Mor, *Arab Women Writers: An Anthology of Short Stories*, pp. 254–56. For details about her trial, see Fadia Faqir, *In the House of Silence*, p. 13.) Zabya Khamis, a poet and short-story writer from the United Arab Emirates, was jailed in 1987 without trial for five months as punishment for writing allegedly transgressive poetry. She describes her prison experiences in her collection of short stories, *Ibtisamat makira wa-qisas ukhra* (Cunning Smiles and Other Stories, Kuwait, 1996).

<sup>48</sup> Stephan Guth, "Why Novels—Not Autobiographies?" in Robin Ostle, Ed de Moor, and Stephan Wild, eds., *Writing the Self: Autobiographical Writing in Modern Arabic Literature* (London: Saqi Books, 1998), pp. 146–47.

<sup>49</sup> Trevor Le Gassick, "The Faith of Islam in Modern Arabic Fiction," *Religion and Literature* 20, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 97.

Halim Barakat regards literature as “a way of exploring human behavior like science and philosophy.”<sup>50</sup> He argues that literary texts are not only works of art but also social documents: “Poems, stories, novels, plays, paintings, graphics and songs constitute historical sources of knowledge about society as well as aesthetic objects to be appreciated in their own right.”<sup>51</sup> In his view, the novels of Naguib Mahfouz “portray Egyptian life and society more comprehensively and accurately than the work of all the social scientists put together.”<sup>52</sup> The novelist John Fowles arrives at a similar conclusion, noting that Mahfouz’s *Miramar* “allows us the rare privilege of entering a national psychology, in a way that a thousand journalistic articles or television documentaries could not achieve.”<sup>53</sup> Given the “view from within” that literary works offer, and the fact that most Arab societies are not readily accessible through other means of investigation, such works can be an invaluable aid in cross-cultural research, of which this study is a part.

Of equal importance is the reciprocal relationship that exists between literature, culture, and society. While literature is influenced by the conditions of the society in which it is generated, it also exerts its own influence on society. As Barakat points out: “A work of art both reflects and shapes reality at the same time.”<sup>54</sup> Deeply anchored in the world that produces it, the literary text, in turn, helps to reproduce ideologies, popular images, values. “Literature is both a central cultural production and a participant in the creation of culture,” Magda al-Nowaihi observes.<sup>55</sup> Highlighting the connection between literary texts and the existential actualities of human life, Edward Said asserts that “the realities of power and authority—as well as the resistances offered by men, women, and social movements to institutions, authorities, and orthodoxies—are the realities that make texts possible, that deliver them to their readers, that solicit the attention of critics.”<sup>56</sup> He criticizes the tendency among Western social scientists to exclude literature from studies of the Middle East, taking the position that “a

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<sup>50</sup> Barakat, *The Arab World*, p. 210.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> John Fowles, in the introduction to Naguib Mahfouz, *Miramar*, trans. Fatma Moussa-Mahmoud (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1983), p. xv.

<sup>54</sup> Barakat, *The Arab World*, p. 210; see also pp. 207–8.

<sup>55</sup> Magda M. al-Nowaihi, “Constructions of Masculinity in Two Egyptian Novels,” in Joseph, *Intimate Selving in Arab Families*, p. 235.

<sup>56</sup> Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University press, 1983), p. 5; see also pp. 8–15, 34–35.

literary text speaks more or less directly of a living reality.”<sup>57</sup> Since the relationship between mothers and daughters is a cultural construction that eventually finds expression and representation in literary texts, one can draw upon these texts as a valid, even crucial, source of information for understanding the relationship.<sup>58</sup>

Of all the critical approaches to literature, this study relies primarily on the psychological one. This choice was dictated by the nature of the mother-daughter relationship, for “mothering,” as Nancy Chodorow emphatically writes, “is most eminently a psychologically based role. It consists in psychological and personal experience of self in relationship to child or children.”<sup>59</sup> Feminist scholars have drawn extensively, though not exclusively, on psychoanalytic theory for the study of mothering and gender.<sup>60</sup> Significantly, the key terms used to describe the interactional dynamics of the mother-daughter relationship come from the realm of psychology: bonding, symbiosis, separation, individuation, autonomy. Given that the psychological approach to literature is concerned with understanding the psychical life of the individual—the deep mental, emotional, and motivational forces that shape personality and influence behavior—it is uniquely suited for this study. Moreover, the psychological approach is the ideal tool with which to interpret dreams, symbols, archetypes, and other forms of subliminal communication that we find in literature.

It is self-evident that no interpretative technique can fully fathom that which lies at the heart of a literary work. Any approach to literary criticism will result in oversimplification, and each approach has its limitations. The insights gained through the psychological frame of reference are therefore supplemented with biographical details and the literary worlds are examined against their cultural, social, and historical backgrounds. Each text is analyzed systematically, first

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<sup>57</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), p. 291.

<sup>58</sup> Some examples of anthropological work on literature are Saddeka Arebi, *Women and Words in Saudi Arabia: The Politics of Literary Discourse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), and Caroline Seymour-Jorn, “Fiction Writers as Intellectuals: An Anthropological Approach to the Study of Women Writers in the Middle East” (Milwaukee: Center for International Studies, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1996).

<sup>59</sup> Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, p. 32.

<sup>60</sup> See, for example, Jane Flax, “The Conflict between Nurturance and Autonomy in Mother-daughter Relationships and within Feminism” (1978); Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (1978), and idem, *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (1989).

for its explicit, intended message, and second for its symbolic, deeper meaning.

No analysis, no matter how meticulous, can exhaust the rich interpretative possibilities of a literary work, particularly when the text contains symbols, the complex and ambiguous nature of which allows for more than one interpretation. Nevertheless, I had to come to some conclusions. Although at times I state my conclusions emphatically, I do not mean to rule out other points of view. My comments and observations are intended as plausible explanations, and I encourage the reader to delve independently into the literary texts in search of other solutions.

### *Organization*

This book consists of seven chapters, each of which explores the mother-daughter relationship from a different perspective or sheds light on a different facet of this relationship. The chapters that deal with a particular genre in Arab women's literature (i.e., autobiography, coming-of-age novel) or a perennial theme (i.e., madness, nurturance) are framed by an introduction to that genre or theme in order to place the discussion in the literary context. This context offers additional insights into Arab women's literature as well as into the points of contact between the Arabic and Western literary traditions.

Chapter 1 or the Introduction explains this study.

Chapter 2 provides essential background information on the arena in which the mother-daughter relationship emerges and unfolds—the Arab family. It discusses the centrality, structure, and core values of the family in Arab societies, delineates the influence of Islam and patriarchal culture on the position and lifestyle of women, describes traditional patterns of family life as depicted in Arab women's literature of the past half century, and contrasts them with modern trends in family organization and family functioning brought about by the rapid social change currently in progress throughout the Arab world. The chapter concludes by addressing both basic issues in the mother-daughter relationship and culture-specific factors that affect it, all of which are illustrated with examples from literary texts.

Chapter 3 offers intimate portraits of mother-daughter relationships in autobiographical works. The chapter begins with a short introduction to the genre of autobiography in modern Arabic literature, focusing on

the emergence of self-narratives by women. Two representative texts are then analyzed in depth: the autobiography of the Palestinian poet Fadwa Tuqan, *A Mountainous Journey*, and the fictionalized memoir of the Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi, *Dreams of Trespass*. Both of these authors were raised in a harem, yet their experiences of family life, of growing up female, and of the relationship with their mothers were profoundly different. The analysis traces the underlying causes of these differences and assesses their influence on the self-development and career choices of these authors.

Chapter 4 presents intimate portraits of mother-daughter relationships in works of fiction known as coming-of-age novels (*Bildungsromane*). The chapter opens with a brief account of this genre, explaining why it has become the most popular form of feminist fiction. Two representative texts are then critically examined: *The Open Door* by the Egyptian Latifa al-Zayyat, and *Lina: Portrait of a Damascene Girl* by the Syrian Samar Attar. The heroines of both these novels face similar obstacles in their struggles for authentic selfhood, notably a conflicted relationship with their mothers, family constraints, and patriarchal oppression. However, their rebellions and visions of the future take entirely different forms: while one joins the struggle for national liberation, the other resolves to leave her country and live in exile in the West. The analysis highlights the tension between the private self and the collective self and the essential ties linking personal and national identities as well as personal and national liberation.

Chapter 5 centers on surrogate mother-daughter relationships. It opens with psychological and feminist observations on the vital human need for nurturance and intimacy as the underlying motive for seeking substitute mother and daughter figures. Two representative novels are then carefully analyzed to demonstrate a variety of compensatory affectionate attachments: *Mothballs* by the Iraqi Layla Mamdouh, and *Women of Sand and Myrrh* by the Lebanese Hanan al-Shaykh. The discussion includes traditional surrogate relationships, such as brother-sister, sister-sister, and grandmother-granddaughter, as well as non-traditional ones, such as promiscuous, lesbian, and bisexual relations.

Chapter 6 is concerned with the alienated self and the genesis of madness in mothers and daughters. The chapter begins with a discussion of what is labeled “the female malady,” namely, the propensity of women to develop mental illness, then addresses the use of madness as a literary theme. Two representative novels are analyzed in depth to illustrate the tragedy of women who are driven into madness by maternal

deprivation and patriarchal oppression: *The Tent* by the Egyptian Miral al-Tahawy, and *From Sleep Unbound* by the Lebanese-Egyptian Andrée Chédid. The analysis emphasizes the culture-specific factors that contribute to the disintegration of the heroines' personalities.

The final chapter offers the main conclusions of this study. It sums up the patterns emerging from the myriad portraits of mother-daughter relationships discussed in this work and examines their implications for women, the family, and the wider society. Intriguingly, the majority of literary works analyzed in this study show that the conflict between mothers and daughters is not only inevitable but necessary as a driving force of change. In assessing future trends of development, I point out the formidable challenges facing mothers and daughters at a time when life is changing rapidly throughout the Arab world and the roles of the family, as well as their own roles within the family, are undergoing redefinition.

Every study has its limitations, and this one is no exception. To begin with, it is impossible to exhaust all the readings on this fascinating topic. One can find many additional literary works to illustrate various points in the discussion and expand the volume of this book. The field of Arab women's literature continues to grow, and new texts become available all the time. In addition, this study is concerned with the female perspective—all the texts analyzed are written by and about women—for the obvious reason that the relationship under scrutiny exists between women. Although male writers have traditionally ignored or mystified the mother-daughter relationship, it may be worthwhile to examine literary works that present the male perspective on the topic. I hope that this book will stimulate other scholars to undertake a comparative study that explores the differences and similarities between the male and female perspectives. Finally, to achieve definitive conclusions on mother-daughter relationships in Arab families would require some empirical data from field studies. Notwithstanding the absence of such data, given the paucity of research on the psychodynamics of family life in Arab societies, the present study, albeit a literary one, may prove to be useful as a source of reference.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE FAMILY: ARAB SOCIETY IN MINIATURE

Arab society starts with the family and is patterned on it. It extends outward from it.

Sania Hamady<sup>1</sup>

#### *The Centrality of the Family in Arab Societies*

In his classic study, *The Algerians*, the renowned French scholar Pierre Bourdieu, who lived in Algeria for many years and gained first-hand knowledge of the value system of its mosaic society, observes that

the family is the alpha and omega of the whole system: the primary group and structural model for any possible grouping, it is the indissoluble atom of society which assigns and assures to each of its members his place, his function, his very reason for existence and, to a certain degree, his existence itself; the center of a way of life and a tradition which provide it with a firm foundation and which it is therefore resolutely determined to maintain; last but by no means least, it is a coherent and stable unit situated in a network of common interests whose permanence and security must be assured above all else, even if necessary, to the detriment of individual aspirations and interests.<sup>2</sup>

Bourdieu's observation is as relevant today as it was half a century ago, when his study appeared. For all Arabs—Bedouin, rural, and urban—the family constitutes the basic social unit around which the individual's life is centered. It provides shelter, food, clothing, protection, identity, reputation, and honor for its members, regulates their economic activities, and defines their social status in the community. The family also mediates between the individual and the outside world by facilitating access to jobs and careers in public life and by providing support in times of need or crisis. In return, it demands loyalty and conformity from its

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<sup>1</sup> Sania Hamady, *Temperament and Character of the Arabs* (New York: Twayne, 1960), p. 88.

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Algerians* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), p. 97.

members, who are expected to subordinate their personal desires and interests to those of the family.<sup>3</sup>

The ethnographic literature on the Arab world is almost unanimous in pointing out that the family, rather than the individual, is the fundamental unit of production and social organization. Particularly among tribes, peasants, and the urban poor, the family is the hub of vital services, functioning at once as an employment bureau, insurance agency, child-care facility, counseling and training center, old people's home, and welfare system.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the family is the most important vehicle of socialization of the young as functioning members of society, teaching children customs and traditions that preserve the cultural heritage and ensure the stability of the existing order. Core values such as sexual mores and the hierarchy of age and gender are upheld and transmitted through the family. Similarly, interpersonal skills, behavioral modes, gender role expectations, and basic attitudes are acquired largely within the family and carried into the wider society. The family may vary in form, as indicated by the terms *usra* (nuclear family), *a'ila* (extended family), *bayt* (house), *ahl* (kin), *hamula* (subtribe, lineage), or *ashira* (tribe).<sup>5</sup> Whatever the form, for Arabs it is the family, not society or the state, which provides the primary sense of identity and belonging, confers rights, and commands obligations. As a result, the individual's allegiance, commitment, and devotion tend to be first and foremost to the family.

The centrality of the family in Arab societies, different as they are both from each other and internally, has been a topic of critical debate among Arab and Western scholars. Halim Barakat states that "the family constitutes the dominant social institution through which persons and groups inherit their religious, class, and cultural affiliations."<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth W. Fernea suggests that "if the Koran is the soul of Islam, then perhaps the institution of the Muslim family might be described

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<sup>3</sup> Barakat, *The Arab World*, pp. 97–98; Hisham Sharabi, "The Dialectics of Patriarchy in Arab Society," in Samih K. Farsoun, ed., *Arab Society: Continuity and Change* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), p. 99.

<sup>4</sup> Fernea, "And How's the Family?" p. 15. See also Diane Singerman, "The Family and Community as Politics: The Popular Sector in Cairo," in idem and Homa Hoodfar, eds., *Development, Change, and Gender in Cairo: The View from the Household* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 145–46.

<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to note that in the late 19th century in Egypt, the term *a'ila* started to be used to indicate a type of nuclear family or modified extended family.

<sup>6</sup> Barakat, *The Arab World*, p. 98.

as its body.”<sup>7</sup> Andrea B. Rugh, describing contemporary family life in Egypt, marvels at what she calls “this glorification of an institution that goes far beyond what is necessitated by the natural biological needs of parents and children.”<sup>8</sup> Suad Joseph writes that “this hypervalorization of the family has placed the family in a sacrosanct space, which may be seen as inviolate except on peril of accusations of betrayal.”<sup>9</sup> Lastly, Raphael Patai observes that familism, a term he uses to denote “the centrality of the family in social organization, its primacy in the loyalty scale, and its supremacy over individual life,” is deeply embedded in the Arab consciousness. Characterizing the traditional Arab family as extended, patriarchal, patrilineal, patrilocal, endogamous, and occasionally polygamous, he concludes that “a family with such traits cannot but reign central and supreme in both social and individual life.”<sup>10</sup> In his view, familism—membership in the family—rather than individualism, is the value orientation inculcated by parents and traditional educational systems.

Islam—the religion of the overwhelming majority of Arabs and a source of cultural values for non-Muslim Arabs as well—reinforces the centrality of the family in Arab societies.<sup>11</sup> Islam paid more attention to the organization of the family than to that of any other institution. This fact is borne out by the large number of Koranic verses dealing with family life.<sup>12</sup> As a holistic system attempting to provide a complete answer to all human needs, Islam sees the family as the all-encompassing framework of Muslim life and as the foundation of the Muslim nation. Regarded as the building-block of the Muslim community and as the only legitimate unit of procreation, the family is entrusted with the crucial task of raising moral and dedicated believers who will contribute to the well-being of society and strengthen it. The

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<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, ed., *Women and the Family in the Middle East: New Voices of Change* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), p. 25.

<sup>8</sup> Andrea B. Rugh, *Family in Contemporary Egypt* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1985), p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph, *Intimate Selving in Arab Families*, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> Patai, *The Arab Mind*, p. 282.

<sup>11</sup> Though Islam and Arabism are often viewed as inseparable, even by Arabs (e.g., the people of North Africa hyphenate the two terms), it is important to distinguish between the two identities. As mentioned earlier, there are Arab Christian minorities and the majority of Muslims are non Arab.

<sup>12</sup> Youssef M. Choueiri, *Islamic Fundamentalism* (London: Pinter Publishing, 1990), p. 128; Robert Roberts, *The Social Laws of the Qoran* (London: Curzon Press, 1990).

cohesive nature of the family not only safeguards its survival in times of adversity but also promotes its growth and prosperity.

Islamist thinkers have elevated the Muslim family to an almost sacrosanct status. The Egyptian Sayyid Qutb, for example, emphasizes the role of marriage and the family far more than the teachings of historical Islam. Drawing on traditional doctrines of motherhood and education, Qutb speaks in laudatory terms of the family as “the nursery of the future,” breeding “precious human products” under the guardianship of women. For Qutb, the family is an immutable structure ordained by God. Moreover, “the whole Islamic social system is an extended family system, pertaining to a divine order and set up in conformity with human instincts, needs, and requirements.” Qutb argues that the family is the cornerstone of society. When the Muslim family is stable and harmonious, Muslim society gains power. Conversely, when the Muslim family is weak and conflicted, Muslim society suffers setbacks. On every level—physical, spiritual, cultural, economic, and political—it is the Muslim family that lends Muslim society the capacity to preserve itself and flourish.<sup>13</sup>

Sanctioned and supported by religion, which, for most Arabs, remains an important regulator of everyday life and a source of identity, the Arab family exercises great control over the individual. Family membership, as well as one’s position within the family (whether single, married, divorced, widowed, with children or childless), defines one’s identity and social standing in the community. While kinship ties across all walks and ways of life in Arab societies are strong and highly effective, family ties are especially binding: they cannot be severed, they do not weaken throughout a person’s life, and they remain influential even after a family member moves to a distant city or emigrates abroad. The persistence of family ties is illustrated by the position of a married woman: even after she joins a different kin group, she continues to be a member of her own paternal family, which, in turn, continues to be responsible for her moral conduct and physical well-being.<sup>14</sup>

The values, priorities, and sentiments that govern the Arab family result in a person’s thorough identification and constant involvement

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<sup>13</sup> Choueiri, *Islamic Fundamentalism*, pp. 127–30.

<sup>14</sup> Moghadam, *Modernizing Women*, p. 124; Patai, *The Arab Mind*, pp. 93–94; Arlene Elowe MacLeod, *Accommodating Protest: Working Women, the New Veiling, and Change in Cairo* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 37–38.

with the family. For some scholars, this is at once the source of all happiness and all misery in Arab family life.<sup>15</sup> On the one hand, intense interaction between family members provides the individual with security and support; on the other hand, it may interfere with personal advancement. The rules established within the family are generally characterized by a lack of privacy, a low tolerance for individuality or autonomy, and an insistence on obedience and conformity. Moreover, self-denial and self-sacrifice are expected, if not exacted. Hisham Sharabi observes that cohesion is achieved mainly through the socialization of the child into dependency on the family. Hence the child grows up feeling his primary responsibility toward the family and not toward the society. When faced with conflicting social and family demands, the individual finds it easier to resolve this dilemma by doing his or her duty toward the family. This type of social behavior has been repeatedly demonstrated in times of national crisis.<sup>16</sup> Halim Barakat notes that the interests of both the individual and society are denied for the sake of the family. Sons and daughters are left with little latitude in conducting their own affairs. The pressure to serve the family and win its approval constrains their behavior and hinders the pursuit of their personal needs and aspirations. On the collective level, kinship loyalties may conflict with national loyalty and undermine national consciousness.<sup>17</sup>

The paramount importance of the family and family life in Arab culture is reflected in the rich vocabulary of kinship terms that exists in the Arabic language. The way these terms are used in everyday speech and social interaction shows that paradigms of family organization pervade all interrelations, spilling over even to non-kin relations. The Lebanese sociologist Fuad I. Khuri, in his study *Tents and Pyramids*, examines the meaning and usage of kinship terms in various contexts of interaction between kin and non-kin. He writes that as forms of address or reference, kinship terms are used to express a wide variety of dispositions, temperaments, and moods, including friendliness, animosity, anger, formality, seriousness, sarcasm, intimacy, politeness, disrespect, status, hierarchy, equality, closeness or distance. For example, terms such as *akh* (brother) *'amm* (paternal uncle or father's

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<sup>15</sup> Sharabi, "Impact of Class and Culture on Social Behavior," p. 243; Altorki, *Women in Saudi Arabia*, pp. 99-106.

<sup>16</sup> Sharabi, "Impact of Class and Culture on Social Behavior," p. 244.

<sup>17</sup> Barakat, *The Arab World*, pp. 100, 116, 118.

brother) *khal* (maternal uncle or mother's brother) and others not only indicate actual referents in the kinship structure, but are also used by extension to reflect and generate certain feelings and attitudes between interactors, from reserve to familiarity to trust and solidarity. Focusing on four categories of kinship terms: family origin terms, collective kinship terms, descent terms, and affinal (marriage) and ritualistic terms, Khuri shows that the extension of kinship terms to non-kin carries with it the behavioral expectations of kinship relations. For example, a person who addresses another as *'amm* (uncle) or *ukht* (sister) generates behavioral expectations that characterize uncle-nephew or brother-sister relationships. The application of such terms to outsiders is made when they share the same age, sex, and status implied in the kinship referents. If this condition is not met, the result is joking, ridicule, or even insult. Khuri arrives at the conclusion that "the world around the Arab, whether actor or interactor, and whether in conflict or harmony, cooperation or contradiction, can be captured in small, encapsulated family structures."<sup>18</sup> Moreover, treating the world as family and using kinship terms in interactional processes between friends, strangers, neighbors, and non-kin is an instrumental strategy. It is meant to accomplish practical goals, specifically to affect choice behaviors in market situations (bargaining techniques) and to build up a person's political career (manipulation of family associations).<sup>19</sup>

Khuri attributes the Arabs' deep attachment to the family to the way they deal with reality, which is perceived as a series of discrete units equal in value, much like a Bedouin encampment consisting of tents scattered haphazardly on a flat desert surface. In the absence of visible hierarchy and graded authority, a person's strategy is to seek protection in group membership; the isolated are vulnerable. Fuad argues that this mental image of society underlies the Arabs' behavioral patterns: they feel best when they are part of a group, and dread isolation, which they equate with weakness and danger. In his view, "being alone is so feared that ostracism, excommunication, and banishment are thought to be the severest forms of punishment a group can inflict upon its members."<sup>20</sup> Such punishment may be meted out in connection with a blood feud, an act of great dishonor, or a grave

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<sup>18</sup> Fuad I. Khuri, *Tents and Pyramids: Games and Ideology in Arab Culture from Backgammon to Autocratic Rule* (London: Saqi Books, 1990), p. 28.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 46–48.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

sexual transgression. The story "The Free-for-All Dance" by the Egyptian Yahya Taher Abdullah dramatizes this outlook. In this story, two village boys who are caught in a homosexual act suffer a harsh punishment: the passive partner is ordered to jump to his death into a water well, while the active partner is banished from the village for the rest of his life. Despite the tragic loss of his son, the bereaved father consoles himself with the thought that the other boy will "live his life far away, a stranger without honour, and will thus die the death of the wandering gypsies."<sup>21</sup>

Altogether, for Arabs the family constitutes the actual framework of life: wider contacts come through the family, jobs in public life are mediated by the family, friends are commonly chosen from among relatives or family acquaintances, and marriages are traditionally contracted within the family circle or lineage. Half a century ago, in 1960, Sania Hamady observed that despite the frustrations of family domination, especially as social change has reduced the functions of this institution but not its claims, the individual submits to its authority because Arab society offers no viable alternative to family life: "Arab society has no structure for an individualistic life. The person who has broken with his family finds no circle and no accommodations apart from it."<sup>22</sup> Two and a half decades later, in 1986, Mervat Hatem, examining the structure of the family in Egypt, concluded that "an individual not living or associated with some family unit contradicts one of the basic cultural axioms."<sup>23</sup> And as recently as 2003, Valentine M. Moghadam, in her study *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*, arrived at a similar conclusion. She writes that in contrast to the Western world, where socioeconomic changes have resulted in a different female relationship to the family and where, in the last one hundred years, it has become increasingly possible for the individual to live without the insurance provided by family ties, this is not yet the generalized case in the Middle East.<sup>24</sup> "The family

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<sup>21</sup> In Yahya Taher Abdullah, *The Mountain of Green Tea*, trans. Denys Johnson-Davies (London: Heinemann, 1983), p. 18.

<sup>22</sup> Hamady, *Temperament and Character of the Arabs*, p. 93.

<sup>23</sup> Hatem, "Underdevelopment, Mothering and Gender within the Egyptian Family," p. 50.

<sup>24</sup> Moghadam, *Modernizing Women*, p. 144.

remains important not only economically but emotionally, even for highly educated Middle Eastern women,” she emphasizes.<sup>25</sup>

In sum, the family is the most traditional and most important feature of Arab social organization. For Arabs, family life is their primary orientation. Based on core cultural values, the Arab family enjoys a sense of solidarity that has persisted from ancient to modern times. As a unit of society and a source of identity, the Arab family is more important than the individual and more influential than the nation. Needless to say, the power that the family has over its members, particularly its female members, carries profound implications for their personal development, freedom of choice and action, and quest for self-realization. From this arises some of the most dramatic conflicts in parent-child relationship. No wonder, then, that a daughter’s rebellion against the family and her desperate struggle to gain autonomy and shape her own destiny are predominant themes in Arab women’s literature.

### *The Arab Family: Old Patterns, Modern Trends*

The traditional Arab family is the arena in which the mother-daughter relationship develops in most of the texts discussed in this work. Whether it is urban, as in Fadwa Tuqan’s autobiography, *A Mountainous Journey*, rural, as in Nawal El Saadawi’s life story, *A Daughter of Isis*, or Bedouin, as in Miral al-Tahawy’s novel, *The Tent*, the norms, values, and attitudes that govern this family are shown to profoundly impact the interactional dynamics between mothers and daughters. In view of the fact that this family is frequently the target of criticism by both autobiographical and fictional daughters, it is useful to provide a brief description of its characteristic features. Understanding the structure of this family, particularly the precarious position of women within it, helps to illuminate critical issues in the relationship

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. Madiha al-Safti attributes this intriguing fact to the factor of religion: “This situation may be understood in the light of the religious heritage of Arab society, which constitutes a dimension in the family structure and in the dynamics of relations among members of the same family; this is because religion is still a significant element of present culture even during the process of change.” See al-Safti, *Impact of Social and Economic Changes on the Arab Family: An Exploratory Study* (New York: United Nations, 1992), p. 70. For the role of Islam in everyday life, see MacLeod, *Accommodating Protest*, pp. 38–41.

between mothers and daughters. Two qualifications need to be made. First, as Margot Badran emphasizes in her account of the early twentieth-century Egyptian feminists and their efforts to “recast the family,” one should bear in mind “that there was no monolithic family—constructions of family varied considerably across the classes; that there have always been exceptions to ‘rules’ within class; and that family-based controls over women were not total, and women have found ways to resist domination.”<sup>26</sup> Second, nowadays, as in the past, the lives of women are difficult to place in either the traditional or modern category.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, in this discussion I use the terms *traditional* and *tradition* versus *modern* and *modernity* as useful simplifications. These terms are porous and not static; they are always changing. Not only does the traditional pattern show endless variations but there was never a period of “true tradition” in Arab history, just as at present there is no “true modern” society in the Arab region.<sup>28</sup>

The traditional Arab family has been described as extended, patrilineal, patrilocal, patriarchal, endogamous, and occasionally polygamous.<sup>29</sup> In the typical patriarchal family, the father has absolute authority over all members of his household. His authority derives from being the provider and the owner of the family’s property. The father’s supreme position as *rabb al-usra* (“lord of the family” or *pater familias*) contrasts with the subordinate status of his wife and children, who are socially and economically dependent on him. They are expected to submit to his rule, obey his wishes, and treat him with deference. The wife is commonly assigned to the home domain, where her tasks center around domestic chores, childbearing, and child rearing. Relationships within the patriarchal family are organized hierarchically by age and gender: the young are subordinate to the old and females to males. In conservative Arab societies, such as the Gulf states, the subordination of women is reflected in veiling, seclusion, and sexual segregation. Muslim family law discriminates against women in matters related to marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance.<sup>30</sup> Although recent advances in

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<sup>26</sup> Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, p. 124.

<sup>27</sup> Arlene Elowe MacLeod, “Transforming Women’s Identity: The Intersection of Household and Workplace in Cairo,” in Singerman and Hoodfar, *Development, Change, and Gender in Cairo*, p. 27.

<sup>28</sup> Gregg, *The Middle East: A Cultural Psychology*, p. 46.

<sup>29</sup> Moghadam, *Modernizing Women*, p. 124; Barakat, *The Arab World*, p. 97.

<sup>30</sup> Muslim family law permits a man to marry up to four wives at any one time, but women must be monogamous; the husband has a unilateral right to repudiate his

women's education and employment, as well as the effects of urbanization, industrialization, public education, and global media saturation have undermined the authority of the father, the patriarchal tradition still persists, and patriarchal attitudes and practices remain strong, especially in the countryside.<sup>31</sup>

All the literary texts included in this study depict the patriarchal nature of the family. Hanan al-Shaykh's novel, *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, paints a penetrating portrait of Arab family life in an unnamed oil desert state, where women are treated to many luxuries except freedom. Nawal El Saadawi's provocatively entitled novel, *God Dies by the Nile*, shows the impact of the patriarchal tradition on the oppression of peasant women in the Egyptian countryside. Conversely, Latifa al-Zayyat's *The Open Door*, set in a middle-class family in Cairo during the turbulent political years of the 1940s and early 1950s, illustrates the gradual erosion of the father's authority.<sup>32</sup> Given that the father is all-powerful, he is often cast in the image of god or king in women's literature. For example, in El Saadawi's short story "The Picture," a little daughter worships her strict father, who is the village mayor, like a god—until she stumbles upon him raping the maid in the kitchen.<sup>33</sup> In Sakina Fuad's story, "Pharaoh Is Drowning Again," the oppressed wife perceives her tyrannical husband as a ruthless Pharaoh.<sup>34</sup>

The Tunisian sociologist Abdelwahab Bouhdiba points out that the pattern of domination-submission is not limited to the family: "The authority relationship has deep roots in our traditional society. It binds not only man to woman and parents to children but also teacher to pupil, master to disciple, employer to employee, ruler to ruled, the

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wife; child custody laws favor the husband, who almost always receives custody of the children; a woman is entitled to half the share of a male heir. Progressive legislation varies from one Arab country to another. For a comparative view of Muslim family law, see *UN Arab Human Development Report 2005*, pp. 189–200.

<sup>31</sup> *UN Arab Human Development Report 2005*, p. 169. For a discussion of Middle Eastern patriarchy, see Deniz Kandiyoti, "Islam and Patriarchy: A Comparative Perspective," in Nikki Keddie and Beth Baron, eds., *Women in Middle Eastern History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), pp. 23–42; and Marcia C. Inhorn, *Infertility and Patriarchy: The Cultural Politics of Gender and Family Life in Egypt* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), pp. 2–10.

<sup>32</sup> Nawal El Saadawi, *Mawt al-rajul al-wahid 'ala al-ard* (Beirut, 1974); English translation: *God Dies by the Nile*. Translated by Sherif Hetata. London: Zed Books, 1985.

<sup>33</sup> In Dalya Cohen-Mor, ed. and trans., *Arab Women Writers: An Anthology of Short Stories* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), pp. 60–64.

<sup>34</sup> In *ibid.*, pp. 163–70.

dead to the living and God to man.”<sup>35</sup> Other Middle Eastern scholars have drawn an analogy between the Arab family and Arab society, noting that similar sets of values and relationships prevail within both the family and the wider society. They thus see the family as a small-scale mirror image of society. Hisham Sharabi, for example, considers the patriarchal family to be the model of both traditional and partly modernized or neopatriarchal Arab society.<sup>36</sup> He emphasizes the oppressive nature of both the family system and the larger social system:

In its basic features the family is the society in microcosm. The values that govern it—authority, hierarchy, dependency, repression—are those that govern social relations in general; the conflict and antagonism, the sociability and incoherence, which characterize relations among the members of the family, also characterize those among the members of the society. The hierarchical and authoritarian structure of the family finds its reflection in the structure of society (irrespective of its “social system”), and the individual is oppressed in both. As a system, the family simultaneously embodies and sustains the larger social system.<sup>37</sup>

Sharabi calls attention to the striking parallel in the dominance of the father and the ruler, the axis around which the family and the nation are organized: “Between ruler and ruled, between father and child, there exist only vertical relations: in both settings the paternal will is the absolute will, mediated in both the society and the family by a forced consensus based on ritual and coercion.”<sup>38</sup>

Halim Barakat shares this view, extending the analogy between the family and the regime to all other social institutions:

The Arab family has served as a society in miniature. As suggested earlier, similar sets of relationships prevail within both the family and the society as a whole as well as in the economic, religious, political, and educational institutions. Stratified and patriarchal relations are common to all. For instance, each political leader, employer, and teacher behaves and is conceived of as a father. The ruler refers to the citizens as “my children” and may even name the country after his family. The employer-employee relationship is another form of parent-child or father-son relationship. The educational system (even at the college level) is also

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<sup>35</sup> Abdelwahab Bouhdiba, *Sexuality in Islam*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Saqi Books, 2004), p. 220.

<sup>36</sup> Hisham Sharabi, *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 41.

<sup>37</sup> Sharabi, “Impact of Class and Culture on Social Behavior,” pp. 244–45.

<sup>38</sup> Sharabi, *Neopatriarchy*, p. 7.

patriarchal; students are constantly referred to as “my children” or treated in a paternalistic manner. Vertical relationships continue to prevail and are regulated and reinforced by a general overall repressive ideology based on *at-tahrib* (scaring) and/or *at-tarhib* (enticement) rather than on discussion aimed at persuasion. Arab society, then, is the family generalized or enlarged, and the family is society in miniature.<sup>39</sup>

These scholars are concerned that the family has become an obstacle to change and progress in the Arab world. In view of the strong resemblance between the patriarchal family and the autocratic regime, it is not surprising that a literary work narrating “a successful challenge of repressive family rules reflects a collective dream of a freer and more equal society.”<sup>40</sup> Nawal El Saadawi’s autobiographical novel, *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, depicts this aspiration. In this text, a young Egyptian daughter rebels against the constraints of family and society when she decides to study medicine. She completes her medical training and becomes a successful physician, proving to everyone that a woman’s place is not necessarily at home. After a short, unhappy marriage and a long period of celibacy, she meets a man with whom she forms an intimate and loving relationship. Although her road to self-development was rocky, she finally finds fulfillment on both the professional and the personal level.

The traditional upbringing of children in Arab families is characterized by an early differentiation in the handling and care of boys and girls. Most frequently, boys are favored at the expense of girls. In addition, there are two sets of gender role expectations, one for boys and one for girls. While female socialization emphasizes domestic tasks and the home domain, male socialization emphasizes external work and the public domain. Boys have most of the rights and few restrictions, whereas girls have most of the duties and multiple prohibitions.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Barakat, “The Arab Family and the Challenge of Social Transformation,” in Fernea, *Women and the Family in the Middle East*, pp. 45–46. An abridged version of this paragraph appears in Barakat, *The Arab World*, p. 118.

<sup>40</sup> Tetz Rooke, *In My Childhood: A Study of Arabic Autobiography* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1997), p. 237.

<sup>41</sup> Although the literary texts included in this study show variations in patterns of socialization according to class, level of education, religious affiliation, geographic area, and setting (bedouin, rural, or urban), common elements emerge that cut across those lines, and it is upon these elements that the following account is based. For additional information on the upbringing of children in the Arab world, see Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, ed., *Children in the Muslim Middle East* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).

The process of socialization takes place primarily within the home, where the children are under the exclusive supervision of their mother and other female relatives during the first seven to nine years of their lives. The virtual monopoly that the mother has over her young child is the direct result of the traditional division of labor, which assigns to the wife the role of homemaker, responsible for the household chores and the upbringing of the children. The father assumes the role of provider, responsible for the livelihood of the family and its standing in the community. Frequently, but not invariably, the father is associated with threatening paternal authority and the mother with protective maternal nurturance. The father is strict and disciplinarian, relying on forceful corrective measures such as physical punishment. He is formal and remote, spending most of his time outside the home. By contrast, the mother is gentle, affectionate, and compassionate; she is constantly present and involved in the children's daily activities. She also serves as a buffer or mediator between the father and the children, effectively managing to circumvent his commands or prevent a harsh punishment. As a result, the children, especially sons, develop a stronger emotional attachment to the mother and closer ties with her than with the father, whom they respect but fear.<sup>42</sup>

The mother's central role in her children's lives is acknowledged in Arabic proverbial lore. "The mother is the world" (*al-dunya umm*), states a popular Lebanese saying. "A fatherless child is not an orphan," asserts another colloquial saying, implying that the mother is more important than the father as a source of love, care, and protection because of her lifelong devotion to her children. "He who has his mother need have no worry," confirms a third proverb, and yet another highlights the contrast between the mother's commitment and the father's absence: "The mother builds a nest while the father runs away." An ironic cameo-portrait of the patriarchal father is provided by the Egyptian fiction writer Sahar al-Muji. Her short story "The Dummy" depicts his absence from, and hence irrelevance to, the daily affairs of his wife and children. Aloof and taciturn, the father becomes a lifeless statue, the ultimate victim of his own position of power and privilege.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> See also Gregg, *The Middle East: A Cultural Psychology*, pp. 221–28.

<sup>43</sup> In Cohen-Mor, *Arab Women Writers*, pp. 127–28.

The socialization of boys and girls takes different paths around the age of seven to nine. The boy enters the men's world, represented by the father, whereas the daughter continues to be socialized by her mother and other female relatives living in the extended household. In rural and working-class families, the mother gives the girl domestic tasks and may even charge her with the care of younger siblings. The oral histories of five Egyptian women collected in Nayra Atiya's *Khul Khaal*, especially the narrative of Om Naeema the fisherwoman, illustrate the impoverished circumstances that force girls to assume housework responsibilities at a young age.<sup>44</sup> Despite the spread of free public education, more boys than girls are sent to school at all levels. Statistically, the Arab region has one of the highest rates of female illiteracy—as much as one half, compared to only one third among males.<sup>45</sup> Aside from economic hardship, this situation is attributed to the parents' fear that a girl will bring dishonor on her family if she is allowed to get out into the world. In addition, popular attitudes are opposed to a girl's education, which is viewed as superfluous, and potentially disruptive, to her primary roles as wife and mother. Marilyn Booth notes that “while the gender gap in literacy narrows greatly from the older to the younger generations, gender disparities in education remain a problem even where girls' schools have long existed.”<sup>46</sup>

Until recently, only in the educated urban class was adolescence experienced “as the kind of ‘problem’ period between childhood and adulthood that it is in the West.”<sup>47</sup> Among the Bedouins, villagers, and

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<sup>44</sup> Atiya, *Khul Khaal*, pp. 129–77.

<sup>45</sup> The rate of illiteracy in the Arab world is higher than the world average and higher than the average for developing countries. At present there are about 60 million illiterate adults in the Arab world, i.e., 40 percent of all adults, most of them impoverished and rural women. Despite the fact that girls perform better in school than boys, fewer of them complete post-basic school education, mainly because of economic problems and parental attitudes. See *UN Arab Human Development Report 2005*, pp. 7–8, 77–87.

<sup>46</sup> Marilyn Booth, “Arab Adolescents Facing the Future: Enduring Ideals and Pressures to Change.” In B. Bradford Brown, Reed W. Larson, and T. S. Saraswathi, eds., *The World's Youth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 224. She reports that in Egypt, as of 1993, 62.2 percent of women were illiterate compared to 37.8 percent of men. However, the overall rates of illiteracy have declined in the Arab region in recent decades: from 1970 to 2000, they have dropped from 70.7 percent (56.1 percent for males and 85 percent for females) to 38.8 percent (27.1 percent for males and 51 percent for females).

<sup>47</sup> Morroe Berger, *The Arab World Today* (New York: Doubleday, 1962), p. 136; Berger's observation is supported by more recent studies such as Fernea, *Children in the Muslim Middle East* (1995), p. 10; Booth, “Arab Adolescents facing the Future”

the uneducated urban masses, adolescence barely existed: the transition from childhood to adulthood was marked by marriage, which usually took place after puberty.<sup>48</sup> In milieus where adolescence has emerged as a developmental stage, as in metropolitan areas, the differential treatment of boys and girls has mostly intensified. The main reason for this is the taboos surrounding female sexuality. The sexual code of traditional Arab culture places a prime value on a girl's virginity, which is equated with the honor of the family. Pre-marital sex is not only forbidden but considered the gravest sin a girl can commit. Consequently, from early childhood a girl grows up in constant fear of losing her virginity. This fear is shared by her mother and male guardians, who find themselves burdened with the heavy responsibility of having to protect the girl's chastity—and the family honor. Hence, while for a boy adolescence is a period of growing freedom, for a girl it brings increasing constraints on her freedom of movement, the way she dresses, and the company she may keep.<sup>49</sup>

The experience of growing up female figures prominently in Arab women's literature. Several commonalities emerge from their individual depictions. While the early years of childhood appear to be playful and joyous, the onset of puberty often brings an abrupt end to this carefree period. In traditional settings, adolescent girls are prohibited from mixed-sex play; they begin to wear the veil; they lose their freedom of movement and are confined to their homes until they can be married off. In their desire to safeguard their daughters' chastity, the parents may remove them from school and terminate their education. A recent anthology of short stories by Arab women writers illustrates this abrupt and painful transition of girls from childhood to adulthood.<sup>50</sup> In the story "That Summer Holiday" by the Palestinian Samiya At'ut, a ten-year-old schoolgirl is forbidden by her mother to wear shorts again or to play in the street because her breasts have started to develop. In "The Parting Gift" by the Saudi Umayma al-Khamis, a teenage girl is withdrawn from school by her mother because she

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(2002), pp. 210–13; and Gregg, *The Middle East: A Cultural Psychology* (2005), pp. 252–53, 269.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, Susan Schaefer Davis and Douglas A. Davis. *Adolescence in a Moroccan Town: Making Social Sense* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1989).

<sup>50</sup> Dalya Cohen-Mor, ed. and trans., *Arab Women Writers: An Anthology of Short Stories* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).

accepted a gift from a suitor. In "Let's Play Doctor" by the Egyptian Nura Amin, a university student is severely beaten by her father and shut up at home because she dared to fall in love with a fellow student.<sup>51</sup> These stories show that when it comes to women's chastity and the family honor, elements of modernity, especially education, do not prevail in the face of traditional attitudes. As the UN's recent *Arab Human Development Report* concludes: "In spite of woman's entry into education and professional life, the question of sex, good repute and honor has barely been affected by the major structural transformations that took place in the past century."<sup>52</sup> It should be noted that the practices of veiling, seclusion, and sexual segregation are locally determined and vary by class, setting, and region. In rural communities, for example, they are not observed and women and men work side by side in the fields. In areas where these practices are enforced, as in the conservative Arab Gulf states, they prevent direct contact between men and women and emphasize the polarity between them. The result is the existence of two separate societies, male and female, each with its own roles, rules, and rewards.<sup>53</sup>

Ritual events in the life of girls play an important part in their socialization. The oral histories of Egyptian women in Atiya's *Khul Khaal* emphasize the traumatic experience of circumcision. Unlike male circumcision, which is a festive and public event, female circumcision is a private affair, attended by close female relatives only. The ritual, which signifies the girl's assumption of her female identity, is regarded as an indispensable prerequisite for marriage. The age at which it is performed is not fixed and varies between six and twelve. A mainly Nilotic custom which is no longer practiced among the upper classes, it is still widespread among the lower classes in Egypt (among both Copts and Muslims) and Sudan, as well as in some parts of the Sahara, Southern Arabia, Southern Iraq, and the Bedouins of Jordan and Palestine.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>51</sup> In *ibid.*, pp. 30–31, 32–37, 38–40 respectively.

<sup>52</sup> *UN Arab Human Development Report 2005*, p. 173.

<sup>53</sup> Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, pp. 137–45; Fernea and Bezirgan, *Middle Eastern Muslim Women Speak*, p. xxv. See also Lila Abu-Lughod, *Writing Women's Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>54</sup> Gregg, *The Middle East: A Cultural Psychology*, pp. 195–98; Nahid Toubia, "The Social and Political Implications of Female Circumcision: The Case of the Sudan," in Fernea, *Women and the Family in the Middle East*, pp. 148–59.

Marriage, the only legitimate framework within which the individual's needs for sex and procreation are met in Arab societies, is the ultimate test of a woman's loyalty to her family. Traditionally, marriage has been seen as a union between two families rather than as an individual affair. Although the parents are required by custom to seek the consent of their daughter before they promise to give her in marriage, it does not necessarily follow that they will abide by her wishes. Hence an arranged marriage is often experienced as a forced marriage by a girl whose personal preference is ignored because of overriding family considerations, social, economic, and political.

The wedding night is the critical moment when the family honor is proven. The act of defloration, especially when performed by the groom (rather than the midwife, as in rural Egypt), testifies to the virginity of the bride and the virility of the groom.<sup>55</sup> "A woman's honor is her most important asset" (p. 77), says Suda the housekeeper in Atiya's *Khul Khaal*. "Blood has to come out," remarks Om Gad, wife of the garagekeeper. "It stands for honor. It stands for enormous honor. A girl's honor is worth the world. Her happiness is built on it. It's destroyed without it and can never be repaired" (p. 14). The blood stained gauze or sheet must be produced either immediately or on the following day for inspection by the families of both bride and groom. Defloration is practiced mainly among the poor urban and rural strata of contemporary Arab society. However, the existence of flourishing clinics that provide artificial virginity to women at a high cost indicates that the rite occurs also among the higher social classes.<sup>56</sup>

The early years of marriage are stressful for the young bride who, in traditional circumstances, is married off soon after puberty to a man who may be many years her senior. Marriage marks a girl's transfer from the authority of her father to that of her husband. The custom of patrilocal residence requires that she leave the parental home and

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<sup>55</sup> Abdessamad Dialmy, "Sexuality in Contemporary Arab Society," *Social Analysis* 49, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 3. Available from [www.accessmylibrary.com](http://www.accessmylibrary.com). Accessed 1/24/2007; Nawal El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*, trans. Sherif Hetata (Boston: Beacon, 1980), pp. 28–29; Inhorn, *Infertility and Patriarchy*, p. 95.

<sup>56</sup> For a discussion of artificial virginity, see Fatima Mernissi, "Virginity and Patriarchy," in Mernissi, *Women's Rebellion and Islamic Memory* (London: Zed Books, 1996), pp. 34–45. For depictions in literature, see Ghada al-Samman's story "Adhra' Beirut" (The Virgin of Beirut), in her collection *Rahil al-marafi al-qadima* (Beirut, 1973), pp. 149–66, and Alifa Rifaat's story "Honor," in Badran and Cooke, *Opening the Gates*, pp. 78–83.

join the household of her husband's family, where she becomes subordinate to her mother-in-law and must serve and obey her or else risk punishment by the husband. Separated from her mother and frequently at the mercy of a cruel and jealous mother-in-law, the young wife can improve her servile position only with the birth of children, especially sons. In due course, when her sons grow up and marry, she will behave toward her daughters-in-law just as she was taught and treated by her own mother-in-law. In this way, female relationships and gender roles are reproduced from generation to generation.<sup>57</sup>

The preceding account of traditional patterns of Arab family life is borne out by the writings of Arab women of the past half century.<sup>58</sup> These writings span an eventful period in the history of Arab countries, which experienced the transition from colonization to independence and the development of modern nation-states. While the older writers among this group (e.g., al-Idilbi, b. 1912, Tuqan, b. 1917, Chedid, b. 1920, al-Zayyat, b. 1923) depict their heroines' childhood (or their own childhood) as conforming to the traditional patterns, writers of a later generation (e.g., El Saadawi, b. 1930, Mernissi, b. 1940, al-Shaykh, b. 1945, Abouzeid, b. 1950) highlight the marked differences between their own upbringing (or their heroines' upbringing) and that of their mothers and grandmothers. Such disparities between mothers and daughters are even more conspicuous in the works of younger writers

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<sup>57</sup> Evelyne Accad, *Veil of Shame* (Sherbrooke, Quebec: Editions Naaman, 1978), pp. 19–31. In reference to the tyrannical mother-in-law, Deniz Kandiyoti remarks: "A woman's life cycle in the patrilocally extended family is such that the deprivation and hardship she may experience as a young bride are eventually superseded by the control and authority she will have over her own daughters-in-law. The powerful post-menopausal matriarch thus is the other side of the coin of this form of patriarchy." (Kandiyoti, "Islam and Patriarchy," p. 32).

<sup>58</sup> Some examples are: Andrée Chedid's *From Sleep Unbound* (1952), Latifa al-Zayyat's *The Open Door* (1960), Nawal El Saadawi's *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* (1965), *Two Women in One* (1975), and *Woman at Point Zero* (1977), Ulfat al-Idilbi's *Sabriya: Damascus Bitter Sweet* (1980), Samar Attar's *Lina: A Portrait of a Damascene Girl* (1982), Hanan al-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra* (1980) and *Women of Sand and Myrrh* (1988), Fadwa Tuqan's autobiography, *A Mountainous Journey* (1985), Alia Mamdouh's *Mothballs* (1986), Leila Abouzeid's *Year of the Elephant* (1984) and autobiographical novel, *The Last Chapter* (2000), Salwa Bakr's *The Golden Chariot* (1991), Fatima Mernissi's fictionalized memoir, *Dreams of Trespass* (1994), Nawal El Saadawi's two-part autobiography, *A Daughter of Isis* (1995) and *Walking through Fire* (1998), Miral al-Tahawy's *The Tent* (1996) and *The Blue Aubergine* (1998), and Leila Ahmed's personal account, *A Border Passage* (2000). These texts cover a huge geographic area, from Mernissi's Fez to al-Zayyat's Cairo to Tuqan's Nablus to al-Shaykh's Beirut to Attar's Damascus and Mamdouh's Baghdad, and from Chedid's Egyptian countryside to al-Tahawy's Egyptian desert and al-Shaykh's Arabian desert.

(e.g., al-Tahawy, b. 1968). Altogether, the changes across generations that emerge from the myriad of voices and narratives assembled in this study are dramatic in terms of the improvement in Arab women's status, education, employment, and range of choices.

Although the family continues to demand loyalty and, for the majority of the people, remains the framework of everyday life and the primary source of support and security, it is the focus of rapid social change currently in progress throughout the Arab world—a fact evidenced by the numerous testimonies and portrayals in these literary texts. The process of modernization has brought about new conceptions of the family and gender roles, as well as changes in family relationships, parenting styles, child rearing practices, and expectations for puberty and dating. While the family remains patriarchal and hierarchical in structure, its centrality as a basic socioeconomic unit has been undermined by the state and other competing institutions. State-sponsored education, employment, and welfare services have replaced some of the traditional responsibilities of the Arab family, thus reducing its function and power. In addition, there has been a shift away from the extended family to a modified version or a nuclear family, especially in the cities. Traditional patterns of marriage and divorce are also changing, partly because of legal reforms in the areas of polygamy, repudiation (a male's unilateral right to divorce), and age of marriage. Different sets of relationships are developing within the family as fathers, no longer the sole breadwinners, are forced to relinquish their control of family life and share authority and responsibility with other family members. Since modernization is more advanced in the cities than in the villages, more changes can be observed in urban centers than in rural areas.<sup>59</sup>

Many factors have transformed the Arab family. Urbanization, industrialization, war and revolution, legal reforms, and foreign influences all have necessitated the development of new coping strategies for survival. New realities have caused family forms to proliferate. For example, international labor migration and greater geographic mobility have produced a rise in women-headed households where, in the absence of the husbands, the wives take charge of the family and manage its tasks.<sup>60</sup> The Egyptian fiction writer Alifa Rifaat portrays

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<sup>59</sup> Barakat, *The Arab World*, p. 100; Moghadam, *Modernizing Women*, pp. 122–33.

<sup>60</sup> See Homa Hoodfar, "Egyptian Male Migration and Urban Families Left Behind: 'Feminization of the Egyptian Family' or Reaffirmation of Traditional Gender Roles?"

this situation in a short story entitled “An Incident in the Ghobashi’s Household.” In this narrative, the husband, a poor villager, finds work in Libya for a year. His resourceful wife avails herself of his absence to solve a family crisis: the pregnancy of her unwed, teenage daughter.<sup>61</sup> Even where the extended family persists it often assumes new functions, such as childcare for working mothers. Other important trends include smaller families and later marriages. Not only has the average age of marriage for both men and women increased, but the age gap between the spouses has declined.<sup>62</sup> Most dramatically, the number of women who choose not to marry and remain single is growing.<sup>63</sup> Fatima Mernissi highlights the revolutionary aspect of this phenomenon: “The concept of an adolescent woman menstruating and unmarried is so alien to the entire Muslim family system that it is either unimaginable or necessarily linked with *fitna* (social disorder).”<sup>64</sup> “The unimaginable,” remarks Valentine Moghadam, “is now a reality.”<sup>65</sup> This reality is vividly depicted in a short story entitled “A Successful Woman” by the Egyptian writer Suhayr al-Qalamawi. In this narrative, a simple Cairene hairdresser who is disappointed in love decides not to look for a husband any more but rather to open her own hair salon, earn her own living, and remain free and independent.<sup>66</sup>

The new or relatively new family forms develop different patterns of interactional dynamics. The husband-wife and father-child relationships are becoming more egalitarian, and the external boundaries of the family are becoming more open. Although the power asymmetry between men and women in the home has not disappeared, roles have become less separate and more fused as the spouses have begun to share

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in Singerman and Hoodfar, *Development, Change, and Gender in Cairo*, pp. 51–79.

<sup>61</sup> In Alifa Rifaat, *Distant View of a Minaret and Other Stories*, trans. Denys Johnson-Davies (London: Heinemann, 1987), pp. 23–28.

<sup>62</sup> For example, in Algeria, Jordan, and Tunisia, women marry at age twenty-four or twenty-five; in Egypt and Morocco, it is twenty-one or twenty-two; even in a conservative Arab state such as Saudi Arabia it is twenty-two, in Qatar and the UAE it is twenty-three. The average ages of marriage for men are usually three to five years higher than those of young women. See Moghadam, *Modernizing Women*, pp. 138–40.

<sup>63</sup> Hoda Rashad and Maged Osman, “Nuptiality in Arab Countries: Changes and Implications,” and Zeinab Khadr and Laila O. el-Zeini, “Families and Households: Headships and Co-Residence,” in Nicholas S. Hopkins, ed., *The New Arab Family* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2003), pp. 39–42, 140–60 respectively.

<sup>64</sup> Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, p. xxiv.

<sup>65</sup> Moghadam, *Modernizing Women*, p. 138.

<sup>66</sup> In Cohen-Mor, *Arab Women Writers*, pp. 265–69.

activities and cooperate in making decisions, particularly regarding the family budget and the upbringing of the children.<sup>67</sup> This is mirrored, for example, in Hanan al-Shaykh's *Women of Sand and Myrrh* in the monologue of Suha, the Lebanese heroine. Suha's husband accepts her decision to leave him in the conservative desert state, where he has found work, and return with their son to Lebanon. In May Telmisyany's *Dunyazad*, a young Egyptian couple grapple together with the tragedy of their stillborn baby girl. While the importance of gender and the family patriliney in child rearing remains crucial, the value of daughters relative to that of sons has increased as girls have become more educated and many work outside the home and contribute to the family income. Significantly, educated mothers tend to be more democratic and permissive in their approach to child rearing than uneducated mothers, who rely more on authoritarian and coercive methods of socialization.<sup>68</sup>

Public education has been a key factor in empowering women and changing traditional attitudes toward gender roles and male-female relations. Educated youth of both sexes tend to adopt more liberal views of marriage, seeking a relationship based on love and equality rather than on parental approval and male domination. Cell phones, the Internet, cyber cafes, and shopping malls facilitate contact between young adults, giving them more opportunities for friendship, dating, and romance. However, these people tend to be from the more economically privileged, and more urbanized, strata.<sup>69</sup> Large social sectors in the Arab world still remain closer to tradition than to modernity. Regardless of modernizing forces, the family still enjoys a great solidarity, and young men and women show less alienation from the family than from any other social institution.<sup>70</sup>

In no area is social change more dramatic than in the emancipation of women. Legal reforms, public education, and access to the labor market have improved women's position in the family and in

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<sup>67</sup> Altorki, *Women in Saudi Arabia*, p. 51; Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, pp. xxii–xxix, 150–53.

<sup>68</sup> For the difference between the socialization methods used by educated and uneducated mothers, see Julinda Abu Nasr and Irene Lorfin, "Socialization of Preschool Children in Lebanon," in *Social and Moral Issues of Children and Youth in Lebanon* (Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, Beirut University College, 1981), pp. 26–28.

<sup>69</sup> Booth, "Arab Adolescents Facing the Future," p. 212.

<sup>70</sup> Barakat, *The Arab World*, pp. 100, 102.

the wider society. Valentine Moghadam's study, *Modernizing Women*, shows that the range of options available to women has expanded with respect to family formation, duration, and size. Trends include later marriages, smaller families, more schooling, more formal-sector employment, and greater decision making among women. Moghadam notes that although these trends are relevant to a small percentage of the urban female population, they are conspicuous enough to arouse opposition by conservative forces, who see the emancipation of women as "having the greatest potential of any factor to destroy the patriarchal family and its political, economic, and demographic structure."<sup>71</sup> This explains why conservative legal scholars and Islamist ideologues have resisted progressive changes in Muslim family law.

The most conservative reaction this change in the status of women has precipitated has come in the form of Islamic fundamentalism. Fatima Mernissi explains fundamentalism as a "defense mechanism against profound changes in both sex roles and the touchy subject of sexual identity."<sup>72</sup> At present, many Arab families are caught between conflicting value systems—old and new, traditional and modern, Islamic and Western. The emergence of competing agencies of socialization, including public schools, the mass media, and political movements, adds to the dilemma facing many parents. Despite this state of flux, the Arab family continues to be the most important vehicle of socialization of young children throughout the Arab world.<sup>73</sup>

"Women are at the center of change and discourse about change in the Middle East," writes Valentine Moghadam.<sup>74</sup> The rapid social change in women's status has generated tension and conflict in the relations between the sexes. In examining the effects of modernization on male-female dynamics in Moroccan society in the mid-1980s, Mernissi observed that they "seem to be going through a period of anomie, of deep confusion and absence of norms."<sup>75</sup> She attributed this situation to the fissures between ideology and reality: whereas half a century ago there was coherence between Muslim sexual ideology and Muslim social reality as reflected in the family system, in recent decades there is a wide gap between them. As she put it: "The

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<sup>71</sup> Moghadam, *Modernizing Women*, pp. 136, 143.

<sup>72</sup> Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, p. xxvii.

<sup>73</sup> Barakat, *The Arab World*, p. 118.

<sup>74</sup> Moghadam, *Modernizing Women*, p. 278.

<sup>75</sup> Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, p. 97.

present situation is characterized by a flagrant discrepancy between women's newly acquired rights to use traditionally male spaces such as streets, offices, and classrooms, and the traditional ideology according to which such rights are clear cases of trespass.<sup>76</sup> The anxiety-provoking ambiguities arising from this situation cause stress and friction between the sexes. The frustration and resentment experienced by men on account of women working outside the home are further aggravated by the scarcity of jobs and high unemployment rate in many Arab countries. More recent studies lend support to Mernissi's observations and show that they still reflect today's reality in various parts of the Arab world.<sup>77</sup>

Besides its impact on male-female relations, social change has had profound effects on the relations between women, including mothers and daughters. Many of the literary texts examined in this work show that generational differences in outlook and attitudes are inevitable, with daughters being less bound by tradition than their mothers and more open to new ideas (e.g., Latifa al-Zayyat's *The Open Door*, Samar Attar's *Lina: A Portrait of a Damascene Girl*, and Leila Ahmed's *A Border Passage*). Still, women's responses to the rapidly changing social reality are not uniform and manifest conflicting trends. On the one hand, there are radical feminists, represented by Nawal El Saadawi, who seek immediate and total equality for women and who tend to combine feminism with Arab nationalism. Inspired by the model of the modern emancipated and independent Western woman, they want to achieve the same results for the Arab woman. Opposed to them are female members of resurgent Islamic movements, represented by Zaynab al-Ghazali, who reject the ideal of the Western woman and support the return of women to their traditional roles and position under Islam. They publicly declare their commitment to Islam by wearing the traditional Arab women's garb, including the veil discarded by their mothers.<sup>78</sup> While secular feminists are mainly from the middle and upper-middle class, Islamist women come from a wide background ranging from the lower- to the upper-middle class. The feminist

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>77</sup> See, for example, al-Safti, *Impact of Social and Economic Changes on the Arab Family*, p. 2.

<sup>78</sup> Moghadam, *Modernizing Women*, pp. 151–92. For the symbolism of the veil and veiling, see MacLeod, *Accommodating Protest*, pp. 97–141; and Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments*, pp. 159–67.

scholar Margot Badran, in her comprehensive study of feminism in Egypt (and other Muslim Middle Eastern societies), notes that “secular feminism arose largely in a ‘religious era,’ while Islamic feminism surfaced in a ‘secular era.’”<sup>79</sup> She delineates the 1970s and 1980s as a time of ideological polarization, when Egyptian feminists were lined up on opposite sides. She believes that the antagonism between the two camps has been tempered since the 1990s for pragmatic and political reasons on the part of feminist, pro-feminist, and Islamist women alike, and that their differences have not precluded them from engaging in common forms of activism.<sup>80</sup> Regardless of whether they are secularists or Islamists, today’s Arab women are different from their mothers or grandmothers. As the myriad texts in this study show, the modern Arab woman has far more options.

Pulled between tradition and modernity, the Arab family is in a transitional state. Given that the Arab family is society in miniature and that Arab society is the family generalized or enlarged, the transitional nature of the Arab family is mirrored in Arab society.<sup>81</sup> Some scholars maintain that the absence of both genuine traditionalism and authentic modernity in contemporary Arab society makes it neither traditional nor modern but rather neopatriarchal.<sup>82</sup> Other intellectuals see the family both as the means to, and the object of, social reform. While the public debate about the nature and future of the family goes on, this long-standing institution continues to give structure to the lives of millions of people throughout the many regions and countries comprising the Arab world.

### *Paradise Lies at the Feet of Mothers*

The lives of the majority of Arab women unfold largely within the domestic domain, where their roles are primarily those of wives and mothers. What motivates these women to seek and accept these roles?

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<sup>79</sup> Margot Badran, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences* (Oxford: One World, 2009), p. 304.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 141–63, and chaps. 5, 13. For additional information on Arab feminism, see Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, pp. 223–50; see also Nadjé al-Ali, *Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East: The Egyptian Women’s Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>81</sup> Barakat, *The Arab World*, p. 119; Al-Safti, *Impact of Social and Economic Changes on the Arab Family*, pp. 1–2.

<sup>82</sup> Sharabi, *Neopatriarchy*, p. 23; see also pp. 3–8.

While traditional patterns of child rearing provide a key to understanding how girls are socialized to fulfill gender role expectations, they do not explain why women readily embrace these roles along with the social identities that they entail. This section examines the influence of Islam—the established state religion in most Arab countries—in orienting women toward the traditional institutions of marriage and motherhood.

Marriage is the desired state of affairs in Islam. All true believers must endeavor to marry at an early age, and by doing so, they fulfill a major religious obligation. The sayings of the prophet Muhammad, “Marriage is incumbent on all who possess that ability” and “Marriage is half of Islam,” reflect the great significance accorded to marriage. Conversely, Muhammad’s statement, “There is no monasticism in Islam,” affirms that the notion of celibacy is alien to Islam. Marriage, the ultimate objective of which is procreation, realizes the essence of Islam: it is not only a safeguard for sexual morality but also the means by which the Muslim nation is perpetuated. Marriage provides self-fulfillment for its members, while serving as the mechanism through which the world is populated with believers to accomplish Allah’s will in history, to spread Islam and fight for its cause.<sup>83</sup> Children, the natural outcome and primary goal of marriage, are considered among the richest blessings of Allah: the larger their number, the greater the strength and prestige of the family. Moreover, it is a religious duty to be fruitful and multiply, as the prophet Muhammad is reported to have said, “Get married, reproduce and let your number increase.”<sup>84</sup> Hence a woman’s roles as wife and mother assume the utmost importance.

Islam places the mother on a pedestal, expressing deep appreciation and gratitude for her hard work in creating a home for her family and looking after the needs and well-being of her husband and children. Her exhausting efforts in bearing and rearing her children, her tireless participation in the daily affairs of her household, and her many sacrifices for the sake of her family’s happiness earn her great respect in this life and rewards in the hereafter. Muhammad’s much-quoted saying, “Paradise lies at the feet of mothers,” speaks of the ultimate

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<sup>83</sup> John L. Esposito, *Women in Muslim Family Law* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1982), p. 15.

<sup>84</sup> Muhammad Abdul-Rauf, *The Islamic View of Women and the Family* (New York: Robert Speller & Sons, 1979), p. 85.

reward: through motherhood, the Muslim woman obtains Allah's highest blessing, namely, a place in paradise. Furthermore, paradise awaits those who cherish and honor their mothers, for obeying and serving one's mother is a pious duty whose fulfillment assures the believer a place in paradise. From an Islamic perspective, "the Muslim mother has consequently a great feeling of security about the type of care and consideration she can expect from her children when she reaches old age."<sup>85</sup>

The idea that the primary domain of a woman's activity is the home is explicitly expressed in both the Koran and the Hadith. "And stay quietly in your homes" (33:33), enjoins the Koran. A famous tradition quotes Muhammad as having said to women: "Take care of the home. That is your jihad."<sup>86</sup> Another tradition declares: "A woman is nearest to her Lord when she is inside her home."<sup>87</sup> And yet another tradition affirms: "Everyone of you is in charge and everyone will be accountable for those given in his charge... The man is in charge of the household and the woman is in charge of the home of her husband and his children."<sup>88</sup> These central sources of religious guidance clearly establish the basic division of labor between men and women in Islam: a woman's tasks are those of wife and mother, while a man is the breadwinner and the active participant in public life.<sup>89</sup>

In recognition of the vital service that the mother renders to her family, the Koran commands respect for, and noble treatment of, the mother: "And We have enjoined upon man to do good to his parents. His mother bears him with trouble and she brings him forth in pain" (56:15). While both parents deserve deference, favoring the mother over the father carries a religious sanction. According to a famous tradition attributed to the prophet Muhammad, the mother deserves thrice the devotion and gratitude due to the father: "A man came to the Messenger of Allah and said: 'O Messenger of Allah, who is most entitled

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<sup>85</sup> Fatwa Bank Online. Name of Fatwa: "Muslim Woman's Role as a Mother." Date of Fatwa: 4 December 2004. Available from <http://www.islamonline.net>. Accessed 15 January 2005.

<sup>86</sup> Musnad Ahmad, hadith 23257; cited in Khalid Baig, *First Things First* (Stanton, CA: Open Mind Press, 2004), p. 260.

<sup>87</sup> Abdul-Rauf, *The Islamic View of Women and the Family*, p. 66.

<sup>88</sup> Bukhari, hadith 4801; cited in Baig, *First Things First*, p. 268.

<sup>89</sup> Baig, *First Things First*, p. 260. It should be noted that these traditional ideas are being challenged by new feminist interpretations of Islamic sources, most notably by Fatima Mernissi.

to the best of my friendship?' The Prophet said, 'Your mother.' The man said, 'Then who?' The Prophet said, 'Your mother.' The man further said, 'Then who?' The Prophet said, 'Your mother.' The man said again, 'Then who?' The Prophet said, 'Then your father.'"<sup>90</sup> According to another popular tradition, "The person who has the greatest right over the woman is her husband, and the person who has the greatest right over the man is his mother."<sup>91</sup>

In her concise study, *Motherhood in Islam*, Aliah Schleifer argues that the Islamic concept of motherhood is not one of punishment, as in the Judeo-Christian tradition, but of martyrdom. She draws on the work of the Arab scholar Ahmad Ghunaim, who shows that the terms used to describe pregnancy and childbirth are the same as those used to describe the person who goes to fight jihad, that considering the mother a martyr places her in the highest category with respect to Allah's blessings, and that several traditions include the woman who dies in childbirth as one of the martyrs. He thus demonstrates the difference between a woman who faces childbirth as a punishment for the "original sin" and the Muslim woman who sees it as an opportunity to become a martyr for the sake of Allah.<sup>92</sup>

Based on additional passages from the Koran and the Hadith, Schleifer concludes that "although in Islam there are many ways to open the gates of Paradise, the vehicle especially chosen for the woman is that of pregnancy, childbirth, nursing, and conscientious rearing of her children."<sup>93</sup> Motherhood is the "exclusive opportunity" of the Muslim woman "to obtain Allah's blessings and rewards, as the difficulty of pregnancy and childbirth is a way which Allah has allotted only to the female sex."<sup>94</sup> In her view, the strenuous efforts that the mother is required to exert on several levels, physical, emotional, and mental, are richly repaid: she gains social standing, economic support, and spiritual rewards. Schleifer emphasizes that although the Muslim woman is

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<sup>90</sup> This version is cited from Lila Abu-Lughod, *Writing Women's World: Bedouin Stories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 45. See also Mualana Muhammad Ali, *A Manual of Hadith* (Lahore: The Ahmadiyya Anjuman Ishaat Islam, n.d.), pp. 373–74.

<sup>91</sup> Cited in Aliah Schleifer, *Motherhood in Islam* (Louisville: The Islamic Texts Society, 1996), pp. 85–86.

<sup>92</sup> Ahmad Ghunaim, *Al-Mar'a mundhu al-nasha'a bayna al-tarjim wa-al-takrim* (Cairo: Al-Kaylani, 1980), pp. 139, 141; cited in Schleifer, *Motherhood in Islam*, pp. 2–3, 51–59.

<sup>93</sup> Schleifer, *Motherhood in Islam*, p. 58.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

allowed to pursue other occupations, her primary responsibilities are to Allah and her family. Any other activities should be secondary and voluntary, for a woman's basic role is that of wife and mother.<sup>95</sup>

The fact that Islam sanctions marriage and motherhood as the key to a woman's status and prestige is not lost on Arab women, the majority of whom adhere to the faith of Islam and are members of Muslim societies. "Muslim women are fully cognizant of the need to attain marital position and motherhood for commanding respect and status in their own kin group and community," observes Nadia H. Youssef. "They are not about to deemphasize willingly the only role that now gives them a bargaining position in the social structure."<sup>96</sup> She stresses that women's acceptance of their traditional roles reflects both a highly effective socialization process and a free choice based on their own assessment of the gains and losses involved. "Children represent much more than a form of social insurance against the threat of divorce or polygamy, for women derive status from motherhood even when divorced or rejected for a second wife. Offspring guarantee to the woman status and respect that extends far beyond her position in the conjugal home and reaches into the heart of her own family's and the community's valuation of her."<sup>97</sup> Hence the high fertility rates in Muslim societies, which, though they have declined in recent years, are still among the highest in the world.<sup>98</sup> Thus prevailing religious and cultural values combine to produce traditional female role expectations. As Suda the housekeeper in Atiya's *Khul Khaal* affirms: "In our part of the world, a woman has to have children and a man must have children, otherwise, what will he leave behind him when he dies?"<sup>99</sup>

The Tunisian sociologist Abdelwahab Bouhdiba suggests that Princess Scheherazade in *The Thousand and One Nights* owes her salvation to nothing other than the fact that she had wasted no time in giving her master three male children in thirty-three months: "One of

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>96</sup> Nadia H. Youssef, "The Status and Fertility Patterns of Muslim Women," in Lois Beck and Nikki Keddie, eds., *Women in the Muslim World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 86.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Current statistical data show that fertility rates are 4.2 for the Arab region vs. 1.6 for high-income OECD countries. The highest fertility rates in the Arab region are in Yemen (6.2), the West Bank (5.6) and Saudi Arabia (4.1). The lowest fertility rates are in Tunisia (2.0). See *UN Arab Human Development Report 2005*, p. 290.

<sup>99</sup> Atiya, *Khul Khaal*, p. 75.

them walked, and one crawled, and one was at the breast.”<sup>100</sup> Bouhdiba asserts that “every traditional Arab woman dreams of just that.”<sup>101</sup> Needless to say, having a large family puts a heavy burden on the father, who has to provide for the children, and on the mother, who has to raise them. Inevitably, this creates stress in the mother-daughter relationship. First, elder daughters are often charged with the care of their younger siblings.<sup>102</sup> They may be withdrawn from school to help their mothers with the housework and childcare or to contribute to the family income by getting a job. Daisy al-Amir’s short story, “The New-comer,” depicts such a situation. In this narrative, the eldest daughter resents her mother for bearing so many children. Withdrawn from school to work in a factory and help her father pay the increasing cost of living, the daughter’s greatest fear is that the mother will get pregnant yet again and thus condemn her to a life of slavery for the sake of the family.<sup>103</sup> Indeed, the flip side of the saying “Paradise lies at the feet of mothers” is that the duty to obey and serve one’s mother can become a tool of oppression and exploitation of daughters. This is reflected in the case of the Egyptian poet ‘A’isha Taymur (1870–1902) and her daughter: in order to pursue her literary interests, Taymur delegated the management of her large household to her twelve-year-old daughter. Preoccupied with her literary activities, she failed to see the early signs of deteriorating health in her daughter, who died at the age of eighteen.<sup>104</sup>

Further, it is difficult for a mother who raises a large family to develop a close relationship with her daughter. The more children she has, the less personal attention she can give to each child. Abdelwahab Bouhdiba notes that “the multiplication of births and the decreasing space between them have imposed a virtual ‘rotation’ of affection. The child-mother relations are ‘rationed,’ and since the same factors affect the father-child relation, the total result is a deficit of attention that

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<sup>100</sup> Edward William Lane, trans., *The Thousand and One Nights* (London: East-West, 1981), vol. 3, p. 671.

<sup>101</sup> Bouhdiba, *Sexuality in Islam*, p. 216.

<sup>102</sup> See, for example, Seteney Shami and Lucine Taminian, “Children of Amman: Childhood and Child Care in Squatter Areas of Amman, Jordan,” in Fernea, *Children in the Muslim Middle East*, p. 74.

<sup>103</sup> In Cohen-Mor, *Arab Women Writers*, pp. 187–91.

<sup>104</sup> Mervat Hatem, “The Microdynamics of Patriarchal Change in Egypt and the Development of an Alternative Discourse on Mother-Daughter Relations: The Case of ‘A’isha Taymur,” in Joseph, *Intimate Selving in Arab Families*, pp. 192–94.

grows more and more pronounced.”<sup>105</sup> This deficit may lead to more rivalry and quarreling among the siblings who, in turn, may seek compensation in surrogate parental figures and relationships. As some of the literary texts in this study show, a daughter’s failure to find a substitute source of parenting and nurturance may cause emotional and psychological problems in her, as well as self-destructive behaviors.

In a traditional culture that puts a heavy emphasis on motherhood, the fate of a barren woman is tragic: her husband has the right to divorce her or take an additional wife. The anxiety provoked by a failure to conceive can be debilitating for the wife, as illustrated by Ihsan Kamal’s story “The Spider’s Web” and Ghada al-Samman’s “Another Scarecrow.”<sup>106</sup> The sad testimony of Dunya in Atiya’s *Khul Khaal* expresses the plight of a childless woman: “Although I live well and have everything I need: a mixer, a television, a radio, and a tape recorder, this problem hangs over me and colors everything around it... I see to my husband’s needs and am generally content, but because I am childless, I feel unsettled. The problem of living without having children of my own is a terrible one. It’s like living in the shadow of a curse, something which I can’t and am not allowed to forget and which makes everything else in life that much more of a struggle” (pp. 127–28).<sup>107</sup>

Failure to give birth to a son can be as devastating to a woman. In traditional milieus, a woman who has only daughters is not much better off than a childless wife.<sup>108</sup> The negative impact that this situation may have on the mother-daughter relationship is depicted in Miral al-Tahawy’s novel *The Tent*. In this narrative, set in a Bedouin family, the mother is so grief-stricken over her failure to bear her husband a son that she is completely unavailable to her daughters, emotionally or otherwise. Thus the “sacred calling” of motherhood is not free of pitfalls. It can be both a sanctuary and an entrapment for mothers as well as daughters.

<sup>105</sup> Bouhdiba, “The Child and the Mother in Arab-Muslim Society,” p. 139.

<sup>106</sup> Ghada al-Samman, “Another Scarecrow,” in Dalya Cohen-Mor, *A Matter of Fate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 200–210; Ihsan Kamal, “The Spider’s Web,” in Cohen-Mor, *Arab Women Writers*, pp. 172–77.

<sup>107</sup> For further information on this topic, see Inhorn, *Infertility and Patriarchy*, pp. 51–85, 222–60.

<sup>108</sup> Bates and Rassam, *Peoples and Cultures of the Middle East*, pp. 221–22.

*Core Issues in the Mother-Daughter Relationship*

According to Andrea Rugh, if the two principles of same-sex closeness in the family and greater closeness between the mother and her child are carried to their logical conclusion, one might expect the mother-daughter relationship in Arab families to be extremely close.<sup>109</sup> However, this expectation is not borne out by the majority of the texts included in this study. Not only is the mother-daughter relationship frequently conflicted and strained, but the mother-son relationship is generally close and strong.

Many factors affect the manner in which mothers and daughters behave and relate to each other, not only the influences of family, culture, and society, but also intra-psychic forces. The prevailing psychological discourse interprets the mother-daughter relationship in terms of bonding, symbiosis, separation, individuation, autonomy. Developmental theory in particular mandates that the daughter separate herself from her mother in adolescence in order to achieve an autonomous sense of self. Because autonomy involves the rejection of parental identifications and authority, the conflict between mother and daughter is seen as inevitable but essential to the full development of the daughter into an adult. The mother-daughter relationship is particularly difficult because it requires both fusion and separation for successful individuation to occur. Too much mother love can lead to symbiosis; too little, to maternal deprivation. Separation is traumatic and threatening, and merger is maintained only at the expense of the daughter's personal growth and maturation. From a traditional developmental perspective, a daughter who is overly attached to her mother beyond the age of adolescence is "immature," while the mother who cannot let go of her adolescent daughter is "clinging" or "possessive" or "overprotective" or "living vicariously through" her daughter. If the daughter is to develop into a well-adjusted and functioning adult, both she and her mother must work through the difficult task of achieving a proper balance between separateness and closeness.<sup>110</sup> It is worth noting that some feminists have challenged the assumption that separation from the mother, both literally and developmentally, is the

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<sup>109</sup> Rugh, *Family in Contemporary Egypt*, p. 80.

<sup>110</sup> Walters, *Lives Together, Worlds Apart*, pp. 10–12; Anderson and Sabatelli, *Family Interaction*, pp. 89–107.

hallmark of mature individuation, and also questioned its applicability to non-Western cultures.<sup>111</sup>

Psychoanalytic theory assumes the influence of unconscious forces that may drive mothers and daughters apart. The daughter's blossoming process, which coincides with the mother's aging process, creates feelings of fear and envy in the mother. In patriarchal society, aging women are considered valueless because they lose their reproductive capacity. The threat which the daughter's youth and sexuality pose to the mother's position in the family may cause resentment alternating with guilt in both mother and daughter. The mother's feelings of fear and envy may be aggravated by an attitude of contempt and rejection on her daughter's part, as well as by her competitiveness for the affections of other members of the family, notably the father and the son. Eventually, the daughter's budding sexuality compels the mother to restrict her freedom and keep her under close supervision. The mother's behavior, albeit dictated by the rigid moral code, is experienced as controlling and oppressive by the daughter. Hence the relationship between them is bound to be fraught with tension and hostility.

In her seminal book, *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir highlights the complexity of the mother-daughter relationship: "The daughter is for the mother at once her double and another person, the mother is at once overweeningly affectionate and hostile toward her daughter; she saddles her child with her own destiny: a way of proudly laying claim to her own femininity and also a way of revenging herself for it."<sup>112</sup> De Beauvoir observes that a similar process can be found in "pederasts, gamblers, drug addicts, in all who at once take pride in belonging to a certain confraternity and feel humiliated by the association: they endeavor with eager proselytism to gain new adherents"<sup>113</sup> As the daughter grows older and boldly asserts herself as an independent person, the ambivalence in the mother's attitude toward her intensifies. On the one hand, the mother cannot bear to have her daughter become her double, a substitute for herself. On the other hand, she cannot bear to have her double become an *other*. This paradox underlies her behavior: "In her daughter the mother does not hail a member

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<sup>111</sup> O'Reilly and Abbey, *Mothers and Daughters*, pp. 10–11; Joseph, *Intimate Selving in Arab Families*, pp. 1–15.

<sup>112</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), p. 281.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

of the superior caste; in her she seeks a double. She projects upon her daughter all the ambiguity of her relation with herself; and when the otherness, the alterity, of this *alter ego* comes to be affirmed, the mother feels herself betrayed."<sup>114</sup> She also fears that in becoming a woman the daughter condemns her to death. After all, "the double is a dubious personage, who assassinates his original, as we see in Poe's tales and in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, for example."<sup>115</sup> The mother's behavior varies greatly depending on whether she sees "a promise of ruin or resurrection" in her daughter's maturation. In the end, when the daughter becomes an adult, "a more or less uneasy friendship" is established between them, "but the one remains forever disappointed and frustrated; the other will often believe that she is under a curse."<sup>116</sup> De Beauvoir concludes her discussion of the mother's situation by debunking two popular misconceptions: that maternity is enough in all cases to crown a woman's life, and that the child is sure of being happy in its mother's arms.<sup>117</sup> In her view, the conflicts from which women suffer owing to their inferior position in patriarchal society take an aggravated form in the relationship between mothers and daughters.

Many of these psychological and feminist observations are reflected in Arab women's literature. In most of the texts examined in this study, the daughter, whether fictional or autobiographical, seeks to express her individuality and gain autonomy by rebelling against her mother. The mother opposes the daughter's bid for freedom and independence, condemns her search for authentic selfhood, and demands conformity to age-old customs and traditions. The daughter attempts to shape her own destiny and find self-fulfillment through other avenues than marriage and motherhood, whereas the mother insists on following conventional gender roles and models of behavior. Such perennial struggles between mothers and daughters figure prominently in the fiction of, for example, Nawal El Saadawi and Emily Nasrallah. They are dramatized in novels as early as Layla Ba'labakki's *Ana ahya* (I Am Alive, 1958) and as recent as Miral al-Tahawy's *Blue Aubergine* (1998). In these works, the role model that the mother provides for her daughter is one of powerlessness, submissiveness, servitude, dependency,

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 517; emphasis in the original.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p. 588.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., p. 521.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., pp. 521–27.

silence, and ignorance. Not surprisingly, the daughter rejects everything the mother stands for.

Ambivalence is a salient feature in depictions of conflicted mother-daughter relationships. The feelings of love-hate toward each other wax and wane in the life course of these heroines, at times to be resolved only in old age or after the mother's death. In Nawal El-Saadawi's novel *Searching*,<sup>118</sup> for example, the heroine, Fouada, a trained research chemist, cherishes her mother's love and at the same feels suffocated by it. "She loved her mother more than anything else, more than Farid [her lover], more than chemistry, more than discovery, more than her very self. She was incapable of freeing herself from this love though she wanted to, as though she had fallen into an eternal trap whose chains and ropes bound her legs and hands—from which she would never in all her life be able to release herself" (p. 60). In this text, the mother was forced to marry her husband and give up her education, and so she lives vicariously through her daughter, encouraging her to further her career. "Your future lies in studying my daughter. There is no use in men" (p. 13). And yet, in spite of her modern outlook, the mother remains a largely negative figure in her daughter's life because she transmits a legacy of frustrations to her. She hoped that Fouada would enter medical school, but her scholastic score at the end of the secondary school was too low. Aware that she does not measure up to her mother's expectations because of her failure to make any discovery in science or to get a promotion at work, Fouada is tormented by feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt on the one hand, and resentment and hostility toward her mother on the other.

In Fatima Mernissi's fictionalized memoir, *Dreams of Trespass*, the heroine is her mother's alter ego. A secluded woman who never learned to read and write, the mother imparts her unfulfilled dreams of education, career, and personal freedom to her daughter, relying on her to realize them. Early on, she teaches her daughter the importance of rebellion and resistance to any form of injustice or oppression. However, when the young Fatima rebels against her, the mother feels betrayed and punishes her for disobedience. And when Fatima goes to school and begins to gain knowledge—and power—the mother feels both proud and humbled. Despite such tensions, the mother-daughter

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<sup>118</sup> Nawal El Saadawi, *Al-Gha'ib* (Cairo, 1970); translated into English as *Searching*, trans. Shirley Eber (London: Zed Books, 1991). All quotations are from this translation.

relationship in this narrative is remarkable for its nurturing care. It is also one of the few positive portrayals of a mother-daughter relationship in Arab women's literature.

Sometimes the daughter develops a strong emotional attachment to her father, who dotes on her and spoils her—much to the mother's envy and resentment. This is depicted in Miral al-Tahawy's novel, *Blue Aubergine*,<sup>119</sup> which is set in an Egyptian family of peasant, Bedouin, and urban ancestry. From early childhood the heroine, Nada, and her mother, whom she sarcastically calls "Queen Nariman," are embroiled in a competition over the father's affections. In this family, the cultural models of parenting are reversed: the father is the source of protection and nurturance, while the mother is the embodiment of threatening parental authority. The mother is abusive to her daughter: she hits her, pinches her thighs, puts hot chili peppers in her mouth, and ties her to the bed leg in the dark—all for the sake of disciplining her and teaching her proper manners. The mother calls her daughter "Satan's brood" (p. 7) and considers Nada's presence in her life "a disaster, a huge dampener on all her aspirations" (p. 10). In contrast, the father is gentle and affectionate: he often hugs his daughter and kisses her, and uses terms of endearment like "Papa's little darling" and "pretty lady" when addressing her (p. 22). As an adolescent, Nada notices that her mother is jealous of her youth. She critically recounts: "Some of her friends will smile when I wear my hair down and say to her: 'Nada is grown up and become a bride.' My mother will not be happy. I know that from the way she screws her features up whenever those words are repeated. She will stand in front of her mirror and look at the thin folds that have suddenly developed under her eyelids and she will talk to him sadly about things that are no longer appropriate for someone of her age" (p. 23). When Nada becomes a graduate student at Cairo University, she seeks to gain an understanding of her conflicted relationship with her mother by writing her dissertation on the topic of "The Dialectic of Rebellion and Gender Oppression." Only after reading through numerous sources "under the words rebellion and guilt and aggression between the mother and the daughter" (p. 10) does she find some answers to her questions. In this text, the mother becomes more sympathetic toward her daughter only after the

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<sup>119</sup> Miral al-Tahawy, *Blue Aubergine*, trans. Anthony Calderbank (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2002). All citations are from this translation.

father dies; and the daughter begins to forgive her mother only after she experiences the miseries of unrequited love for a man.

Given the relative silence on the psychodynamics of mothering and gender in Arab families, it is useful to consider feminist theory. In her examination of the psychology of gender socialization within the family, Nancy Chodorow highlights the centrality of women's mothering to the shaping of the self and to the perpetuation of gender difference and inequality.<sup>120</sup> Chodorow writes that mothers relate to daughters in a different way than they do to sons. Because the daughter and the mother are the same gender, the mother relates to her daughter as an extension of herself. Consequently, girls learn to see themselves as partially continuous with their mothers, whereas boys learn early on of their difference and separateness. Boys define their identity by contrast, not relation, to the mother, thus developing a more autonomous sense of self and firmer ego boundaries, whereas girls persist in defining themselves relationally, and so their experience of self contains more flexible or permeable ego boundaries. The influence of maternal care is what leads to the different sense of self in men and women: "Women's mothering, then, produces asymmetries in the relational experiences of girls and boys as they grow up, which accounts for crucial differences in feminine and masculine personality, and the relational capacities and modes which these entail."<sup>121</sup> Chodorow argues that this situation prepares boys for participation in nonrelational spheres (i.e., the cold and detached world of public and economic affairs), and girls in relational spheres (i.e., the emotional world of family and children). She suggests shared parenting as a means of stopping the cycle's repetition and subverting the reproduction of gender difference and hierarchy.

Chodorow's relational model of female selfhood, with its emphasis on the centrality of the mother-daughter relationship to the ongoing process of female individuation, is particularly relevant to the traditional Arab family, where the mother has virtual monopoly over the early years of the child's life. The relational sense of self that an Arab daughter acquires from her mother and brings to her own mothering is reinforced by the extended character of the traditional Arab family and by the separate world of women, who rely heavily on their relationships with other women. While this provides the daughter with the capacity for intimate relational connections throughout her adult

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<sup>120</sup> Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, pts. 2, 3.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

life, it may result in problems of merging with others, difficulties with interpersonal boundaries, and issues with self and identity. The biography of the Egyptian poet 'A'isha Taymur (1870–1902) shows the blurring of boundaries between mother and daughter, where 'A'isha confused her needs with those of her daughter Tawhida. As Mervat Hatem points out, 'A'isha transferred her domestic responsibilities to her daughter in order to pursue her literary interests, assuming that her daughter would either take pleasure in her mother's literary study or enjoy a feminine occupation like the management of the household. 'A'isha's conduct bore resemblance to that of her mother before her, who also confused her needs with those of her daughter. Hatem notes that "in both instances, this confusion of boundaries contributed to the conflicted relations between mothers and daughters."<sup>122</sup> The autobiography of the Palestinian poet Fadwa Tuqan, *A Mountainous Journey*, shows that growing up in the relational world of a harem had detrimental effects on her sense of self and personal identity. Tuqan sharply criticizes her mother, who was unnurturing to her, and condemns the atmosphere of overinvolvement fostered by the women in the extended household. She attributes many of her psychological problems in adulthood, especially her poor self-image and low self-esteem, to her traditional upbringing and childhood experiences. As for the public, "masculine" sphere of work, which Chodorow describes as nonrelational, Arabic works of literature show that it is filled with male relationships. This is depicted most vividly in Naguib Mahfouz's Cairo Trilogy, where the patriarch, Ahmad Abd al-Jawwad, cultivates close ties with a group of friends from the "public" world. In fact, it is at home with his wife and children that he is cold and detached, whereas in the outside world he is warm, kind, and genial. As many critics have pointed out, Chodorow's theory glosses over important variations across cultures, as well as intragender differences and intergender similarities within any given culture.<sup>123</sup>

### *Arab Culture and the Mother-Daughter Relationship*

While some issues in the dynamics between mothers and daughters in Arab families are common to this relationship the world over,

<sup>122</sup> Hatem, "The Microdynamics of Patriarchal Change in Egypt," p. 206.

<sup>123</sup> For a critique of Western psychodynamic axioms, see Joseph, *Intimate Selving in Arab Families*, pp. 7–17.

others are specific to Arab culture. Based on the works of Arab women writers examined in this study, it is possible to single out the cultural factors that impact this dyad. Many of them are deeply rooted customs and traditions that mark each developmental milestone in a woman's life from the cradle to the grave. Others embody the patriarchal institutions, values, and norms of Arab Muslim societies. Naturally, these cultural factors do not occur in isolation but are inextricably interwoven with social, religious, economic, and political aspects. Several pivotal cultural features, such as the centrality of the family in Arab societies and of motherhood in Islam, have been discussed earlier. Frequently the target of criticism in the works of Arab women writers, the burden of heritage and custom is depicted as an impediment to women's liberation and to progress in the wider society. While the winds of change have made inroads into traditional Arab culture, many fundamental issues have remained the same. In what follows, the culture-specific influences that shape the mother-daughter relationship in Arab families are described. The discussion proceeds along the major stages in a woman's life course.

### I. *The Preferential Treatment of Boys*

It is generally recognized that Arab culture places a much higher value on sons than on daughters and that the overwhelming desire of all parents is to have at least one son. The preference for boys derives from various motives: to perpetuate the family, carry on its name, and take the father's place after his death; to assist the family financially by getting a job or by helping the father on the farm or in the shop; to take care of the parents in old age. In Bedouin and rural communities, the issue of group safety and protection contributes to the higher value accorded to male children, because only males can "bear arms," fighting enemies and defending against attacks by thieves and intruders. The value of a female is her capacity to "bear children," that is, to become a mother of male offspring.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Hamed Ammar, *Growing Up in an Egyptian Village* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954), pp. 94–95; Saad Gadalla, "The influence of reproductive norms on family size and fertility behavior in rural Egypt," in Saad Eddin Ibrahim and Nicholas S. Hopkins, eds., *Arab Society: Social Science Perspectives* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1985), pp. 116–118; Patai, *The Arab Mind*, p. 92.

The prestige and social recognition that come from having sons are such that in traditional milieus a woman who has only daughters is not much better off than a childless wife. A man who has only female children is derided as *abu banat*, “the father of daughters.” Conversely, when blessed with male offspring, both the wife and the husband assume the honorific title of “mother of” or “father of” followed by the name of their first born son. According to popular belief—and in contrast to scientific evidence—the woman is the party responsible for a childless marriage as well as for the sex of the child. Hence the birth of daughters and the absence of male heirs are commonly blamed on the wife. A husband whose wife is barren has the right to divorce her or take an additional wife.<sup>125</sup>

In traditional milieus, the differential treatment of boys and girls is manifested in many ways: at birth, the arrival of a son is marked by a celebration, that of a girl is often ignored; in infancy, boys are nursed twice as long as girls; in childhood, boys are given priority with regard to family resources—food, clothes, living space, and spending money; in adolescence, boys gain more freedom and continue to receive an education, but girls lose their freedom of movement, are withdrawn from school, and are kept at home under close supervision. Favored and indulged from birth, the boy learns quickly that the women of his family exist to satisfy his every wish, whereas the girl, deprived and marginalized, discovers that her main function is to serve and obey the men in her family.<sup>126</sup>

The higher valuation of boys is also expressed in the festivities surrounding male rites of passage. In Atiya’s *Khul Khaal*, for example, Om Naeema recounts that in her village the midwife charges twice as much for delivering a boy than for delivering a girl, and the male nurse charges fifty percent more for circumcising boys than for circumcising girls. As she explains: “The difference in fees is that boys are more precious than girls in our countryside, and therefore the reward expected for handling a boy is higher than that expected for females” (p. 140). Even Alice, an educated, middle-class Coptic Christian, admits that she favored her eldest son above her daughters: “Youssef is my eldest son. I loved him above the girls and treated him better than any of

<sup>125</sup> Inhorn, *Infertility and Patriarchy*, pp. 63–64, 176–79.

<sup>126</sup> Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments*, pp. 119–23; Gregg, *The Middle East: A Cultural Psychology*, pp. 228–29.

the others. Everything to me was Youssef, Youssef, Youssef” (p. 43). She justifies her behavior by referring to her vulnerable position as a wife: “If a woman is totally dependent on her husband as I was in the early years of marriage, then she longs for sons. She prefers them to daughters because she feels they’ll stand by her in time of need—they have the means to stand by her” (p. 48). Ironically, her son let her down: “My hopes were disappointed in the case of my eldest son and it’s my youngest daughter who asks for me and insists on sending me E&5 from her paycheck every month” (p. 49).

Although many mothers acknowledge the comfort and support they get from their daughters, they admit that they felt disappointed when they were born. As Leila, the educated village woman in a recent anthology of oral histories of Palestinian women, *Three Mothers, Three Daughters*, recounts: “I was eighteen when I had Lilian, she’s my first. How did I feel about having a girl first? Look, anyone who tells you it makes no difference is not telling the truth. A woman always wants her first to be a boy, even the second. A woman is given more credit if she has sons, that’s the way it is in Arab society. Now that Lilian has grown up, I’m glad I had a girl. Daughters stay close to you, sons go off. But you’re influenced by those around you. So, naturally, when Lilian was born I was disappointed. I had wanted a boy.”<sup>127</sup>

Still, there are exceptions to this general attitude and not all Arab mothers treat their sons with favoritism. While many of the daughters in the novels and autobiographies examined in this study complain that their mothers discriminated against them (e.g., Huda Shaarawi in her memoirs *Harem Years*, Zahra in Hanan al-Shaykh’s *The Story of Zahra*, the unnamed heroine in Nawal El Saadawi’s *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*), some daughters declare that they were treated equally (e.g., Fatima Mernissi in her fictionalized memoir *Dreams of Trespass*, and Leila Ahmed in her personal account *A Border Passage*). Obviously, even in traditional families there are nonconformist mothers who question the patriarchal values of their society and are reluctant to impose them on their daughters. Imparting their unfulfilled dreams and ambitions to their daughters, they encourage them to get an education and better their lives. The type of mothering that such mothers provide is characterized by nurturance and solidarity.

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<sup>127</sup> Michael Gorkin and Rafiq Othman, *Three Mothers, Three Daughters: Palestinian Women’s Stories* (New York: Other Press, 1996), p. 194.

These non-conformist mothers infuse their daughters with a sense of self-worth and determination necessary for facing challenges and attaining freedom and independence. They form an alliance with their daughters, teach them strategies of resistance, and lend them support in their struggles for self-fulfillment. The pattern of mother-daughter relationship in this instance is one of connection, empowerment, and transformation.<sup>128</sup> This pattern is more common among mothers who are themselves educated and thus more keenly aware of the link between education and female empowerment. As Alice in Atiya's *Khul Khaal* has learned from personal experience, it is education that makes choice and economic independence possible: "From mother to daughter the desire to learn was instilled. It served mothers and daughters well, especially in times of trouble."<sup>129</sup> In this respect, education is a vital tool for women's emancipation as well as for social change.

Although the preferential treatment of a son often brings the daughter into conflict with the mother, it does not necessarily follow that in the absence of such discrimination there is intimate bonding between mother and daughter. This is evident in Leila Ahmed's narrative, *A Border Passage*, where the author declares that her mother "never showed any preference for her sons over her daughters,"<sup>130</sup> and yet their relationship lacked closeness and was invariably cold and distant.

## II. *The Sexual Code*

In no area of life is the differential treatment of girls more apparent than in sexual matters. The sexual mores of traditional Arab culture are characterized by severe prohibitions for both men and women. Nevertheless, it is the women who bear the brunt of sexual repression. Female sexuality is surrounded by strict rules designed to safeguard premarital chastity in women and their marital fidelity. The various measures employed toward these ends include segregation, veiling, seclusion, and circumcision. The most powerful deterrent against illicit

<sup>128</sup> O'Reilly and Abbey, *Mothers and Daughters*, pp. 1–18.

<sup>129</sup> Atiya, *Khul Khaal*, p. 29; see also Alice's remarks regarding the positive effects of her working as a seamstress on her self-image and her relationship with her husband, in *ibid.*, pp. 39, 48, 52.

<sup>130</sup> Leila Ahmed, *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America—A Woman's Journey* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 96.

sex is the value attached to virginity. While honor in its nonsexual connotation is termed *sharaf*, a woman's sexual honor is called '*ird*. The *sharaf* of the man depends on the '*ird* of the women in his family. Under all circumstances, a girl must preserve her virginity intact until her first marriage. To lose her virginity to anyone but her husband is the gravest sin she can commit. Correspondingly, the greatest dishonor that can befall a man results from the sexual misconduct of his daughter, sister, or cousin (*bint 'amm*).<sup>131</sup>

When a girl brings dishonor on her family by losing her virginity, it is incumbent on her paternal relatives—her father, brother, or uncle—to avenge the family honor by severely punishing her. In conservative circles, this means putting her to death. Ritual murder is considered the only way to cleanse the shame inflicted on the family honor. Public opinion in many Arab countries, notably Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and the West Bank, permits crimes of honor, and the courts treat them leniently.<sup>132</sup> The high incidence of various forms of violence against women, including honor crimes, domestic violence, and female circumcision, is a topic of concern in the UN's recent *Arab Human Development Report*, which concludes that "the family in many parts of the Arab world has been transformed from a place of safety and security into a place where any type of violence against women may be practiced."<sup>133</sup> Thus from early childhood a girl grows up in constant fear of losing her virginity. This fear is shared by the mother, who is responsible for her daughter's upbringing and morality, as well as by the girl's father and brothers, who have the duty to protect, and if necessary to avenge, the family honor.

The repressive attitude to sex has profound psychological consequences. The topic of sex is taboo, children receive no sex education, and their minds are infused with the notion of the sinfulness of sex. Since any manifestation of sexuality on the part of the child is ignored, denied, or stifled, sexuality, in all its aspects, becomes associated with

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<sup>131</sup> Ahmed Abou-Zeid, "Honour and Shame among the Bedouins of Egypt," in J. C. Peristiany, ed., *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), pp. 245–59; Patai, *The Arab Mind*, pp. 120–23.

<sup>132</sup> El Saadawi, *The Nawal El Saadawi Reader* (London: Zed Books, 1997), p. 251. For statistics on honor crimes in the Arab world, see *UN Arab Human Development Report 2005*, pp. 116, 143–44, 198.

<sup>133</sup> *UN Arab Human Development Report 2005*, p. 116.

shame and transgression.<sup>134</sup> From this arises some of the most bitter complaints of daughters against mothers in Arab women's literature. Not only is the mother depicted as the enforcer of the rules, but frequently she is harsher than the father in disciplining the daughter for the slightest misconduct. Such clashes between mothers and daughters, with the resultant strain in their relationship, are vividly portrayed in Nawal El Saadawi's *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, Latifa al-Zayyat's *The Open Door*, and Miral al-Tahawy's *Blue Aubergine*, to mention just a few examples. Ghada al-Samman's story "'Adhra' Beirut" (The Virgin of Beirut) accuses the mother of complicity in the ritual murder of her daughter for the sake of the family honor. The mother in this story is present in the room when her husband and sons force her daughter, who got pregnant outside the bonds of marriage, to swallow poison; she rushes to close the curtains to hide the crime; then she abandons her daughter to die alone in her room and goes to visit her neighbors; she drinks coffee with them and watches television, as if nothing has happened.<sup>135</sup>

### III. Rites of Passage into Womanhood

#### *Circumcision*

The rite of circumcision pits mother against daughter at the formative stage in the daughter's development—childhood, inevitably scarring her for life both emotionally and physically. The role of mothers in perpetuating this custom is central. In many instances, it is the mother who insists on circumcising her daughter, just as it is the mother who puts pressure on her daughter to agree to an arranged marriage. This may cause feelings of betrayal and abandonment in the daughter, who may harbor anger and resentment toward the mother. The phenomenon of maternal enforcement of patriarchal values, which reflects a deep level of internalization of these values, can be attributed to a number of social and psychological factors. First, women, who are less valued in patriarchal society, attempt to gain legitimacy in the eyes of men by enforcing male norms. Secondly, women who have themselves endured these coercive customs seek rationalization and validation for

<sup>134</sup> El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, pp. 12–15, 74–90, 133–54.

<sup>135</sup> Ghada al-Samman, "'Adhra' Beirut," in idem, *Rahil al-marafi al-qadima* (Beirut, 1973), pp. 149–66.

their harsh experiences by touting them as beneficial in preparing girls for future married life. Thirdly, there is a tendency for victims of abuse to identify with the aggressor, thus setting in motion a vicious cycle of oppression. In patriarchal society, men oppress women, and women act out their frustrations and aggression on those family members over whom they retain some control—their daughters. Lastly, social pressure and the fear of stigmatization also play a role in motivating mothers to uphold this ancient custom.

As noted earlier, female circumcision is practiced among the lower classes in Egypt and Sudan.<sup>136</sup> The oral histories of five Egyptian women in Atiya's *Khul Khaal* reveal the depth of the trauma they suffered in childhood and the effect it had on their attitudes toward the ritual in adulthood. Om Gad, circumcised when she was nine, says: "There are some occasions in life which are unforgettable. One of these was my circumcision" (p. 11). Despite her painful memories, she intends to follow the custom: "We emerged into this world and found this habit already existed. It's just so. My people do this, and so I must do like they do" (p. 11). As she graphically describes, her eldest daughter was circumcised by a midwife: "Her knife was blunt and it took three tries by the end of which the girl was a wreck, and I was a bundle of nerves" (p. 12). Despite this harrowing experience, Om Gad has no reservations about circumcising her youngest daughter, aged eleven, and even asserts that "circumcision does not affect sexual desire" (pp. 12–13). By contrast, the Coptic Christian Alice, circumcised at the age of eight, says resentfully: "This operation makes it harder for a girl to enjoy sex, and as sex is all-important to men, then where is the happiness this custom brings?" (p. 41). Alice feels remorse for circumcising her eldest daughter: "I regret circumcising Mariam. I've changed a lot, and my ideas have changed over the years" (p. 52). She remarks that since the time of her daughter's circumcision, most Christians have stopped circumcising girls (p. 41). Suda, a young housekeeper who is engaged to be married, was twelve when she underwent this ritual. She believes that "every Muslim girl must be circumcised of course, otherwise she would not be considered Muslim. Only Christian girls in our village are not circumcised. It's a must. It's the first taste of suffering a girl

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<sup>136</sup> According to recent statistical data, the rates of female circumcision in the year 2000 were 97 percent in Egypt, 89 percent in Sudan, 98 percent in Somalia, 98 percent in Djibouti, and 23 percent in Yemen. See *UN Arab Human Development Report 2005*, p. 117.

ever has" (p. 79). Suda knew what to expect from the talk of the older girls in her neighborhood—her mother, like her friends' mothers, did not prepare her for this event. Despite her young age, she understood that the event was inevitable: "I knew I had to go through this operation. I knew there was no getting around it. It's as sure a thing as having to get married or give birth" (p. 79). As for Om Naeema the fisherwoman, subjected to this ritual at the age of seven, she maintains that "girls are circumcised to keep them cool and able to control their sexual urges. Boys are circumcised because it is believed that they cannot copulate or beget children if they are not" (p. 139). Dunya, a married cleaner who was circumcised when she was six years old, is the only Muslim woman in this group who objects to this practice: "I wouldn't do it to my daughter. I wouldn't want to hurt her. But when they did it to me, I had no choice and no mind of my own. I couldn't discuss or argue or resist. If I had been an adult, I would have opposed it, but a child is still possessed of the mind and thoughts of its parents" (p. 111). Sadly, Dunya was childless at the time when her oral history was recorded.<sup>137</sup>

### *Defloration*

The consummation of marriage on the wedding night in traditional families, especially from the lower classes, puts the young bride in an awkward, frightening, and painful situation. Her first sexual encounter is a semi-public event in which she has to prove her virginity to a husband whom she hardly knows and who is frequently much older than she. With little preparation for what is awaiting her, the bride is expected to fulfill her sexual duties and satisfy her husband's desire. As Bahiah Shaheen, the heroine of Nawal El Saadawi's novel, *Two Women in One*, sarcastically remarks: "A girl moves from her father's house to a husband's and suddenly changes from a non-sexual being with no sexual organs to a sexual creature who sleeps, wakes, eats, and drinks sex. With amazing stupidity, they think that those parts that have been cut away can somehow return, and that murdered, dead, and satiated desire can be revived."<sup>138</sup> The absurdity of the situation is heightened

<sup>137</sup> For further information on this ritual, see Janice Boddy, *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men, and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), pp. 49–52.

<sup>138</sup> Nawal El Saadawi, *Two Women in One*, trans. Osman Nusairi and Jana Gough (London: Saqi Books, 1985), p. 101.

by the violence, blood, and exhibitionism that accompany the sacrifice of the hymen. What is supposed to be an intimate, romantic experience frequently turns into a traumatic event that leaves physical and emotional scars.

Typically, the rite of defloration testifies to the virility of the groom and the virginity of the bride. But in rural Egypt, the defloration by finger makes the rite a means to ascertain the virginity of the bride solely.<sup>139</sup> The oral histories of five Egyptian women in Atiya's *Khul Khaal* offer a rare glimpse into this sensitive subject, which is generally surrounded by silence. In narrative after narrative, these women point out the similarity between the rites of circumcision and defloration. Suda recalls: "People would say to the girls, 'Marriage is just like circumcision only better'" (p. 80). She recounts that her marriage to her first husband was consummated in the traditional way. She was ignorant of what was going to happen, as her mother never spoke of such things in her presence. An old woman who was big and strong was chosen to hold her for the defloration ceremony. As Suda remarks: "My mother didn't have the heart to be present in the room with me" (p. 109). When she was held forcefully with her legs pulled apart, she remembered that this sort of thing happened to her once before: "I said to myself, 'But they held me in this way when I was a child!'" (p. 110). Suda was thinking of her circumcision. The similarity between these two rites is also emphasized by Om Naeema, who, terrified of what was going to happen to her on her wedding night, gave herself courage "by repeating over and over again that nothing of what would take place now as far as marriage is concerned could be worse or more painful than the ritual circumcision I had experienced as a child" (p. 147). She recalls that the midwife, her mother, and married female relatives were in the room with her for the defloration: "The groom wrapped [a clean piece of white gauze] around his finger and entered me until he drew blood. When he was satisfied of my virginity, the midwife said to him, 'Congratulations. Now go sit at the other end of the room while I do what remains to be done.' She then inserted her finger into me several times, taking blood and spotting with it the two white shawls until they were adequately decorated. She then hiked them up on sticks, and they were carried out of the room for all to see, then taken in procession to the groom's house. This is called the ritual

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<sup>139</sup> Abdessamad Dialmy, "Sexuality in Contemporary Arab Society," p. 3.

of exhibition” (p. 147). After the ceremony the groom had sex with her. Om Gad, who was married at the age of thirteen, tells of a similar experience: “The females of my family came the day of my wedding and held me for the defloration” (p. 13). Importantly, she remarks that the attitude to the rite of defloration has changed over time: “People don’t do that much any more. This first night is between the man and woman now. But then they did. It was the custom.” (p. 13).<sup>140</sup>

Alifa Rifaat’s short story, “My Wedding Night,”<sup>141</sup> illustrates how difficult the traditional consummation of the marriage is for both the bride and the groom. For one thing, the young couple is barely acquainted with each other. For another, the psychological pressure on the groom to demonstrate his virility on the wedding night is quite debilitating, even when he can retire with the bride to a private room. Not surprisingly, the groom in this story fails to perform sexually and breaks down in tears. It is only thanks to the bride’s sensitivity and empathy that a crisis is averted and the groom agrees to start their life together on the basis of friendship and affection.

The topics of defloration and circumcision do not figure much in Arab women’s literature for the reason that the majority of Arab women writers come from the middle and upper classes and thus are less concerned with, or aware of, the problems of women from the lower classes. In addition, the topic of sex, including the rituals surrounding female sexuality, are considered taboo, a situation which inhibits Arab women writers from discussing them in public.

It is reasonable to assume that the rite of defloration, like that of circumcision, can jeopardize the mother-daughter relationship. The daughter may feel betrayed and threatened by the mother, who usually organizes the ceremony and participates in it. The mother may feel betrayed and threatened by a daughter who fails the test of virginity and tarnishes the family honor.

#### IV. *Arranged Marriage*

The custom of arranged marriage is explained as a necessity arising from the segregation of the sexes in traditional Arab society. In theory, the parents are required to ask for their daughter’s consent before they promise to give her in marriage, but in reality they often

<sup>140</sup> For further information on this ritual, see Inhorn, *Infertility and Patriarchy*, p. 95.

<sup>141</sup> In Cohen-Mor, *Arab Women Writers*, pp. 120–26.

ignore her wishes and marry her against her will. In the search for a groom (as well as a bride), family relations come first and foremost. The practice of endogamy favors marriages contracted within a relatively narrow circle: the same lineage, sect, community, group, village, or neighborhood. Marriage outside one's own group is frowned upon and discouraged, sometimes forbidden or even punished. Arranged marriage is the predominant pattern in traditional milieus in all Arab societies, though in the more urbanized, educated, and economically privileged social sectors, young adults have more opportunities for dating, romance, and choosing their marriage partners based on personal attraction and affection.

Women are the principal organizers of marriages. Their role is vital because they have access to the female world and its resources—a large network of relatives, friends, and neighbors. Soraya Altorki, describing marriage strategies among the elite classes of Saudi Arabia in the mid-1980s, writes that women, as mothers or sisters, provide the groom and his father with information about marriageable girls and their families. By passing on selective information, they can influence men to take a course of action that suits their own interests.<sup>142</sup> Nowadays, cell phones and the Internet offer direct contact between youths of both sexes. Rajaa Alsanea's bold first novel, *Girls of Riyadh* (2007), depicts the popularity of e-mails as a confidential means of communication among members of the upper classes in contemporary Saudi society. The attitude of mothers toward their daughters' arranged marriages varies greatly. As the texts examined in this study show, some mothers may not even inform their daughters of a marriage until shortly before it is due to take place (e.g., Huda Shaarawi's mother in *Harem Years*, written c. 1947); other mothers may pressure their daughters to agree to an arranged marriage (e.g., Bahiya's mother in Nawal El-Saadawi's *Two Women in One*, 1975); and still other mothers may vow not to force their daughters to marry against their will (e.g., Lina's mother in Samar Attar's *Lina: A Portrait of a Damascene Girl*, 1982). The impact of social change on this custom is evident from the publication dates of the above-mentioned works. As Leila, the educated village woman in *Three Mothers, Three Daughters*, affirms: "These days, the parents don't control it so much. Children are much freer to choose who they want. Even girls are freer."<sup>143</sup> Nonetheless, the tragic fate of a daughter

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<sup>142</sup> Altorki, *Women in Saudi Arabia*, p. 124.

<sup>143</sup> Gorkin and Othman, *Three Mothers, Three Daughters*, p. 196.

who tries to rebel against an arranged marriage is a recurrent theme in Arab women's literature. The short story "The Assassination of Light at the River's Flow," by the Saudi writer Khayriya al-Saqqaf, depicts the coercive measures, including beating and locking up, employed by both the father and the mother to obtain their daughter's consent to an arranged marriage.<sup>144</sup> Conversely, Samira Azzam's short story, revealingly entitled "Fate," depicts the psychological pressure that the mother and other female relatives put on the daughter to accept an arranged marriage.<sup>145</sup>

The separation from the mother upon marriage is frequently a traumatic event for the daughter. Andrea Rugh points out the contrast between Western and Arab cultures regarding the issue of separation. In an American family, for example, the daughter's desire to break away from the mother in order to become an independent adult may cause a conflict between them. But in an Egyptian family, for example, the daughter is expected to leave her parental home with marriage and move into her husband's household. The separation from the mother, which in traditional circumstances occurs shortly after puberty, creates anxiety, sadness, and homesickness in the daughter, who hopes that the physical distance from her mother's house will allow frequent visits.<sup>146</sup> As for the mother, her closeness to her daughter occurs "as a sympathy in the face of mutual misery and the inevitability of their separation."<sup>147</sup> Adrienne Rich, describing a similar situation among Brahmin families in India, criticizes this attitude: "This kind of female bonding, though far preferable to rejection or indifference, arises from identification with the daughter's future victimization. There is no attempt on the mothers' part to change the cycle of repetitions into which the daughters' lives are being woven."<sup>148</sup>

Early marriage is still widespread in the Arab world. Marilyn Booth writes that "it remains common in parts of the Arab world for girls to be taken out of school to marry in their teens."<sup>149</sup> The UN's recent *Arab Human Development Report* concludes that "early marriage is not

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<sup>144</sup> In *The Assassination of Light: Modern Saudi Short Stories*, trans. Abu Bakr Bagader and Ava Molnar Heinrichsdorff (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1990), pp. 47–51.

<sup>145</sup> Samira Azzam, "Fate," trans. Yasir Suleiman, in Cohen-Mor, *A Matter of Fate*, pp. 148–57.

<sup>146</sup> Rugh, *Family in Contemporary Egypt*, pp. 82–83.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>148</sup> Rich, *Of Woman Born*, p. 245.

<sup>149</sup> Booth, "Arab Adolescents Facing the Future," p. 225.

simply a social custom; it has been transformed into a social problem with many causes and dimensions.”<sup>150</sup> Arguably, early marriage disrupts the process of separation-individuation of girls and strains their relationships with their mothers. These young brides do not get sufficient time or nurturance to go through the process of separation-individuation in an age-appropriate manner. Moreover, the premature and forced separation is not accompanied by gaining freedom and autonomy but rather by assuming a subservient role to the husband and the mother-in-law. As a result, the sense of self for these daughters may be more fragile and weak, and they may be burdened by feelings of inadequacy, dependency, and alienation.

#### V. *The Mother-Son Relationship*

Many scholars of Arab family life have observed that a husband’s primary attachment is with his own mother, rather than his wife, whereas a wife’s primary attachment is with her son. The wife’s behavior is attributed to the threats of polygamy and repudiation, which render the ties between the spouses weak and unstable. A mother always expects that her son will take care of her future, regarding him as her best insurance in sickness, old age, or divorce. Andrea Rugh writes that in Egyptian families a mother experiences her son as “her own personal ego extension” and competes with the father for his love and affection. She notes that there is “an underlying urgency to the mother’s need to co-opt her son’s affections”: should her husband divorce her, she would need her son to support her.<sup>151</sup> Suad Joseph has examined the mother-son dynamics in a Christian village in Lebanon and concluded that the close bond between them fits the traditional cultural pattern, thus affirming that the core values of the Arab Muslim majority are shared by the Arab Christian minority. She argues that this strong bond is functional and plausible in the context of such close-knit and family-oriented communities.<sup>152</sup> Other scholars have suggested that the strength of the mother-son bond may be problematic or even dysfunctional. Halim Barakat, for example, regards the deep attachment that characterizes the mother-son relationship as verging on morbidity.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> *UN Arab Human Development Report 2005*, p. 174.

<sup>151</sup> Rugh, *Family in Contemporary Egypt*, pp. 80, 82.

<sup>152</sup> Joseph, *Intimate Selving in Arab Families*, pp. 187–90.

<sup>153</sup> Barakat, *The Arab World*, p. 100.

Hamed Ammar calls attention to the erotic element underlying the mother-son relationship.<sup>154</sup> Abdelwahab Bouhdiba criticizes what he calls “the prolongation of the uterine relationship” between a mother and her son. He quotes Muhammad’s saying, “The uterine relationship extends life,” to illustrate the persistent power of this primary bond. In his view, this excessive attachment has negative effects on the development of the child’s personality and later adult behavior.<sup>155</sup>

Indeed, Bouhdiba is convinced that the dynamics of the mother-son relationship have given rise to a form of the Oedipus conflict peculiar to Arab Muslim culture, what he calls “Jawdar complex” (named after a hero in one of the tales of *The Thousand and One Nights*).<sup>156</sup> He emphasizes the fundamental difference between the two mythological figures: Oedipus is guilty (he has committed parricide and incest), whereas Jawdar (who deals only with false appearances) defines a type of behavior free from all guilt; that is, an exculpated Oedipus. For Bouhdiba, Jawdar is the archetypal image of the Arab adolescent, and his mother is the faithful prototype of the Arab mother. He believes that in Arab Muslim societies a Jawdar complex underlies male personality and sexuality. This complex is readily seen in the institution of marriage, whose instability reveals the man’s inability to detach himself from his mother and to perceive his wife—the woman—as a sexual partner and an equal.<sup>157</sup>

The Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi, in her seminal study *Beyond the Veil*, offers further insight into the mother-son relationship through her analysis of the husband-wife relationship. Mernissi writes that conjugal intimacy is discouraged in Islam because it is perceived

<sup>154</sup> Ammar, *Growing Up in an Egyptian Village*, pp. 105, 121.

<sup>155</sup> Bouhdiba, “The Child and the Mother in Arab-Muslim Society,” pp. 128–29, 133–36.

<sup>156</sup> For the tale of Jawdar, see Lane, *The Thousand and One Nights*, vol. 2, pp. 168–214. Briefly, the hero, Jawdar the fisherman, guided by a Moorish magician, sets out in search of a treasure buried in the depths of the earth. He must recite magic formulas in order to open six doors. The seventh door is guarded by his mother and he must undress her completely to open it. This is the price to be paid for access to the treasure. Initially, Jawdar cannot bear to face his mother naked and thus fails to open the door to the treasure. Eventually, he musters the courage to order her to undress. As soon as the mother is stripped naked, she vanishes, and he is able to seize the treasure. According to Bouhdiba, this tale implies that it is only the image of the mother that holds a man back, and that this image is false and merely a creation of fantasy.

<sup>157</sup> Bouhdiba, “The Child and the Mother in Arab-Muslim Society,” pp. 135–36, and *Sexuality in Islam*, pp. 225–30.

as a direct threat to a man's allegiance to Allah, which requires the unconditional investment of all his energies, thoughts, and feelings in his God. In her view, the Muslim system is not so much opposed to women as to the heterosexual unit: "What is feared is the growth of the involvement between a man and a woman into an all-encompassing love satisfying the sexual, emotional and intellectual needs of both partners."<sup>158</sup> This explains why the sexual act is considered polluting and is surrounded by ceremonies and incantations whose goal is to create emotional distance between the spouses and reduce intercourse to a strictly reproductive act. Erotic love is regarded as even more dangerous because it has the potential to grow into a profoundly fulfilling emotional bond that might compete with a man's love for God. To eliminate the peril which the conjugal unit poses to a man's total devotion to God, it is weakened by two legal devices, polygamy and repudiation, both of which are exclusively male privileges. Because of these devices, the spouses are less inclined to invest emotionally in each other and the marital bond suffers from instability.<sup>159</sup>

How, then, are the emotional needs of the spouses met if they are prevented from developing intimacy? Mernissi points out that in societies which establish a weak marital bond, the mother-son relationship is accorded a particularly important place. In fact, the mother-son relationship is the only context within which a man is allowed to love a woman—his mother, and a woman is allowed to experience warmth and affection from a man—her son.<sup>160</sup> Mernissi argues that marriage in Islam promotes the Oedipal split between love and sex in a man's life: "He is encouraged to love a woman with whom he cannot engage in sexual intercourse, his mother; he is discouraged from lavishing his affection on the woman with whom he does engage in sexual intercourse, his wife."<sup>161</sup> Inevitably, this situation creates intense competition, jealousy, and antagonism between the mother and her daughter-in-law. The mother, who has control over the household as well as over her daughter-in-law, often interferes in her son's marital life. The wife is powerless vis-a-vis her mother-in-law until she gives birth to a son, who improves her status in the family and gives her

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<sup>158</sup> Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, p. 8.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 113–20.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

prestige. The arrival of a male offspring sets a vicious circle in motion: since the son is the wife's exclusive possession, he becomes the object of her emotional investment—and the substitute for her unfulfilled heterosexual relations; therefore, she is bound to cultivate the same kind of relationship with him as the one existing between her husband and his mother. In this way, the mother-son-wife triangle is perpetuated from generation to generation. Mernissi states that this triangle is “the trump card in the Muslim pack of legal, ideological, and physical barriers which subordinate the wife to the husband and condemn the heterosexual relation to mistrust, violence and deceit.”<sup>162</sup> She notes that the structural instability inherent in the traditional Muslim family and its conflicted interpersonal relations have disastrous effects on the development of the child, whether a son or a daughter.<sup>163</sup> In her view, while the pressures of modernization disrupt the patriarchal structure of the family and traditional patterns of male-female interaction, they increase the family instability by causing anomie, that is, confusion of roles, ambiguity, and tension. This is due to the fact that the existing norms have been shaken, but new ones have not yet come into place.<sup>164</sup>

Mervat Hatem takes a similar position. Focusing on the Egyptian scene, she writes that because Islam regards heterosexual intimacy and romantic love as a threat to patriarchal control, the only outlets for emotional satisfaction are the special relationship between mother and son and friendships between members of the same sex.<sup>165</sup> She emphasizes that both of these outlets are fraught with danger: “The incestuous and homosexual potential of these relations make them very problematic to the stern Muslim culture.”<sup>166</sup> Describing the battle over the husband's affections between the wife and the mother-in-law as “the classic triad in Egyptian family life,” she remarks that “the vulnerability of Egyptian masculinity is seen in its inability to resolve the tensions between mother and wife, who lay conflicting claims to it.”<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 64, 119–20, 148–49.

<sup>165</sup> Hatem, “Underdevelopment, Mothering and Gender within the Egyptian Family,” p. 58.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>167</sup> Hatem, “Toward the Study of the Psychodynamics of Mothering and Gender in Egyptian Families,” p. 302.

She believes that heterosexual tensions and ambiguities are likely to persist in Egyptian society, unless gender roles undergo fundamental redefinitions.

The Moroccan writer Leila Abouzeid, in her autobiographical novel *The Last Chapter*, provides an intimate glimpse into the husband-wife-mother-in-law triangle, particularly the debilitating effects it has on the wife's mental health. In Miral al-Tahawy's *The Tent*, Grandmother Hakima hates her daughter-in-law and speaks ill of her, which alienates her son, who goes off on long trips to escape his troubles. The situation is somewhat different in Fatima Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass*, where the father does not allow the tension between his wife, Douja, and his mother, Lalla Mani, to disrupt the peace in the family. In all these instances, the mother-in-law represents generational conflicts that can be traced back to her inferior status as a female growing up in a patriarchal family. As for the daughter, she is doubly alienated: first in her childhood, by the preferential treatment accorded to her brother by her mother, and secondly in her married life, by the privileged relationship of her husband and her mother-in-law.

#### VI. *The Brother-Sister Relationship*

The brother-sister relationship is viewed as "running a close second" to the powerful mother-son relationship.<sup>168</sup> Characterized by unconditional love and mutual devotion, it is often described in the scholarly literature as "the only safe cross-gender relationship in otherwise relatively gender-segregated societies."<sup>169</sup> The brother is expected to protect his sister and take good care of her if she is needy, while the sister is expected to serve and obey her brother. The brother is also the jealous guardian of his sister's chastity, and it is his duty—as it is his father's and uncle's—to avenge the family honor by killing a sister who has lost her chastity. The strong brother-sister ties are evident especially after marriage, when conflicts between spouses may arise because of their attachment to brothers or sisters. For example, if a sister is not married, she continues to live in the parental household, where her brother's wife becomes the female head after the mother's

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<sup>168</sup> Joseph, *Intimate Selving in Arab Families*, p. 140; Donna Lee Bowen and Evelyn A. Early, *Everyday Life in the Muslim Middle East*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 14.

<sup>169</sup> Joseph, *Intimate Selving in Arab Families*, p. 117.

death. Despite the wife's superior position, when a quarrel occurs between her and the sister, the brother is expected to side with his sister. In the case of a sister's divorce, her brother becomes her guardian if the father is deceased. A widowed sister who has no sons often moves in with her brother and transfers to him her share in the inheritance from their father.<sup>170</sup>

Some Arab women writers, such as Adhaf Soueif and Nawal El Saadawi, point out the incestuous elements underlying the brother-sister relationship.<sup>171</sup> The folklorist Hassan El-Shamy speaks of a "brother-sister syndrome" which is unrecognized and untreated in the Arab psychiatric literature. In his view, this syndrome arises from the social and cultural conditions that characterize the traditional Arab family.<sup>172</sup> Most scholars focus on the romantic (love) and the patriarchal (power) aspects of the brother-sister relationship. Suad Joseph suggests that the brother-sister relationship serves as an important vehicle for the socialization of males and females into culturally appropriate gender roles, thus helping to reproduce patriarchy.<sup>173</sup>

Brother-sister relationships frequently function as surrogate parent-child relationships. This is reflected in Fadwa Tuqan's autobiography, *A Mountainous Journey*, in the close ties between the young Fadwa and her older brother Ibrahim. It is also depicted in Latifa al-Zayyat's novel, *The Open Door*, in the strong bond between the heroine, Layla, and her brother, Mahmud. Andrée Chedid's *From Sleep Unbound* shows the unhealthy side of this powerful attachment as manifested between the husband Boutros and his sister Rachida, especially its disastrous effects on Samya, Boutros's neglected wife. The fact that this novel is set in an Egyptian Christian family shows that the core values of Arab culture are shared by both Arab Muslims and Arab Christians. Fedwa Malti-Douglas's childhood memories provide yet another example of the brother-sister-wife triangle.<sup>174</sup> She recounts that her aunt Najla

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., pp. 124–25. See also Inhorn, *Infertility and Patriarchy*, p. 173.

<sup>171</sup> See Adhaf Soueif's short story "The Water-Heater," in her collection, *Sandpiper* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), pp. 63–86; and El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, p. 14.

<sup>172</sup> Hassan El-Shamy, "The Brother-Sister Syndrome in Arab Family Life, Socio-Cultural Factors in Arab Psychiatry: A Critical Review," *International Journal of Sociology of the Family* 2 (1981): 319.

<sup>173</sup> Joseph, *Intimate Selving in Arab Families*, pp. 109–112, 123; see also her Lebanese case study, in *ibid.*, pp. 113–40.

<sup>174</sup> Fedwa Malti-Douglas, "Aunt Najla," in Fernea, *Remembering Childhood in the Middle East*, pp. 232–39.

“had been a stunning, well-educated young woman, who decided to dedicate herself to the greater glory of her brother, my father” (p. 233). She gave up a teaching career to live with her brother in the village of Deir el-Amar in Lebanon, moving in after his divorce from Fedwa’s mother. She ran the household and raised his young children, constantly feuding with his new wife after he remarried. Looking back on her childhood, the adult Fedwa realizes that “Aunt Najla had always hated my father’s wives—not only my mother but the woman he married long after his divorce from my mother” (p. 237). “What were Aunt Najla’s feelings towards my father?” She asks. “Was she in love with him? Questions with no simple answers” (p. 237). Although Malti-Douglas refrains from passing judgment on her beloved aunt, who was a surrogate mother to her, and finds it fortunate that with her passing some of these riddles will remain buried for ever, she acknowledges that “one thing needs no clarification: she was very protective of my father” (p. 237).

### VII. *The Kin Group*

The traditional Arab family is extended and tightly connected to a larger kin group. However, even when the family is not extended in the strict sense, relatives remain enmeshed in a web of close relationships that leaves little room for the expression of autonomy and individuality. Little privacy is permitted and, for better or worse, the individual’s business is the family’s business. If a child is subjected to an undue disciplinary action by a parent, a close relative or a senior member of the group may intervene to mitigate the punishment. All members of the group help each other in times of need or crisis. They exchange gifts, celebrate festive occasions together, and visit each other regularly. The intense interaction with the kin group imparts a strong sense of security and belonging to the individual, who enjoys multiple sources of emotional and instrumental support. Notably, a child who has a conflicted relationship with a parent can seek compensation in intimate relationships with other members of the group. An unnurtured daughter, for instance, can forge close ties with an aunt, grandmother, cousin, etc. Such ties are usually relaxed and free of the tension and pressure inherent in the parent-child relationship. For women, the connection with the kin group is a vital means of reducing their isolation and developing supportive networks of relatives, friends, and neighbors. Social visits offer them opportunities to hear

the latest news, meet new people, form new friendships, and select marriage partners for family members and acquaintances. In many ways, the kin group is beneficial for the well-being of the individual. However, the flip side of this intricate web of relationships is obligation, control, and sometimes domination and exploitation. The duty to satisfy the demands and expectations of the kin group is burdensome to the individual, who is already bound by many commitments to the nuclear family.<sup>175</sup>

This section focused on the culture-specific factors that impact the dynamics between mothers and daughters in Arab families. Notwithstanding the customs, traditions, and norms that can set mothers and daughters in an antagonistic and frustrating relationship, the ties that bind them are persistent. Mother and daughter have intimate knowledge of each other derived from their like biology and psychology. They share many interests and concerns, hopes and fears, joys and sorrows. Critical of her mother as the daughter may be, she eventually realizes that in the harsh reality with which she has to cope, her mother remains her only ally and source of love and support. Deficient as the mother's care may have been, when the daughter moves into her mother-in-law's household, she quickly discovers that her life at home was far better and happier. Hence, just as the daughter may be prone to exaggerate the misery she has experienced at the hands of her mother, so she may also be inclined to idealize her mother and look back on her childhood with nostalgia.

In conclusion, the mother-daughter relationship is the cornerstone of Arab family life. The most challenging of all family relationships, this bond is fraught with possibilities and pitfalls. Daughters experience their mothers as both nurturing and oppressive. Mothers experience their daughters both as an extension of themselves and as their rivals and adversaries. The mother is the catalyst for her daughter's self-development and the primary source of identification for her, whereas the daughter is the repository of the mother's self-esteem and ego ideal. The mutual dependence of mothers and daughters on each other is a vital necessity as well as a burden. How mothers and daughters relate to each other, specifically their success or failure in

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<sup>175</sup> Altorki, *Women in Saudi Arabia*, p. 99; Hatem, "Toward the Study of the Psychodynamics of Mothering and Gender in Egyptian Families," pp. 299–301.

developing an intimate relationship, hinges largely on their ability to overcome many cultural, psychological, and social impediments. The complexity and diversity of mother-daughter relationships are mirrored in the myriad themes and motifs that feature in the narratives of Arab women writers.

## CHAPTER THREE

### MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS IN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WORKS

My relationship with my mother decided the course of my life. I used to think that my father's influence on it was greater than hers. I discovered while I was writing [my autobiography] that this was not true.

Nawal El Saadawi.<sup>1</sup>

#### *Arab Women Writers and Self-Narratives*

The question of whether autobiography existed as a genre in the Arabic literary tradition has elicited a great deal of critical debate. A number of Western scholars have argued that “true” autobiography is lacking in Arabic writing of the premodern period and that it is “alien” to the culture of the Middle East. Georges Gusdorf, who is often identified as the dean of autobiographical studies, asserts that “autobiography is not possible in a cultural landscape where consciousness of self does not, properly speaking, exist.”<sup>2</sup> Emphasizing that the cultural precondition for autobiography is a pervasive notion of individualism, a “conscious awareness of the singularity of each individual life,”<sup>3</sup> he believes that autobiography expresses a concern peculiar to Western people and that it is not to be found outside the Western cultural sphere. Scholars who subscribe to this view maintain that autobiography developed in non-Western cultures only after the colonial impact. The orientalist Frantz Rosenthal, for example, who surveyed all the major Arabic autobiographical materials from the beginning of Islam until the sixteenth century, concluded that none of them arose from “an awareness of the value of the uniquely personal aspect of life,”<sup>4</sup> from what

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<sup>1</sup> Nawal El Saadawi, *A Daughter of Isis: The Autobiography of Nawal El Saadawi*, trans. Sherif Hetata (London: Zed Books, 1999), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Georges Gusdorf, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” in James Olney, ed., *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 30.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> Frantz Rosenthal, “Die Arabische Autobiographie,” *Analecta Orientalia* 14 (1937):

Thomas Philipp defines as “the belief that the development and life experience of each individual has an inherent value.”<sup>5</sup> Considering the acquisition of such consciousness or worldview a precondition for the writing of autobiography, as distinct from the mere compilation of autobiographical materials, Philipp prefers to treat autobiography as a cultural expression not of Eastern or Western people, but of *modern* people. He affirms the existence of an abundance of Arabic autobiographical materials in the medieval period but asserts that the autobiography proper did not appear in Arabic literature until the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup>

For the feminist scholar Susan Stanford Friedman, the individualistic concept of the autobiographical self that is delineated in Georges Gusdorf’s work and shared by many other critics, including James Olney, Philippe Lejeune, and Karl J. Weintraub, raises serious theoretical problems. Specifically, it fails to recognize that “the self, self-creation, and self-consciousness are profoundly different for women, minorities, and many non-Western peoples.”<sup>7</sup> Friedman gives two reasons for the fundamental inapplicability of individualistic models of the self to these particular groups: “First, the emphasis on individualism does not take into account the importance of a culturally imposed group identity for women and minorities. Second, the emphasis on separateness ignores the differences in socialization in the construction of male and female gender identity.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, from an ideological as well as psychological perspective, “individualistic paradigms of the self ignore the role of collective and relational identities in the individuation process of women and minorities.”<sup>9</sup> Friedman argues that the relational models of female selfhood proposed in the work of feminist theorists like Sheila Rowbotham and Nancy Chodorow take into account the historically generated differences between men and women and are therefore more suitable to women’s autobiographical texts, especially

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10; cited in Thomas Philipp, “The Autobiography in Modern Arab Literature and Culture,” *Poetics Today* 14, no. 3 (Fall 1993): 577.

<sup>5</sup> Philipp, “The Autobiography in Modern Arab Literature and Culture,” p. 577.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 576.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Stanford Friedman, “Women’s Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice,” in Shari Benstock, ed., *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women’s Autobiographical Writings* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), p. 34.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

those by women who also belong to racial, ethnic, sexual, and religious minorities. She points out that the very terms *identification*, *interdependence*, and *community* which Gusdorf dismisses from autobiographical selves are recognized by Rowbotham and Chodorow as key elements in the development of a woman's identity. Her critique highlights the cultural biases that have informed the individualistic paradigms, whose notions of selfhood are defined by a white, masculine, and Christian experience.<sup>10</sup>

Arab scholars, like their Western counterparts, are divided on the issue of whether autobiography existed in the Arabic literary tradition. Some take the position that Arabic autobiography emerged in the modern period. They maintain that autobiography—like the novel, the short story, and the drama—is an imported genre that developed under the influence of Western models during the Arab cultural renaissance (*nahda*) of the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries. Ihsan Abbas, for example, is of the opinion that Arabic autobiographical writings of the premodern period lacked “the unity of structure, the sense of time, and any development of character” and that they were mere collections of news, stories, and anecdotes.<sup>11</sup> Muhammad Abdul Ghani Hassan believes that Arabic autobiographical writing was nonexistent in this period because of a keen sense of privacy: Arabs may have been so protective of their private lives that they refrained from exposing them to the public eye by writing about them. He points out that it was not customary for an Arab to boast of the self in prose, though this moral constraint did not apply to poetry.<sup>12</sup> The most critical voice perhaps is that of Edward Said, who states categorically: “Autobiography as a genre scarcely exists in Arabic literature. When it is to be found, the result is wholly special.”<sup>13</sup>

Opposed to this view are other Arab and Western scholars who believe that autobiography was a literary form well known to the medieval Arabs. Bernard Lewis, for example, refutes the argument that only under Western impact have Middle Easterners started to produce autobiographical writings and demonstrates the continuous thread of

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>11</sup> Ihsan Abbas, *Fann al-sira* (Beirut: Dar al-thaqafa, 1956), p. 37.

<sup>12</sup> Muhammad Abdul Ghani Hassan, *Al-Tarajum wa-al-siyar* (Cairo: Dar al-ma'rifa, 1980); cited in Nawar al-Hassan Golley, *Reading Arab Women's Autobiographies* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), p. 76.

<sup>13</sup> Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 81.

autobiographical materials in the literatures of the Middle East from ancient times to the present.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, in a recently published study, Dwight F. Reynolds et al challenge the “fallacy of Western origins” and show that there are far more Arabic autobiographical texts written between the ninth and nineteenth centuries than previously recognized by modern scholars. Criticizing all those who apply Western literary conventions to Arabic autobiography, they advocate a cross-cultural comparative framework for studying the genre.<sup>15</sup> However, all these scholars acknowledge that the conceptions of Arabic literature underwent a radical change from classical to modern times. For Fedwa Malti-Douglas, nowhere is this change more visible than in autobiography: “The literary text ceases to be an expression of collective norms and becomes a personal work, expressing, and centering on, the individual.”<sup>16</sup> In an effort to put an end to the controversy surrounding this topic, Robin Ostle suggests that autobiography be treated as a general tendency in all sorts of writing rather than as a genre. In his view, the advantage of this approach is that it “releases one from the often futile game of tracing a specific genre across historical lines of demarcation with all the arbitrariness which this entails” and thus “avoids the spectacle of group of scholars disagreeing on these points of historical demarcation as they hunt the elusive hare of a specific genre through the confusing undergrowth of its origins and its antecedents.”<sup>17</sup>

While scholars remain divided on the question of whether or not autobiography as a genre was known to the medieval Arabs, they are unanimous about women’s autobiography: *no* autobiographies by women exist in classical Arabic literature. Dwight F. Reynolds et al., whose study introduces many little known autobiographical writings, fail to find a single text by a woman before the twentieth century. Even the feminist scholar Fedwa Malti-Douglas, who firmly believes that the tradition of recording life histories flourished in the Middle Ages, emphasizes that it was male-centered and male-authored: “The Arabic

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<sup>14</sup> Bernard Lewis, “First-Person Narrative in the Middle East,” in Martin Kramer, ed., *Middle Eastern Lives: The Practice of Biography and Self-Narrative* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991), pp. 20–34.

<sup>15</sup> Dwight F. Reynolds et al., *Interpreting the Self: Autobiography in the Arabic Literary Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Blindness and Autobiography: Al-Ayyam of Taha Husayn* (Princeton: Princeton University press, 1988), p. 10.

<sup>17</sup> Robin Ostle et al., *Writing the Self: Autobiographical Writing in Modern Arabic Literature*, (London: Saqi Books, 1998), p. 18.

autobiographical canon is predominantly a male one. Certainly for the heyday of Arabic literature—that is, the classical period—no women’s autobiographies come to mind whatsoever. The male scriptor, as I have amply shown, dominated the medieval prose literary endeavor.<sup>18</sup> In her view, this is not a mere coincidence: “Prose by its nature permits a clearer representation, a more elaborate reformulation and restructuring of the world. Mimesis is tied to its essence. This is especially clear when prose is compared to traditional Arabic poetry, a highly conventionalized form.”<sup>19</sup> Women were allowed to express themselves within a certain poetic genre, the elegiac mourning of menfolk in the tribe (*ritha’ or marthiya*), but the realm of prose was effectively closed to them. Only in the modern period do autobiographies by women begin to appear, attracting secular figures like Huda Shaarawi as well as religious activists like Zaynab al-Ghazali. But the overall number of female-authored autobiographies, as well as their literary impact, is much smaller than that of male authors.<sup>20</sup>

Nadja Odeh offers the following explanation for this state of affairs: “Writing autobiography means violating privacy, and in Arab-Islamic society, where private life, family life, inner feelings and thoughts are sacrosanct, this is a risky undertaking particularly for women.”<sup>21</sup> The traditional division of space between the sexes assigns the public sphere, of which the literary world is a part, to men and the private domain of the home to women. It requires that a woman’s face be invisible and her voice inaudible in public. In the modern period, both the harem and the veil have begun to disappear in many parts of the Arab world, a development which, along with socioeconomic changes and a gradual improvement in women’s status and self-consciousness, has made female autobiographical writing possible.<sup>22</sup>

That the concept of privacy continues to interfere with the production of Arab women’s autobiography is affirmed by the Moroccan novelist Leila Abouzeid. In the introduction to her memoir, *Return to Childhood*, she gives three reasons why autobiography was until recently not respected as a literary form in Morocco. First, for Arabs, literature

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<sup>18</sup> Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Woman’s Body, Woman’s Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 145.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>21</sup> Nadja Odeh, “Coded Emotions: The Description of Nature in Arab Women’s Autobiographies,” in Ostle et al., *Writing the Self*, p. 263.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 264. See also Badran, *Feminism in Islam*, pp. 96–97.

meant primarily “the lyric, the poetic, and the fantastic, whereas autobiography deals with the practice of daily life and tends to be written in common speech.”<sup>23</sup> Second, autobiography has the negative connotation in Arabic of *madihu nafsahu wa muzakkiha* (literally, “one who praises and recommends oneself”), a phrase denoting various defects in a person: selfishness versus altruism, individualism versus the spirit of the group, arrogance versus modesty. Third, the concept of privacy is an obstacle to writing the self: “A Muslim’s private life is considered an *‘awra* (an intimate part of the body) and *sitr* (concealing it) is imperative.”<sup>24</sup> Citing the Koranic verse, *Allah amara bissitr* (“God ordered the concealing of that which is shameful and embarrassing”), Abouzeid points out that this concern is reflected in the veil and in Arabo-Islamic architecture, where windows look inward and outside walls are blind. Abouzeid reveals that she had to wait twenty-eight years before she dared write her autobiography, “because I am a woman, and women in my culture do not speak in public, let alone speak about their private lives in public.”<sup>25</sup>

Miriam Cooke asserts that “the autobiography is a less common genre for women, particularly Arab women, because it emerges out of self-confidence and a sense of empowerment.”<sup>26</sup> But Fadia Faqir refutes this claim, noting that some of the women writers who contributed to her anthology of autobiographical essays did so “precisely because they lack self-confidence and a sense of empowerment.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, the need to assert the self and acquire self-esteem may be the underlying motive for producing an autobiography. Robin Ostle takes a similar position, suggesting that autobiography may stem from a sense of powerlessness on the part of the writer rather than the opposite. In such a case, the autobiography serves as “an instrument of strategy through which a position of relative powerlessness or marginality is transformed into something which is able to challenge or to occupy the center.”<sup>28</sup> Extrapolating from typical examples of self-narratives by Arab women writers, he concludes that an autobiography

<sup>23</sup> Abouzeid, *Return to Childhood*, p. iii.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. iv.

<sup>26</sup> Miriam Cooke, “*Ayyam min Hayati*: The Prison Memoirs of a Muslim Sister,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 26, no. 1–2 (March–June 1995): 147.

<sup>27</sup> Fadia Faqir, ed., *In the House of Silence: Autobiographical Essays by Arab Women Writers* (Reading, U.K.: Garnet, 1998), p. 8.

<sup>28</sup> Ostle et al., *Writing the Self*, p. 22.

may be an empowering act undertaken on behalf of an individual and even a group or a community.

Needless to say, the autobiographical impulse varies from writer to writer, encompassing a variety of motives and goals, some of which are self-exploration, self-evaluation, self-assertion, self-liberation, self-defense, self-acknowledgment, and self-promotion. Fadia Faqir observes that most of the female contributors to her anthology wrote their autobiographical essays “to negotiate a textual, sexual, linguistic space for themselves within a culture that is predominantly male-dominated.”<sup>29</sup> Margot Badran highlights the fact that many of the early female autobiographers were feminists or otherwise entertainers whose lives were already public, and “in shaping the narratives of their life-stories they, like the feminists, assumed agency.”<sup>30</sup> She sees much of women’s early practice of autobiography, as exemplified by pioneering autobiographers such as Huda Shaarawi and Nabawiyya Musa, as “a feminist act of assertion,” arising from the need to “shatter the complicity with patriarchal domination that had been effected through women’s enforced invisibility and silence.”<sup>31</sup>

Whatever the motivation, for Arab women writers self-representation is not as straightforward as for male authors. Although writers of both sexes in Arab societies must contend with the ever-watchful eye of the censor, women face “double jeopardy” on account of being women and political dissidents.<sup>32</sup> Women writers, especially those who pen autobiographies, have to cope with opposition to their work within their families, cultures, and societies. They must avoid an overt discussion of religion, sex, and politics—the three taboos—or else risk ostracism, the banning of their books, prosecution by the authorities, and even imprisonment. The well-publicized cases of a number of women writers from across the Arab world attest to this precarious situation: Layla al-Uthman of Kuwait, Zabya Khamis of the United Arab Emirates, Suhayr al-Tall of Jordan, Layla Ba’labakki of Lebanon, Latifa al-Zayyat and Nawal El Saadawi of Egypt. Not surprisingly, the level of self-exposure and, conversely, self-censorship vary from writer to writer and from text to text. The works of Nawal El Saadawi, be they fiction or nonfiction, are known for their boldness and outspokenness.

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<sup>29</sup> Faqir, *In the House of Silence*, p. 6.

<sup>30</sup> Badran, *Feminism in Islam*, p. 97.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Faqir, *In the House of Silence*, p. 9.

The novels of Hanan al-Shaykh, notably *The Story of Zahra* and *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, contain a frank treatment of personal, sexual, and political matters. By contrast, the autobiographies of Huda Shaarawi, Fadwa Tuqan, and Layla Usayran exclude references to sex and sexuality.

Given the social constraints placed on Arab women writers, how should their self-narratives be read? Nawar al-Hassan Golley suggests that attending to the “silences” of a text is a useful strategy in reading Arab women’s autobiographies. The critic’s task is to uncover what is “not said” and what is an absence, “to make eloquent the most muted aspects of a text.”<sup>33</sup> Things left obscure or unspoken can provide critical insights into the writer’s personality, family, and the wider society. Further, the critic should place each autobiographical writer within her cultural context because her act of writing is directly informed by it.<sup>34</sup> The importance of cultural sensitivity in reading Arab women’s autobiographies is also underscored by Leila Ahmed: “Autobiographical texts must be read with the clear awareness that social relations and their meanings are culturally specific.”<sup>35</sup> Rather than extrapolating from Western meanings and experience, the text should be read as the author’s presentation of self in terms of the norms and assumptions of her own society.

There are also generic distinctions that need to be taken into account in reading women’s autobiographies. In Arabic, the term *mudhakkirat* is often used interchangeably for “autobiographies” and “memoirs,” two types of writing which are similar in that both are retrospectives on a life but different in focus and scope. Thomas Philipp offers a useful distinction between the two categories.<sup>36</sup> The memoir covers only a limited period in the author’s life, whereas the autobiography starts with the beginning of the author’s life and covers all of it, up to the time of writing, although the early periods of life—the so called formative

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<sup>33</sup> Golley, *Reading Arab Women’s Autobiographies*, p. 44; citing Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 85, and Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology* (London: Verso, 1975), p. 43.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>35</sup> Leila Ahmed, “Between Two Worlds: The Formation of a Turn-of-the-Century Egyptian Feminist,” in Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck, eds., *Life/lines: Theorizing Women’s Autobiography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 159; citing Vytautas Kavolis, *Designs of Selfhood* (London: Associated University Presses, 1984), p. 21.

<sup>36</sup> Philipp, “The Autobiography in Modern Arab Literature and Culture,” pp. 578–79.

years—usually receive more attention than the later years. Further, the autobiography focuses on a personal history—the author’s life—and the outside world is subordinated to the history of the self, whereas in the memoir the author’s life serves as a convenient organizational framework within which the author provides an eye-witness account of important historical events and famous public figures. Political memoirs are a typical example of this category. Philipp acknowledges that this distinction is not absolute and that there is a considerable degree of overlap between the two types. Thus it is not unusual for an autobiography to contain considerable social and political material and for a memoir to include substantial personal information. He observes that in Arabic literature memoirs are more numerous than genuine autobiographies. While some scholars interpret this situation as a sign of the traditional Arab reluctance to talk about private matters, others, noting a similar imbalance in other modern literatures, see it merely as revealing the reading public’s taste and the commercial interests of book publishers.<sup>37</sup>

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, when Arab women writers ventured into the area of self-narratives, the range of their writing has expanded to include, besides autobiographies and memoirs, also diaries, letters, self-portraits (or autobiographical essays), and two other closely related genres—the biography and travel literature. Although the volume and impact of Arab women’s texts pale in comparison with those of their male counterparts, the increasing number of self-narratives by women in a range of languages—Arabic, French, and English—in recent decades has attracted greater critical attention to their work.<sup>38</sup>

Female-authored personal accounts are ideally suited for the study of mother-daughter relationships in Arab families. For one thing, they open to public scrutiny “the hidden, forbidden grounds of family life.”<sup>39</sup> For another, they offer rich insights into intimate family relationships and the inner territory of self. Given the paucity of scholarly publications on the topic, such texts assume all the more importance

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<sup>37</sup> Sergei A. Shuiskii, “Some Observations on Modern Arabic Autobiography,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 13 (1982): 111; For further discussion of the Arabic terms for autobiography, see Rooke, *In My Childhood*, pp. 26–39.

<sup>38</sup> For further information on women’s autobiography, see Badran, *Feminism in Islam*, pp. 95–96.

<sup>39</sup> Joseph, *Intimate Selving In Arab Families*, p. 212.

as alternative sources of knowledge and information. Autobiographical works are valuable documents not only for what they include but also for what they omit. Their power lies in presenting a view from inside what constitutes an individual's reality—family, culture, society. In depicting the stark facts, minute details, and subtle nuances of the mother-daughter relationship, these texts demystify motherhood and daughterhood, illuminate the influence of cultural norms on women's patterns of development, and suggest other paths to female self-definition and self-fulfillment. Despite the problems of subjectivity and validity inherent in autobiographical works, they remain indispensable tools of investigation into the nature of Arab family life.

### *Fadwa Tuqan's A Mountainous Journey*

The foremost woman poet in Palestine, Fadwa Tuqan (1917–2003) was born in Nablus, the West Bank. A self-taught poet with little formal education, Tuqan's literary career spans more than half a century, reflecting an evolution in style and theme. Her early poetry, written in traditional verse, was romantic in nature, dealing with themes of personal love and loss. After the Arab defeat in 1967, she composed mostly in free verse, and her poetry became more political, expressing commitment to the struggle of the Palestinians for self-determination. A poet all her life, Tuqan's first attempt at writing prose was her autobiography, *A Mountainous Journey*, first published in Arabic in 1985 and in English in 1990.<sup>40</sup> In it she recounts her life history from childhood to middle age, ending with the 1967 war with Israel. The second part, published in 1993 under the title *The Tougher Journey*,<sup>41</sup> continues the narrative, but the emphasis shifts from the personal to the public arena.

*A Mountainous Journey*, explicitly called an autobiography on the title page, is the story of a self-made poet who had to overcome formidable obstacles to realize her aspirations. Her triumphant battle motivated her to tell the world her life story, believing that it would allow other people in similar circumstances to benefit from her experiences.

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<sup>40</sup> Fadwa Tuqan, *Rihla sa'ba rihla jabaliyya* (Acre: Dar al-aswar, 1985). English translation: *A Mountainous Journey: An autobiography*, trans. Olive Kenny (Saint Paul, Minn.: Greywolf Press, 1990). All quotations are from this translation.

<sup>41</sup> Fadwa Tuqan, *Al-rihla al-as'ab* (Amman: Dar al-shuruq, 1993).

Tuqan admits that though she opens hidden areas in her life to public scrutiny, she does not expose everything about herself: "I have not completely removed the lid from my life's treasure chest. We are not obliged to dig out all our private affairs" (p. 12). The part that she lays bare without exercising self-censorship is her struggle for self-fulfillment.

Fadwa Tuqan was born in 1917 into a conservative upper-class family in Nablus, a major city in what is now the West Bank. The Tuqans were wealthy and influential, and their extended household, consisting of two married brothers, Fadwa's father and her uncle, occupied a big old house with high walls that shut off the harem from the outside world. Fadwa was the seventh child of her parents, who were blessed with ten children, five boys and five girls. However, as she writes in the opening lines of her autobiography, her birth was a problematic event: "I emerged from the darkness of the womb into a world unprepared to accept me. My mother had tried to get rid of me during the first months of her pregnancy. Despite repeated attempts, she failed" (p. 12).

The mother's attempted abortion sets the stage for a conflicted relationship with her daughter. Throughout the narrative, Tuqan depicts her mother as a major agent of oppression in her childhood. Her grievances against her mother range from neglect to emotional cruelty to physical abuse. After giving birth, the mother put the infant Fadwa in the care of a nanny and had very little to do with her daughter except for breast feeding. Much to the young girl's frustration, her birth date vanished from her mother's memory. Only in 1950, when Fadwa applied for her first passport, did the mother link her daughter's birth to the death of her beloved cousin, which enabled her to establish her birth date. Although dating births by relating them to outstanding events was a widespread tradition among Arabs at the time, the irony was not lost on the adult daughter, who told her mother, "All I have to do is obtain my birth certificate from your cousin's gravestone" (p. 15).

Tuqan recalls many unhappy incidents that made her feel rejected and unnurtured by her mother. The mother used to tell each of her children anecdotes about their childhoods. The young Fadwa awaited her turn, yearning to hear something about her own childhood, but despite her repeated requests, the mother never responded. This cut her to the bone. "Cringing with a feeling of nonentity, I would tell myself: I am nothing. I have no place in her memory" (p. 19). The

mother would comb Fadwa's hair in nervous haste, hurting her. She punished her unfairly by rubbing red pepper seeds on her lips. She rebuked her constantly. She dressed her in unattractive clothes that she sewed herself. And she never granted her daughter the material things she craved, such as gold earrings or a factory-made doll. Fadwa's sensitivity to this unfair treatment gave her nightmares about her mother, even after her death.

The author writes that as a child she was afraid of her mother but also fearful she should die and be replaced by a cruel stepmother. These ambivalent feelings of fear and dependence dominated her relationship with her mother. She recounts that the bouts of malaria she suffered from time to time made her happy because they were the only occasions when her mother treated her kindly. Looking back on her childhood, she tries to find an explanation for her mother's behavior toward her. After all, she rationalizes, her mother was tired of multiple pregnancies and child care. She conceived the seventh time under duress, for her husband craved a fifth son. Fadwa's arrival dashed his hopes. Perhaps the mother associated her daughter's arrival with the misfortune that befell the family, as the father was arrested by the British authorities and deported to Egypt (p. 19). And perhaps her mother's biting sarcasm was a means to relieve her own frustration at the isolation and social constraints imposed on her by the conservative family (p. 22).

In an effort to temper her bitter criticism of her mother, Tuqan enumerates some of her positive qualities: her generosity and compassion for the poor (p. 24), her love of singing and music, her disapproval of class superiority (p. 32). The mother was literate and reading was one of her greatest pleasures. Addicted to the historical novels of Jurji Zaydan, she named Fadwa after one of his heroines. She possessed wit and beauty, had a gregarious disposition, and was popular among the womenfolk. Although the mother was a member of a women's charitable society which, in 1929, united with the general Arab Women's Federation, she was not permitted to travel to their conventions or to participate in women's demonstrations (pp. 109–10). As a member of the upper class, she was veiled and lacked freedom of movement. In retrospect, Tuqan realizes that her mother was as much a victim of the prevailing customs and traditions as she was, and that confinement to the harem was the underlying cause of a hidden unhappiness that ran through her (pp. 22–23). Despite her social isolation, the mother's vitality and love for life was boundless. After the fall of Palestine in

1948, she was the first woman of her generation in Nablus to remove the veil (p. 25).

One of the scenes that left an indelible mark on the narrator's mind was seeing her mother naked in the women's public bath: "Mother appeared more beautiful and attractive than ever. In my eyes she looked like a fairy-tale houri" (p. 24). Malti-Douglas notes the striking contradiction between the images of the mother at home and in the public bath: "The mother can be a positive figure, but only outside the confines of the family and when literally and figuratively denuded of her everyday attire. It is her public persona that permits this transformation, an unrealistic one indeed, since she also turns into someone legendary. The woman can be beautiful, the mother not."<sup>42</sup>

Despite the narrator's attempts to present a balanced view of her mother, the resulting portrait is overwhelmingly negative. Time after time, Tuqan reiterates that her mother failed to satisfy her emotional needs, that as a child she was more attached to her maternal aunt than to her mother, and that it was this aunt who satisfied her longings for warmth and affection. She sadly exclaims: "How I wished, during my childhood, that she would give me the chance to love her more" (p. 21). The constant attack on the mother leads Malti-Douglas to conclude that this autobiography is a matrophobic text.<sup>43</sup> She points out that Tuqan's rejection of the concept of motherhood is conveyed at the outset of her narrative, when she recounts her mother's attempted abortion: "This striking movement, this aborted abortion, foregrounds a woman's lack of control over her own body; it makes motherhood into a problem. Motherhood, a quasi-sacred activity and the life dream of virtually all Middle Eastern women—and their only access to status—is demystified and subverted. The repeated unsuccessful attempts to eliminate the fetus add failure and impotence to the rejection of motherhood. In the process, not only is the ideal of motherhood itself subverted, but so also are the mother herself, her power, and the idea of matriarchy."<sup>44</sup> For Malti-Douglas, it is not a coincidence that Tuqan never married and never bore children.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word*, p. 166.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175; see also Golley, *Reading Arab Women's Autobiographies*, pp. 125–26.

The question of why mother and daughter were unable to bond is central to this narrative and calls for a thorough examination. What factors, besides the problematic birth, hindered their relationship from blossoming? While the reasons that the self-aware narrator gives when she tries to rationalize her mother's behavior toward her are plausible, they are in themselves inadequate to fully account for the extremely poor interaction between them. However, when one considers the particular traits and disposition of these two individuals, it becomes clear that the personalities of mother and daughter were simply incompatible. The mother had a vivacious nature and a cheerful, extroverted temperament; the daughter was melancholy, introverted, and withdrawn. Tuqan admits that "Mother wasn't cruel by nature. She was extremely sensitive, as quickly moved to tears and sorrow as she was to fun, singing and laughter. She had a cheerful temperament, open to human contact, and couldn't enjoy life without being with people. I always had a strange immunity to the infection of her cheerful, extroverted personality" (p. 22). Tuqan further admits that she herself lacked the talent for socializing and habitually sought refuge in solitude: "Even during the periods when I was at peace and harmony with the world, with people and things in general, I still enjoyed my own company and could only find it by isolating myself. This was my tendency most of the time" (p. 84). When her brother Ibrahim, who taught her how to compose poetry, advises her to stop focusing on personal feelings of pain and loss in her poems, she remarks: "It would appear that my melancholy, introverted nature, which always made me withdraw completely within myself, was stronger than Ibrahim's excellent advice. There seems to be a certain immutability to our natural dispositions" (p. 70).

Psychologists and sociologists have long recognized that the child's characteristics, such as gender, age, and temperament, may elicit different responses from parents and influence their parenting styles. Stephen Anderson and Ronald Sabatelli write that "a critical factor in determining effective parenting is the 'goodness of fit' between the child's characteristics and those of the parent."<sup>46</sup> Highlighting the bidirectional and interdependent influence of children on their parents' behavior, they reiterate that what matters is "not only the temperament or individual traits of the particular child but how well the child's traits interact with

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<sup>46</sup> Anderson and Sabatelli, *Family Interaction*, p. 208.

the parent's own temperament and traits. The better the fit between parent and child, the greater the likelihood of quality parent-child interactions."<sup>47</sup> In Fadwa Tuqan's case, it is apparent that there was a profound discordance between her "naturally introverted withdrawal" (p. 84) and her mother's "naturally gregarious disposition" (p. 24). It is noteworthy that Tuqan is perceptive enough to ascribe the cold relations and "silent aversion" (p. 37) between her family and that of her uncle, who lived under the same roof, to "the wide gulf between the dispositions of the members of the two families" (p. 37). "My brothers and sisters were a lively bunch," she writes, "filling the house with high spirits, laughter and song. Everything about them was open and frank, while Uncle's family shut themselves away from us with a tight taciturnity and secrecy" (p. 37). However, when discussing her own conflicted relationship with her mother, Tuqan fails to consider the possibility of personality clash as the underlying cause, for this would imply sharing some of the guilt. Instead, she lays the blame squarely on her mother's shoulders.

The scarring effects of a mother's attempted abortion on her daughter's psyche are also depicted in Leila Ahmed's life history, *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America—A Woman's Journey*.<sup>48</sup> Ahmed, too, sees the origin of her conflicted relationship with her mother in the frightening attempt on her life in the womb. In her personal account, Ahmed writes that she is prone to depression. Originally, she thought that she had inherited this propensity from her mother's family. But later it dawned on her that it could be the outcome of her mother's desire to abort her: "Perhaps it was not, after all, the family legacy I was struggling with but my own mother's wish for my death while she was carrying me, her thoughts and desires translating into chemicals of rejection. They had remained circulating in my blood ever since, ready when the circumstances came, to pervade all my cells again and stain my mind with bleakest gloom" (p. 90). As a child, Ahmed was deeply attached to her nanny, who was her source of nurturance and her closest companion, but resentful of her mother, who was cold, remote, and strict. Ahmed recounts that when she was twelve, she fell ill with pneumonia. She remembers having a vague feeling that her mother wanted her to die so that she could become the center of attention and the focus of sympathy (pp. 87–88). Although Ahmed

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 209.

<sup>48</sup> Published in Penguin Books in New York in 2000.

admits that this could have been just the imaginings of a child, she goes on to suggest that “it is possible too that these feelings represent a child’s divining of the unacknowledged, unwanted desires that cross the human heart, for I believe that children can divine the inner projects and secret emotions of the adults they are close to and that they can know them as well and perhaps sometimes better than the adults themselves do” (p. 88). The distance between mother and daughter persisted into Ahmed’s adulthood. On visiting her mother after moving into her own apartment in Cairo, she recalls the lack of intimacy and physical warmth. “I went up to her, bending to kiss her goodbye—always with her a formal gesture, a careful kissing of the air, for my mother, unusually in this society, always shrank from touch” (p. 21).

Like Tuqan, Ahmed finds some redeeming qualities in her mother: she did not show partiality to her sons, nor did she subject her daughters to the ritual of circumcision. Just as the young Tuqan was astonished to discover that her mother was beautiful when she stood naked before her in the public bath, so the young Ahmed was amazed to discover that when talking with female relatives, her mother could be open-minded and sympathetic about other people’s experiences, even in matters of sexuality (pp. 69–70). However, Unlike Tuqan, Ahmed’s view of motherhood, though highly critical, is not entirely negative:

Motherhood was mysterious. It was sacred, but it had little to do, apparently, with actually looking after or tending to one’s children. It was, I suppose, about having one’s children around one, under one’s broad physical and moral guardianship and protection—even if, in the routines and practicalities of daily life, it was someone else who actually looked after them. And it connoted also some powerful, unseverable connection of the heart. Everything my mother did seemed to be an expression of this notion of motherhood, from her apparent lack of interest in the dailiness of our lives to the scenes she made at the quayside in Alexandria, waving her large white handkerchief in a tear-drenched goodbye as one or another of us and sometimes several of us left for England (p. 111).

Ultimately, Ahmed achieves something of a reconciliation with her mother after her death, when her spirit appears to her asking for forgiveness. Ahmed recalls saying to her, “I release you from any harm you have done me” (p. 91). As for forgiveness, she said that it was not in her power and that her mother must seek it elsewhere. Ahmed believes that she was alluding to God and to another daughter who had lived only a few hours and died, presumably because her mother, who did not want another child, had induced her premature birth.

In *A Mountainous Journey*, Tuqan does not have fond memories of her father either, and his portrait is decidedly negative. A stern and rigid man, the father believed that wealth and sons are life's greatest status symbols. He was authoritarian, humorless, and aloof. Although he liked music and enjoyed listening to songs by popular singers such as Umm Kulthum, he forbade his children to play, sing, or keep a lute in the house. Tuqan accuses him of neglect and emotional indifference toward her: he never hugged her or showed any concern or affection for her, even when she was sick with malaria; he rarely spoke to her directly, and he used the third person to refer to her, even in her presence. When his son Yusuf forbade the adolescent Fadwa to go to school again or leave the house unescorted because she accepted a flower from a boy, the father did not intervene on her behalf and did not attempt to reverse the harsh punishment. Later on, when he learned that his son Ibrahim, who was a renowned poet, was teaching Fadwa to compose poetry, he dismissed the news with a wave of his hand. This gesture of contempt crushed Fadwa's feelings, making her think: "He doesn't believe I'm good for anything... He has no feelings for me except indifference, as though I'm nothing, as though I'm a nonentity, a vacuum, as if there is absolutely no need for me to exist" (p. 59).

Even after she became an adult and a poet in her own right, Tuqan did not win her father's favor. She recalls with indignation that after Ibrahim's death in 1941, her father demanded that she write political poetry instead of romantic poetry, so as to fill the void Ibrahim left behind. This demand alienated her from him all the more: after all, the social constraints her father had imposed on her at home kept her isolated from the outside world, and she felt she lacked the knowledge or background needed to write such poetry. It was only after her father's death in 1948, amid the Arab defeat in Palestine, that she was able to bring herself to write political poetry.

For Tuqan, the father's redeeming qualities were his patriotic and nationalistic sentiments. She mentions proudly that Nablus was renowned for its tradition of struggle and resistance against occupation. This tradition earned the city the name *Jabal al-Nar*—"the mountain of fire" (pp. 26, 70). During the British Mandate in Palestine, her father was a member of various political societies and was imprisoned several times by the British authorities. Tuqan writes that her father's oppressive presence usually upset her, but when he was in jail she felt sympathy for him.

The large, extended family in which Tuqan grew up afforded her alternative sources of fatherly feelings: as a child she became strongly attached to her paternal uncle, who was warm and loving toward her, and as an adolescent she forged a close bond with her brother Ibrahim, who became a father figure. As for her relationship with her father, Tuqan states that it fluctuated between “neutrality in times of peace, when he was in good health, and overflowing compassion when he was in prison or sick” (p. 89). She was tormented by two conflicting feelings: a sense of estrangement and a sense of dependence. On the one hand, she felt no emotional connection to her father. On the other hand, she needed his protection: “To me, he was the tent that sheltered us: if we lost him we would be exposed to the storms of life” (p. 112). Tuqan acknowledges that she missed her father after his death, when the family started having problems, and even composed an elegy for him.

As with her mother, Tuqan tries to rationalize her father’s attitude toward her: “Now when I recall Father’s coldness towards me personally, I can find only one explanation for his maintaining the curtain of formality between us. Perhaps my prominence in the family as a novel personality, differing from the norm, led him to fear this would end up in a headstrong revolt against the established rules. He used his aloofness and inflexibility towards me as a bridle to curb my aspirations for change and transcendence, and to prevent me from overstepping the boundaries set for a young woman belonging to an extremely conservative family” (p. 105). While this explanation may well account for the father’s coldness toward Fadwa when she was already an adult and a successful poet, it does not account for his lack of concern for her during her childhood and youth.

In sum, Tuqan depicts the reality of her life in her parents’ home as miserable: she suffered discrimination, repression, and deprivation. She had no private life, no freedom of movement, no female role model. Tuqan minces no words in describing the female quarters, calling it “a prison” (pp. 12, 51, 93, 105), “a bottled-up harem” (*al-qumqum al-harimi*, p. 106), and “a chicken coop” filled with domesticated birds whose sole vocation was hatching chicks (p. 110). When she looked around her she saw “nothing but faceless victims with no independent lives” (p. 106); these women aged prematurely, had no friends, and their lives revolved around trivialities. Tuqan writes that the multiple prohibitions, commands, and reprimands to which she was subjected during her formative years left their mark on her personality

and precipitated several emotional crises, including an attempted suicide. "Our childhood complexes influence us all our lives," she writes. "Those who generated them in us pass on; the days and years roll by with these problems still crouching there, curbing and directing our steps" (p. 105).

Scarred by her childhood experiences, the adolescent Fadwa was timid and insecure, with a poor self-image and low self-esteem. At this stage in her development, she found refuge from the "prison" of her home in two separate realms: nature and school. Nature gave her a sense of peace, harmony, and freedom. Together with her childhood companion, Alya, she used to take long walks in the countryside and absorb its infinite beauty: "I would gaze at nature around me much as a nursing baby gazes into the face of its mother, discovering it feature by feature, day after day" (p. 41). The splendor and silence of the open spaces filled her soul with joy and ecstasy. In nature she felt a free spirit at one with the green world: "There, my childhood, in all its throbbing spontaneity, was set free to embrace a new world of virginal greenness that grew freely, unbounded by any barriers" (p. 40). Nature remained a refuge throughout her life: "My feelings for nature are acute and strong. From childhood I have identified with nature, feeling myself a part of it" (p. 145). During her educational stay in England (1962–64), one of her favorite pastimes was walking in the English countryside. Among its many attractions, she mentions its "pervading calmness that suits the nerves like a lullaby" (p. 145).

The literary scholar Annis Pratt identifies escape into nature as a recurrent archetypal pattern in women's fiction.<sup>49</sup> Pratt draws on Simone de Beauvoir's analysis of nature worship to explain this archetype: "For the young girl, for the woman who has not fully abdicated, nature represents what woman herself represents for the man, herself and her negation, a kingdom and a place of exile; the whole in the guise of the other. It is when she speaks of moors and gardens that the woman novelist will reveal her experience and her dreams to us more intimately."<sup>50</sup> Pratt notes that in female-authored novels which contain the green-world archetype, women find solace, companionship,

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<sup>49</sup> Annis Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), pp. 16–24.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17, citing de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, (New York: Knopf, 1953), pp. 710–11.

and independence in nature. Most often, nature becomes “an ally of the woman hero, keeping her in touch with her selfhood, a kind of talisman that enables her to make her way through the alienations of male society.”<sup>51</sup>

School was the second realm which provided the young Fadwa with refuge. Tuqan has fond memories of the few years she spent at school. Her teachers liked her and she liked them; some of them paid special attention to her. She also discovered the taste of friendship with other girls. The high profile she enjoyed among her teachers and classmates boosted her fragile ego: “In school, I was able to discover parts of my lost self. There I established myself as a person, something I had not been able to do at home” (p. 45). Importantly, her female teachers provided her with a different role model than the one she encountered at home. No wonder that Tuqan says: “I preferred school to home. It suited me better...School fulfilled many of the psychological needs that remained unsatisfied at home” (p. 46). But her school career was cut short. Soon after she reached puberty—and experienced falling in love for the first time—her brother Yusuf discovered that she accepted a flower from a neighborhood boy and, fearing for the family honor, forbade her to go to school again, effectively confining her to the house.

The harsh punishment crushed Fadwa’s spirit. She contemplated committing suicide, not only as a way out of her predicament but also as revenge on the family’s tyranny. Neither her mother nor father stood by her side. Her mother’s “individuality had been so debilitated by her subjugation,” Tuqan writes, “she was unable to save me from the men’s decision” (p. 50). When the father asked why Fadwa was at home helping with the housework instead of at school, her mother replied: “There are many stories going around about girls these days and since she’s reached this stage it’s better for her to stay at home” (p. 4). The incredulous Fadwa recalls that all her father said was “‘Eh... good,’ and left!” (p. 49). Fadwa’s sense of injustice was aggravated by the humiliation she suffered. In addition to being deprived of her personal freedom and of formal education, she was treated with contempt and aversion by all the members of the household, even the servants. Her self-esteem was so low that she developed the habit of walking with her head bowed and her eyes downcast.

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21. See also Odeh, “Coded Emotions,” pp. 263–71.

A new chapter in the narrator's life began with the return of her brother Ibrahim to Nablus in 1929, after completing his university education in Beirut. Ibrahim offered Fadwa a way out of her isolation by teaching her how to compose poetry. A kind, broad-minded man, he was attentive and caring toward Fadwa and took a personal interest in her well-being. "All his life his penetrating eyes saw into the far reaches of my heart, sensing its misery at its emptiness, and feeling its ambitions, which he tried to help me to fulfill. He was the only one who really saw me, and noticed my existence" (p. 67). The adolescent Fadwa developed a deep emotional attachment to her poet brother, clinging to him "with the tenacity of a drowning person to a lifeboat" (p. 53). Ibrahim put Fadwa under his protective wings, steadily guiding her attempts at writing poetry, and even took her to live with him for some time in Jerusalem, where, away from the oppressive atmosphere of her home, her personality blossomed. Tuqan declares that Ibrahim "replaced the father who never let me feel the warmth of fatherly feelings" (p. 112). Moreover, he was "the psychological healer that saved me from inner collapse" (p. 53). She repaid her brother with love and devotion, happily looking after his needs and performing many small services for him. However, her relationship with him was constantly marked by fears for his life, as he suffered from poor health. His untimely death, in 1941, was a great loss to her. "When Ibrahim died and Father was still living, I truly felt like an orphan" (p. 112).

Tuqan's relationship with Ibrahim exemplifies the strong brother-sister bond which is valorized in Arab culture and lauded in Arabic poetry. It is interesting to note that while one brother, Yusuf, closed the door to freedom and self-fulfillment in her face, another brother, Ibrahim, opened a window. As a matter of fact, neither brother was the eldest one. The author lists the line of succession of her parents' offspring as follows: Ahmad, Ibrahim, Bandar, Fataya, Yusuf, Rahmi, Fadwa, Adeeba, Nimr, Hanan. The hierarchical structure of the traditional Arab family is based on age and sex: the eldest son enjoys a higher position among his siblings and has authority over them; a brother, even if younger, has authority over his sister. Tuqan resented Ahmad's despotic domination: "As for my brother Ahmad, he always raised that barrier the oldest brother puts between himself and his brothers and sisters. He dominated us like a father, so my relationship to him was marked mostly by unease, reserve and formality, along with silence. And silence is the language of strangers, even strangers united by blood" (p. 85). After Ibrahim's death, Tuqan transferred her

love to her youngest brother, Nimr. She developed a strong bond with him, stating that “he had been the only substitute to Ibrahim” (p. 172). The fact that Tuqan did not form a close relationship with any of her four sisters—or with any other female in her extended family—would seem to indicate that she sought to dissociate herself from the women-folk and their pattern of existence.

More than anything else, Tuqan sought a way out of what Elaine Showalter calls “the cramped confines of patriarchal space.”<sup>52</sup> Both literally and figuratively, Tuqan narrates her life story as an escape from prison: the prison of the house, of the family, of customs and traditions. Poetry was the means of escape. Tuqan is aware that she was catapulted onto the poetic path by a chance event: the incident of the boy with the flower. She muses about the role of chance in life and how a trivial event can change the course of a person’s life: “Had not that boy crossed my path and had not my brother, Yusuf, confined me within the old walls, my life would have followed the usual course” (p. 57). By this she means she would have completed her studies in primary school until the fifth grade, which was the highest grade available for girls in Nablus at the time, after which she would have probably been forced into a traditional, arranged marriage. In this case, Ibrahim would never have thought of making her his student. Was it mere chance or preordained fate that triggered her poetic development? The author admits that she often dwelled on the issues of predestination, individual freedom, and divine justice (pp. 126–28).<sup>53</sup>

The reader encounters the name Fadwa Tuqan for the first time when the narrator looks at the cover of the exercise book she prepared for her lessons with Ibrahim and sees the uneven handwriting of a thirteen-year-old girl: “Name—Fadwa Tuqan; Class (I crossed out this word, writing in its place: Teacher—Ibrahim Tuqan); Subject—Learning Poetry; School—The House” (p. 58). In this connection, Malti-Douglas remarks: “The acquisition of the name, concomitant as it is with the acquisition of poetry, signals a type of rebirth for the heroine. It is only when she embarks on her poetic path that she acquires a name and an identity.”<sup>54</sup> Henceforth Fadwa’s search for self is intimately connected with her poetic journey.

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<sup>52</sup> Elaine Showalter, “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness,” *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 2 (Winter 1981): 201.

<sup>53</sup> For a discussion of the concept of fate/chance in Arab culture and literature, see Cohen-Mor, *A Matter of Fate*, pp. 3–32, 189–200.

<sup>54</sup> Malti-Douglas, *Woman’s Body, Woman’s Word*, p. 168.

Tuqan writes that her natural bent for poetry, coupled with her strong drive for self-realization, assured that poetry became her life's objective: "Poetry became the sole preoccupation, awake or asleep, of my spirit and mind. It became the love that remained throughout my life a mystical love" (p. 63). Despite her sentence of confinement, studying and memorizing lines of ancient Arabic poetry transformed her repressed feelings into productive energy: "I was immersed in the act of creating myself, building myself up anew, in an eager search for the potentialities and abilities that constituted my life's capital" (p. 63). Her creative impulse was thus the catalyst in her process of becoming, of self-discovery, and of self-definition.

Tuqan's poetic journey was fraught with obstacles. As a woman poet she found herself in "double jeopardy," having to contend with social and cultural definitions of her role not only as a woman but also as a poet.<sup>55</sup> To begin with, she encountered resistance to her literary aspirations within her own family, including female relatives, such as her paternal aunt, al-Shaykha. They tried to stifle her efforts to make something of herself by shaking her faith in her abilities. "In their eyes, I was the discordant note in the house, the black sheep going astray from the fold" (p. 80). Even the educated circle of female teachers in Nablus did not welcome her in a friendly spirit. They treated her with enmity and arrogance, and Tuqan suffered deeply at their repeated accusations that her brother Ibrahim wrote the poetry for her and put her name at the end of it. The female community that surrounded her in Nablus during the 1930s and 1940s was an uneducated bourgeois society, "a society of sharp tongues and unceasing gossip and backbiting" among whom she appeared to be "a peculiar antisocial creature" (p. 95). Frustrated, Tuqan realized the truth of that old saying, "The flute player has no merit in his home town," keenly aware that she was paying the price for her success, even among her family and closest relatives.

It was not a coincidence that Tuqan's initial relationship with poetry was composing elegies (*ritha*). It was her brother Ibrahim who made this choice for her when he began teaching her. The writing of elegies, especially for male relatives (notably fathers or brothers), was traditionally assigned to the female poetic voice even before the birth of Islam. As Malti-Douglas points out, this choice signals Tuqan's attachment

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<sup>55</sup> For a discussion of double jeopardy, see *ibid.*, pp. 163–64, and Friedman, "Women's Autobiographical Selves," p. 47.

to the high poetic culture: "Her place in the canon is laid out for her. Accepting it means accepting her female literary role."<sup>56</sup> The pen name, Dananeer, with which Tuqan signed her earliest love poems is revealing. Dananeer was a slave girl of Yahya al-Barmaki, the famous vizier who served at the court of the Caliph Harun al-Rasheed. In the Islamic Middle Ages, slave girls owned by the ruling classes were trained to compose and sing love poetry. Even more revealing is the fact that she placed before her first two love poems a quotation from an authoritative male source: "Dananeer was honorable and chaste." Tuqan explains that as a result of her upbringing, she associated the word "love" with shame, and she felt the need to protect herself from the "shame of love" by assuring the reader that "love poetry did not remove the qualities of 'chastity' and 'honor' from the female writer of poetry" (p. 73).<sup>57</sup> Malti-Douglas finds the choice of a slave girl as persona ironic, for evidence suggests that such slaves girls were actually sex objects and great courtesans. In addition, the use of a pen name raises the issue of the right to romantic poetic speech. It suggests that only by assuming the identity of another established female poetic voice could Tuqan feel that she had a right to speak.<sup>58</sup> An even more sensitive issue was the ownership of the poetic voice. Tuqan repeatedly faced allegations that Ibrahim had a hand in her poems (pp. 68, 95). The fact that he was the most distinguished poet of his generation and "the voice of the Palestinian people" (p. 71) made her all the more vulnerable to such accusations. Thus, before creative self-assertion was possible, Tuqan had to overcome formidable social and cultural obstacles rooted in patriarchal myths and assumptions about herself as a woman and a poet.

"To be a creative woman in a gender polarized culture is to be a divided self,"<sup>59</sup> observes Alicia Suskin Ostriker. This is certainly true of Tuqan. Her autobiography reveals a perpetual tension between an individual self that seeks autonomy and individualism and a relational

<sup>56</sup> Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word*, p. 171.

<sup>57</sup> It is interesting to note that Hind Nawfal (1860–1920), who founded in Cairo the first women's journal, *al-Fatah*, offered her readers the same reassurance in her introduction to the first issue. See Hind Nawfal, "The Dawn of the Arabic Women's Press," in Badran and Cooke, *Opening the Gates*, pp. 217–19.

<sup>58</sup> Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word*, p. 172.

<sup>59</sup> Alicia Suskin Ostriker, "Divided Selves: The Quest for Identity," in idem, *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), p. 60.

self that seeks affiliation with a group and being part of a collective identity. Tuqan was tormented by her inability to “get away from the subjective realm of the self” (p. 123) and write political poetry. “I truly wished that...I could rid myself of being forever torn between my individualism and my national sentiments” (p. 124). Wavering between these conflicting attitudes made her feel guilty and dissatisfied. She was well aware that to fulfill the role of a poet, she had to be in touch with the realities of her country and commit herself politically. However, she could not transcend the force of her fundamental nature. “My tendency to romanticism,” she writes, “would pull me deep into myself again” (p. 131). When her father put pressure on her to write patriotic poems, she experienced a severe emotional crisis that led her to swallow a bottle of aspirin in attempted suicide. The father’s death in 1948 liberated her, and she began to write patriotic poems and participate in some political activities. But her complete poetic liberation, characterized by “an abiding emotional attachment to the communal cause” (p. 126), occurred only after the Arab defeat in 1967. Several literary critics have observed that it is not a coincidence that the successful transition to political poetry came about after the Israeli occupation of Nablus. As Magda al-Nowaihi explains: “Because Tuqan can finally identify with the entire nation’s powerlessness and vulnerability, which reflect her own, she can now sing their collective sorrow. Whereas she had previously felt her marginalization much more acutely as a woman than as a Palestinian, it is at this moment, when citizenship is truly no longer a privilege, that she can see it as more than a male prerogative and can fully embrace both her national and her gendered identities. These identities are no longer conflicting strands of her self; rather, they echo one another.”<sup>60</sup> Tuqan’s later poetry shows a remarkable blend of the personal and the collective.

The history of Palestine, then, is intimately connected with Tuqan’s self-development. She lived during a tumultuous period when her country experienced repeated crises of war, foreign occupation, and popular revolt. From British to Israeli domination, the struggle of the Palestinians for self-determination is echoed throughout the autobiography, though it frequently jostles with the feminist vision of the narrator. This particular aspect, the intersection of feminism and nationalism,

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<sup>60</sup> Magda M. al-Nowaihi, “Resisting Silence in Arab Women’s Autobiographies,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 33 (2001): 484.

characterizes the work of many contemporary Arab women writers. While some conceive the liberation of women as a precondition for the liberation of the nation, others see it as vice versa. It is a pivotal yet controversial issue for Arab feminists.<sup>61</sup> Malti-Douglas finds an inverse correlation between Tuqan's development and that of her country: "The year 1917 marks her birth—and the Balfour declaration, a death threat for her country; 1948 is a rebirth and access to political activity—and the loss of two-thirds of Palestine; 1967 consummates the loss of Palestine and Fadwa's full maturity."<sup>62</sup>

"Suffering is the sole origin of consciousness," observes Dostoevsky.<sup>63</sup> While Tuqan's political consciousness sprang from the suffering of the Palestinian people, her gender consciousness sprang from her personal suffering: the repression, discrimination, and deprivation that she endured during her childhood and adolescence. Tuqan highlights the life-long psychological effects of a deprived childhood by using a Freudian framework in her critique of her family. At other times she compares her trials and tribulations to those of the mythological figure Sisyphus (p. 12) and the biblical Joseph (p. 54). Her images are compelling: her family was the prison from whose locked doors she wished to escape (p. 51); her adolescence was exposed to the sword of the executioner (p. 78); her femininity was whimpering like a wounded animal in a cage (p. 107). Worse yet, she lived in a prison within a prison, being the prisoner of her environment, of her psychological and physical makeup, of her preordained fate (p. 127). Having lived a life "like that of animals confined in cages behind iron bars" (p. 107), she developed a prisoner's complex. In that wretched reality, the pivots of her existence were books and solitude (p. 84). Her motto was, "I read, so I exist" (p. 126). All these hardships made the quest for freedom and self-fulfillment the center of her life. Tuqan's ultimate triumph—to be a woman and a creator rather than simply a procreator—was as great as the challenge she faced. The multiple levels of her "journey"—inner and outer, poetic and feminist—have profoundly transformed her: "I feel that I am another person with no connection to my former self, no

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<sup>61</sup> Malti-Douglas, in the introduction to Tuqan's *A Mountainous Journey*, p. 2. For further information on this topic, see Lisa Suhair Majaj, Paula W. Sunderman, and Therese Saliba, eds., *Intersections: Gender, Nation, and Community in Arab Women's Novels* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002).

<sup>62</sup> Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word*, p. 176.

<sup>63</sup> Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, in *The Short Novels of Dostoevsky*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Dial Press, 1945), part 1, ix, p. 152.

longer acquainted with it except in memory” (p. 117). In her evolution from victimization to self-affirmation, poetry played a pivotal role. As she emphatically declares: “Poetry continued to be the beginning and the end, the first and last objective of my life” (p. 165).

While Tuqan bares many intimate details about her personal life, she keeps one area sealed: her love affairs. As she writes at the very outset of her autobiography, she felt it necessary to “keep the veil down over some aspects of the soul to safeguard it from debasement” (p. 12). She does not explain why she never married but guardedly alludes to several romantic relationships with men. One of them, identified only by his initials A.G., she met during her educational stay in England (1962–64). Another one, to whom she refers only as “my foreign friend” (p. 188), she met in Nablus shortly before the outbreak of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. By that time, she was living on her own in a separate house which Ibrahim’s son designed for her in 1965. Tuqan regards love as more than the affirmation of her femininity: “To me it is the affirmation of my crushed humanity and its very salvation” (p. 115). Insinuating that she experienced love many times in her life and had no regrets, she asserts that “it is unnatural that one’s heart should be bound up in one person all one’s life. It is normal for more than one relationship to form and for love to recur in the heart” (p. 116). As she elaborates: “I have never believed that one’s emotional life ends with the end of a particular love affair. Indeed, I believe that I am fulfilling the message of Eve. This guarantees a refreshing change of spirit—in particular an inner harmony” (p. 184). Such statements, which express rejection of the Arab sexual code and claim the right to total human liberation, are highly provocative, considering the predominantly conservative nature of her audience. On the one hand, it is not surprising that the narrator, who was forced to leave school for accepting a flower from a boy, should take such a radical stand. On the other hand, these views may reflect a lack of capacity for intimacy, that is, an inability to form a lasting and meaningful relationship with a significant other.

Structurally, Tuqan’s autobiography does not adhere to chronology in the strict sense of the word. Malti-Douglas characterizes this work as “a fragmentary text, parts of it separated from others, with prolepses and analepses that would drive a chronologically minded reader wild.”<sup>64</sup> Citing feminist theory to the effect that such fragmentation

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<sup>64</sup> Malti-Douglas, *Woman’s Body, Woman’s Word*, p. 164.

is typical of female autobiography, in contrast to the more linear male mode, she suggests that “Tuqan’s autobiographical project is a rejection and a subversion of the traditional male developmental autobiographical form in which a life and a life account take on shape and become a coherent whole.”<sup>65</sup> According to another interpretation, the many halts and side trips in the narration represent an attempt by the narrator to understand, and to make understood, the needs and desires that lay behind the events of her life.<sup>66</sup>

It is worth noting that *A Mountainous Journey* contains rare details concerning the author’s creative impulse and the circumstances surrounding the composition of many of her poems, such as “A Life” (p. 112), “Before the Closed Door” (p. 128), “The Deluge and the Tree” (p. 164), and “A Jordanian-Palestinian in England” (p. 165). Tuqan declares that she “found her authentic poetic self” (p. 74) in the work of the Arab poets in North America (*adab al-mahjar*). She then abandoned the traditional, classical style, which her brother Ibrahim insisted upon, in favor of modern, free verse (an act of liberation). Tuqan reveals that she usually could not compose poems under the immediate influence of events, when she would be in an agitated emotional state. For example, she was unable to write poetry for two months after the Arab defeat in 1967. Once the storm subsided, she would regain her ability to compose. She would always start a poem spontaneously, then continue to work on it consciously (p. 90). In her view, an understanding of a poet’s life and circumstances is essential for understanding his or her poetry. She therefore disagrees with T.S. Eliot’s assertion, “The artist does not use art as an expression of the self, but to wipe out this self” (p. 186). She believes art is immortal. A sense of the transience of life motivates the artist to create something “more permanent than the self” (p. 188). Tuqan’s poetry, recited by children and adults in her country and throughout the Arab world, is her lasting legacy.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Magda al-Nowaihi, “Resisting Silence in Arab Women’s Autobiographies,” p. 485.

<sup>67</sup> A selection of Fadwa Tuqan’s poetry is included at the end of the English translation of her autobiography. See also *Selected Poems of Fadwa Tuqan*, trans. Ibrahim Dawood (Irbid, Jordan: Yarmouk University, 1994).

*Fatima Mernissi's Dreams of Trespass*

A leading Moroccan sociologist and feminist writer, Fatima Mernissi was born in Fez in 1940. She received her primary education in a school established by the nationalist movement and her secondary education in a girls' school funded by the French protectorate. She studied political science at Muhammad V University in Rabat and at the Sorbonne, and earned her Ph.D. in sociology from Brandeis University. Her academic career flourished at Muhammad V University, where she was a professor of sociology from 1973 to 1980, and where she has since been a member of the research center. She has published extensively in both French and English on the position of women in Islam.<sup>68</sup> In her analytical studies, she explores the sources, modes, and effects of gender inequality in Muslim societies. She shows the incompatibility of traditional Muslim norms and institutions with the requirements of modernization and stresses the vital importance of women's emancipation for socioeconomic development in the Arab world.

*Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*,<sup>69</sup> published in English in 1994 and translated into Arabic in 1997, is a rich narrative that does not lend itself to an easy classification. On the one hand, the book is labeled "memoir" on the upper left-side corner of the back cover. On the other hand, the subtitle contains the word "tales," which denotes stories of imaginary events. Is the text, then, a personal history, based on the principle of veracity, or a work of fiction? What further compounds the matter is the fact that the text meets the criterion of the "autobiographical pact" set up by Philippe Lejeune; namely, the author, narrator, and protagonist are identical, as evidenced by the repetition of the names Fatima (e.g., p. 25), Mernissi (e.g., pp. 81, 116, 190, 240) and Fatima Mernissi (e.g., pp. 87, 96) throughout the text.<sup>70</sup> Yet in an interview given shortly after the book came out, Mernissi acknowledged the role of creative imagination in her account

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<sup>68</sup> See the bibliography for some of her publications. All of her works have been translated into Arabic.

<sup>69</sup> Fatima Mernissi, *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1994). All quotations are from this translation.

<sup>70</sup> Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, ed. Paul John Eakin, trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), pp. 3–5.

of the past.<sup>71</sup> All considered, it is fair to conclude that the book is a fictionalized memoir, a narrative containing a mixture of facts and imagination.

*Dreams of Trespass* focuses on the first nine years of Mernissi's life, spanning the years 1940 to 1949. Weaving her own memories with the dreams and memories of the women who surrounded her in her childhood, the narrator paints an intimate portrait of a secluded life lived behind the locked gate of a city harem in Fez, Morocco, during the 1940s. The narrative offers colorful depictions of the people, experiences, and influences that have shaped Mernissi's life and writing, molding her into an outspoken feminist scholar. At the same time it provides a fascinating glimpse of Moroccan culture and society in transition from colonialism to independence.

Fatima Mernissi was born into a traditional, urban, upper-class family in Fez in 1940. The extended family, which occupied a spacious house in the heart of the Medina, consisted of the paternal grandmother, her eldest son with his wife and seven children, and his younger brother—Fatima's father—with his wife and three children. Her parents' eldest daughter, Fatima had a sister and a younger brother. In addition to these family members, several widowed and divorced female relatives as well as a few rootless women found shelter under the Mernissis' roof.

Fatima's early memories revolve around the walled courtyard that marked the confines of the lives of the women in the harem. Separating the women's quarters from the outside world, the walls, the gate, and the gatekeeper represented the ultimate frontier. Without permission from the head of the family or the gatekeeper, no woman could get out. If permission was granted, the woman still had to be escorted by a male relative through the streets, wearing a long wrap and a thick veil. Faced with such restrictions on their freedom of movement, the secluded women constantly fantasized about crossing the frontier. "Women dreamed of trespassing all the time. The world beyond the gate was their obsession" (p. 2). Hence their activities—telling magical stories, acting out dramas, and embroidering birds on silk fabrics—were attempts to transcend their frontiers and expand their space and horizons by flying on imaginary wings.

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<sup>71</sup> I am grateful to one of my anonymous reviewers, who interviewed Mernissi shortly after her book came out, for sharing this information with me.

From early on, the young Fatima was keenly aware of the frontiers that constrained the women in the harem. At the Koranic school where she was sent at age three to join her numerous cousins, education meant knowing the *hudud*, or sacred frontiers, and respecting them. At home, there were forbidden terraces, forbidden activities (e.g., listening to Radio Cairo or smoking cigarettes), and obligatory daily rituals, notably eating communal meals at set times and kissing the hands of the adults at sunset. Above all, there was a rigid hierarchy based on sex and age: the women were subordinate to the men, and the young to the old. Among the women there were additional disparities in rank: first married women, then widows and divorcées, then children, and all of them subservient to Lalla Mani, the conservative paternal grandmother.

The highly structured harem environment, with its well-defined physical, sexual, social, and cultural frontiers, gave Fatima a sense of security: she knew the limits of her speech, action, and movement. "My childhood was happy," she declares, "because the frontiers were crystal clear" (p. 3). However, two problems disrupted her sense of order and harmony. First, not all the frontiers that she encountered growing up female were visible or clearly marked, with the result that "looking for the frontier has become my life's preoccupation. Anxiety eats at me when I cannot situate the geometric line organizing my powerlessness" (p. 3). Second, the rigid city harem where she lived contrasted sharply with the freedoms of the country harem, where her maternal grandmother Yasmina lived and where there were no visible walls. "There were really no limits to what women could do on the farm. They could grow unusual plants, ride horses, and move freely about, or so it seemed. In comparison, our harem in Fez was like a prison" (p. 55). The irreconcilable differences between the two harems threw the young heroine into confusion, precipitating a life-long exploration to discover the meaning, purpose, logic, and validity of the harem institution.

This exploration, undertaken enthusiastically with her cousin and childhood companion, Samir, was conducted by posing questions to various women in the household, including family members, relatives, and harem co-habitators. Fatima discovered quickly that the word "harem" was highly charged, triggering bitter arguments, and that the women were divided into two camps: one camp was anti-harem and the other was pro-harem. What Fatima learned from the women who surrounded her had a profound effect on the development of her

feminist consciousness and on her efforts to construct a stable and clear sense of self. Mernissi's narrative, then, highlights not the milestones of her life but rather the modes of discourse and social interaction to which she was exposed as a child. Her close ties with the women in the harem provided her with a variety of role models which she could either emulate or reject.

The most dominant figure in Fatima's early years was her mother, Douja (nickname for Khadija). The mother is portrayed as a rebellious and restive woman who never really accepted or adjusted to communal harem life. Of rural origins, she had no access to education and remained illiterate throughout her life. Trapped behind the walled courtyard, she saw her confinement as an absurdity that served no purpose: "Who is benefitting from a harem? What good can I do for our country, sitting here a prisoner in this courtyard?" (p. 200). Unable to throw off the yoke of age-old customs and traditions, she constantly sought ways to express her individuality and satisfy her yearning for privacy. Her successful endeavors include replacing the traditional thick cotton veil with the sheer chiffon *litham*, and the long and heavy *haik* (wrap) with the tight and colorful *djellaba* (men's cloak); organizing occasional intimate dinners with her husband and children on the rooftop terrace; having regular late morning breakfasts by herself; and embroidering modern designs rather than traditional ones. These small acts of resistance—violations of the "sacred frontiers" or prescribed limits—enabled her to assert herself and exercise a degree of freedom. As she put it: "Everyday I sacrifice myself and give in to tradition so that life can roll peacefully along in this blessed house... but there are some very personal things, like embroidery, which allow me to breathe, and I am not going to give those up, too" (p. 207).

The types of embroidery produced by the women of the harem reveal the deep division between the modern, anti-harem camp, represented by Douja and the teenaged Chama, and the conservative, pro-harem camp, represented by the mother-in-law, Lalla Mani, and Aunt Radia (Chama's mother). The modern camp favored embroidering birds in flight, using a doubled thread and loose stitches, an activity which was pure fun and did not take much time to complete. The conservative camp favored traditional designs, using a thin thread and very tight stitches, which was a tedious and time-consuming task. The traditional needlework was repetitive and ornate, requiring discipline and strict control, whereas modern embroidery was innovative and simple, allowing for freedom and relaxation. Indeed, "the conflict over

the embroidery design [was] emblematic of much deeper, antagonistic world views" (p. 209). Lalla Mani was a staunch supporter of the status quo, whereas Douja craved autonomy and emancipation. Hence "the split between the women was unbridgeable" (p. 209). This conflict was so intense that it pitted mother (Aunt Radia) against daughter (Chama).

It is not surprising that embroidery should become the battleground for conflicting attitudes and outlooks. In discussing the history of embroidery, Shelley Phillips points out that in many patriarchal cultures the construction of femininity was fused with embroidery: "Application to embroidery signified the containment and submission expected of women and their embroidered adornments became symbols of a leisured, aristocratic lifestyle."<sup>72</sup> As one of the few leisure pursuits permitted middle- and upper-class women, embroidery was utilized as a means of self-expression and private communication. Mothers and daughters expressed their resistance as well as resignation to patriarchal culture through the content of their embroidery. Not infrequently, their embroidery questioned their situation, serving as a creative outlet for their discontents and subversive messages. It thus became a weapon, "a source of pleasure and power for women, while being indissolubly linked to their powerlessness."<sup>73</sup> Significantly, the mutuality and reciprocity of the art, as a joint activity taught by mothers to daughters, made it the symbol of their unity.<sup>74</sup> In Mernissi's narrative, the lack of cohesion and solidarity among the women of the harem is all the more accentuated by the fact that a mother and her daughter are divided over embroidery designs. For Chama, the work of embroidery is clearly "not a selfless duty, but a manifestation of self,"<sup>75</sup> allowing her to assert her individuality, creativity, and autonomy. But for her mother, Aunt Radia, embroidery is a demonstration of duty, compliance, and respect for tradition.

Anne Donadey sees a similarity between the art of embroidery produced by the women of the harem and the technique used for chapter division in this text. Mernissi employs similar words to end one chapter and begin the next one; a theme introduced at the end of one chapter is taken up and elaborated in the next. Ending and beginning

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<sup>72</sup> Phillips, *Beyond the Myths*, p. 283.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 285.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 288.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

chapters with a similar vocabulary invokes the narrative strategy of survival used by Scheherazade, the storyteller of *The Thousand and One Nights*. Donadey suggests that this technique is a textual form of trespassing boundaries, an activity in which the secluded women constantly engaged.<sup>76</sup>

Douja exemplified this mode of behavior in her everyday actions. She sought to overturn all forms of discrimination, whether on the basis of gender or age. Thus she insisted that no distinction be made among the wives in the harem and that she should enjoy the same privileges as Radia, the spouse of her husband's brother. Although the brother, who was older and richer than her husband and the head of a larger family, had a higher rank and more power, he accepted Douja's demand, and their salons, for instance, were the exact replica of each other. Notably, when Fatima was born, Douja insisted that the family hold the same celebration rituals for her baby girl as for Samir, the baby boy born one hour earlier on the same day. Most importantly, the mother was determined to do everything in her power to enable Fatima to escape harem life. She instilled in her ideas of freedom and equality, teaching her to reject injustice and to create her own happiness. Worried that her daughter was too shy and quiet, she encouraged her to be rebellious. "You must learn to scream and protest, just the way you learned to walk and talk" (p. 9), she told her. She urged her daughter to study and get a diploma, seeing in education the key to liberation. In fact, she was instrumental in Fatima's transfer from the traditional Koranic school to a modern primary school modeled on the French system. On hearing that the nationalists opened in the city institutions of learning for girls, she immediately petitioned the father to send Fatima there. The matter was deliberated in an official family council meeting, and the mother was beside herself with joy when it was approved. However, when she asked to attend literacy classes, her request was turned down on the grounds that "schools are for little girls, not for mothers... It is not in our tradition" (p. 200).

Denied the right to fulfill her personal dreams, the mother transmitted her aspirations to her daughters, telling them that she wanted their lives to be "very exciting and filled with one hundred percent happiness, nothing more, nothing less" (p. 80). The thought that her daughters'

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<sup>76</sup> Anne Donadey, "Portrait of a Maghrebian Feminist as a Young Girl: Fatima Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass*," *Edebiyat* 11 (2000): 87, 85–103.

future would be brighter reassured Douja and comforted her: “At least my daughters will have a better life, full of opportunities... They will get an education and travel. They will discover the world, understand it, and eventually participate in transforming it” (p. 200). Not only did the mother present her daughters with a positive vision of the future, but she also took concrete steps to prepare them for it. She dressed Fatima in the latest Western fashions rather than traditional attire, explaining to her that “caftans may be of unparalleled beauty, but Western dress is about salaried work” (p. 85). Fatima wore very short French white dresses, even though they were less comfortable than her *sarwal* (harem pants). Douja sought to empower Fatima in every possible way, giving her constant support, encouragement, and guidance. She taught her daughter the power of words, making sure she understood the major lesson behind the tales of *The Thousand and One Nights*. As she interpreted this popular work, the tales show that words could save the person—Scheherazade—who knew how to string them artfully together. There is a prophetic ring to the mother’s words when she tells her daughter that her chances of happiness depend on how skillful she will become with words (p. 16).

The mother’s opposition to the veil dramatizes her commitment to women’s liberation. Her insightful comment as to why it was imposed on women eventually became one of the major themes in Mernissi’s feminist writing: “No one really knows why men force us to wear veils. Something to do with the difference maybe. Fear of the difference makes people behave in very strange ways” (p. 94). So anxious was the mother to see her daughter escape the veil that when she found her once running around with a scarf tied around her head, she snatched it away, shouting, “Don’t you ever cover your head! ... Do you understand me? Never! I am fighting against the veil, and you are putting one on? What is this nonsense?” (p. 100). When Fatima tried to explain to her that she did it because she was afraid of the invading German army, her mother reprimanded her, “Covering your head and hiding will not help. Hiding does not solve a woman’s problems. It just identifies her as an easy victim. Your grandmother and I have suffered enough of this head-covering business. We know it does not work. I want my daughters to stand up with their heads erect, and walk on Allah’s planet with their eyes on the stars” (p. 100).

As a child, then, Fatima received a great deal of nurturance from her mother. The text abounds with moments of tenderness and intimacy between mother and daughter: when Douja gives Fatima’s hair

a weekly beauty treatment, when she tells her stories of heroines from *The Thousand and One Nights*, when she hugs Fatima and takes her into her bed because of a nightmare. The mother was always there for her daughter. However, she was critical and reproachful if Fatima tried to disobey her. Fatima found her mother's position on rebellion rather contradictory. On the one hand, she encouraged her to rebel; on the other hand, if Fatima tried to stage a revolt by screaming and kicking feet, her mother would stop her, saying: "I did not say you ought to rebel against me! You should rebel against all the others, but you still have to obey your mother. Otherwise, it would lead to chaos" (p. 117). In addition, the mother advised her to carefully consider the odds first: "Rebel when you know there is some chance you may win" (p. 117). As a result, staging a revolt became a tricky business for Fatima. As she readily admits: "Even today, half a century later, the answers I come up with are always the same: inconclusive" (p. 117). The turning point in the relationship between mother and daughter occurred when Fatima learned in school how boys and girls become men and women capable of producing babies. Douja got really upset because she realized that Fatima was growing fast and becoming less dependent on her. It was the first time Fatima felt that she had some kind of power over her mother, and that it was information, or knowledge, that had given it to her.

Fatima's maternal grandmother, Yasmina, was the second female figure to inspire her with feminist ideas. Judging by what Yasmina taught her granddaughter, it is easy to determine where Douja acquired her views about freedom and equality. The intergenerational legacy is also reflected in the sense of humor which Yasmina, Douja, and Fatima shared. This is evident in Yasmina's practical jokes and ability inject fun into the harem life on the farm, in Douja's witty exchanges with her mother-in-law and the femme fatale act she used to put on, and in the adult Fatima's style of writing in her scholarly work.

Grandmother Yasmina lived with eight other co-wives in the countryside one hundred kilometers to the west of the Mernissi residence, between Fez and the ocean. An uneducated woman from a rural background, Yasmina was strikingly tall and skinny, with mountainous features and eccentric habits. Known to be a rebel and incomparable at staging confrontations, she amused the members of her household by naming her fat white duck Lalla Thor, after her most hated co-wife, and the farm peacock King Farouk, after the ruler of Egypt who repudiated his wife for not bearing him a son. Yasmina got away with numerous acts of defiance because she made her husband Sidi Tazi

laugh, "and that was a real achievement, for he was a rather moody person" (p. 31).

Yasmina's life on the farm afforded her greater freedom of movement and free access to nature. She could go fishing and horse riding, walk in the fields, climb on trees, and swim in the river. Her constant retreat into nature and deep identification with it illustrate what Annis Pratt calls "the green-world archetype" in women's fiction, an archetype we saw earlier in the autobiography of Fadwa Tuqan. Regarding nature as an intimate ally and a healer of all ills, Yasmina maintained that "the worst thing for a woman was to be cut off from nature. Nature is a woman's best friend. . . . If you're having troubles, you just swim in the water, stretch out in a field, or look up at the stars. That's how a woman cures her fears" (p. 55). Her daughter Douja voices the same sentiments when she bemoans her separation from nature in the city harem. Douja loved the yearly picnics spent on the family farm away from the walled courtyard, savoring the sense of freedom in the open spaces. After going back to the house, she would feel miserable for days. "When you spend a whole day among trees," she would say, "waking up with walls as horizons becomes unbearable" (p. 59).

Fatima used to visit Grandmother Yasmina once a year, during her summer vacations, and talk to her "about frontiers and fears and differences, and the why of it all" (p. 25). Yasmina taught her granddaughter how to overcome her fears by playing creative games with her and patiently answering the many questions that troubled her. Young as she was, Fatima was bewildered by the sharp contrast in lifestyle between her mother and her grandmother: "Yasmina's harem was an open farm with no visible high walls. Ours in Fez was like a fortress. Yasmina and her co-wives rode horses, swam in the river, caught fish, and cooked it over open fires. Mother could not even step out of the gate without asking multiple permissions" (p. 39). Yasmina carefully explained to her granddaughter how it all worked. Although Fatima was unable to fully grasp the meaning of *qa'ida*, or invisible rule, and why it was most of the time against women, her grandmother managed to calm her and satisfy her need for answers. It was from Yasmina that Fatima learned about the notion of the harem within: a law tattooed in the mind. As she came to understand it, "Once you knew what was forbidden, you carried the harem within. You had it in your head" (p. 61).

Yasmina believed in egalitarian Islam, and her concepts of justice and equality were based on the Koran. She could not accept the fact that the first wife, Lalla Thor, by virtue of her wealth and aristocratic

background, had no housekeeping duties. "She ought to be working like all the rest of us," she insisted. "Are we Muslims or not? If we are, everyone is equal. Allah said so. His prophet preached the same" (p. 26). As for King Farouk, she condemned his behavior as unethical: "What kind of good Muslim leader . . . dismisses a wife just because she does not produce a son? Allah alone, says the Koran, is responsible for the sex of babies" (p. 33). Yasmina taught her granddaughter "never to accept inequality, for it was not logical" (p. 26) and to resist oppression, be it of patriarchy or colonialism. She told her about famous women in Arab history, notably Shajarat al-Durr, who became Egypt's ruler in 1250, despite the fact that according to Muslim law a woman cannot rule a country. Fatima learned from Yasmina about the history of Moroccan resistance to French and Spanish colonization. She learned from Yasmina's co-wife, Tamou, a Berber warrior from the Rif mountains, about nationalism and women's emancipation.

Concerned that her granddaughter was too fixated on frontiers, Yasmina encouraged her to play like other kids and have fun or else she would miss out on happiness. When Fatima asked her grandmother whether she would grow up to be a happy woman, Yasmina reassured her in very strong terms: "Of course you will be happy! . . . You will be a modern, educated lady. You will realize the nationalists' dream. You will learn foreign languages, have a passport, devour books, and speak like a religious authority" (p. 64). There is a prophetic ring to Yasmina's vision of her granddaughter's future. Fatima's evolving sense of self found affirmation and security in her maternal grandmother and her intimate bond with Yasmina enhanced her self-development.

Aunt Habiba and the freed slave Mina were additional sources of nurturance and role models in Fatima's childhood. Aunt Habiba was repudiated by her beloved husband for no reason. Mina was an old, rootless Sudanese. Both women, who found shelter on the upper floor of the Mernissis' house, were endowed with *hanan*, "a free-flowing, easygoing, unconditionally available tenderness" (p. 17). Fatima found Habiba and Mina to be far more lavish with this resource than the mothers in the family. "People who give *hanan*, like Aunt Habiba, never threaten to withdraw their love when you commit some unintentional minor or even major infraction," she remarks. "*Hanan* was hard to come by downstairs, especially among the mothers, who were too busy teaching you to respect the frontier to bother with tenderness" (p. 17). Mina was so popular with the children that even the mothers would enlist her help when they had a hard time communicating

with their sons or daughters. Fatima, who became deeply attached to her, regarded her as a symbol of tenderness: "*Hanan* is such a divine gift... Only saints and other privileged creatures provided *hanan*, and Mina had it" (p. 159). Fatima credits Mina with helping her overcome some deep-seated fears and anxieties.

Aunt Habiba, the official storyteller of the harem, and Cousin Chama, the stage director, were the "high priestesses of imagination" (p. 113). Apart from providing entertainment, they wove the magic wings upon which the women of the harem could leap beyond the walls that confined their existence. Among the heroines most often portrayed in Chama's theater were Egyptian and Lebanese feminists, such as 'A'isha Taymur, Zaynab Fawwaz, and Huda Shaarawi, as well as famous fictional characters, especially Scheherazade and the adventurous princesses of *The Thousand and One Nights*. While the first group represented pioneers of women's liberation, the second group "went ahead and lived it, dangerously and sensuously" (p. 133). In addition to these heroines, two female singers, the Egyptian nationalist Umm Kulthum and the Westernized Lebanese Asmahan, were favorite subjects of dramas. The theater sessions provided unique opportunities for all the members of the harem to interact as well as to discover and show their talents. Fatima discovered that she could do acrobatic leaps, which she had learned from Grandmother Yasmina. Shy and quiet by nature, she was proud of her acrobatic performance, which helped her develop self-confidence. As usual, Lalla Mani, the conservative paternal grandmother, considered the theater "a sinful activity" because it was not mentioned in the Koran (p. 109). But Fatima was fond of this form of art. "Theater, that spelling out of dreams and giving up of body to fantasy, was so essential. I wondered why it was not declared a sacred institution" (p. 111).

Organized around stories by and about such women as these, Mernissi's narrative draws on a rich female oral tradition that both entertained and educated. Aunt Habiba's storytelling sessions thrilled Fatima and also imparted practical lessons and moral values to the inquisitive and impressionable young girl. For example, her interpretation of the tale of Princess Budur's fate highlighted the ability of a woman who finds herself in a hopeless situation to transform her reality by imagining the impossible. It also showed the absurd distinctions between the sexes and the critical importance of women's solidarity. Emphasizing the benefit of questioning, concentration, and observation as learning tools, Aunt Habiba reassured Fatima that she need not

worry about her future because she had “magic inside”—a hidden talent that she would ultimately discover, cultivate, and become famous for—and because she “belonged to a long line of women with strong dreams” (p. 215). Aunt Habiba encouraged Fatima to believe in herself and transcend the frontiers that limited her horizons. Her words, like those of Yasmina and Douja, have a prophetic ring when she says to Fatima: “You’ll be able to transform people, I’m sure of it” (p. 215). Inspired by these words, Fatima inwardly vows: “Oh yes, Aunt Habiba...I will be a magician. I will chisel words to share the dream and render the frontiers useless” (p. 114).

Although Aunt Habiba was uneducated and could neither read nor write, she possessed a keen understanding of gender relations. Her theory that beauty resided in the skin, amusing as it sounded, carried a serious message. “Skin is political (*A-jilda siyasa*),” she would say. “Otherwise, why would the imams order us to hide it?” (p. 226). Arguing that human beings are connected to their world through their skins, she was convinced that “if men wore beauty masks instead of battle masks, the world would be a much better place” (p. 220). As far as Aunt Habiba was concerned, a women’s liberation had to start with proper skin treatment. Although Fatima did not completely understand what she meant, her words prompted her to take up beauty treatments, skin toning and massage, and face and hair masks.

In sum, although Fatima was born into a harem, she was surrounded by caring and supportive women who provided her with diverse role models, each contributing in her own way to her self-development. Even Lalla Mani and Aunt Radia, who held conservative views and were in favor of the harem, promoted Fatima’s self-knowledge by presenting her with additional—opposite—outlooks. Owing to these multiple perspectives, Fatima gained a more balanced picture of the dilemmas and choices facing women in Moroccan society as she struggled to attain maturity and a vision of her own future.

As can be expected, Fatima’s father was the authority figure in her family. A conservative man who adhered to tradition, he was the opposite of his defiant and nonconformist wife. Although he was a nationalist, he had an ambivalent attitude toward women’s liberation. On the one hand, he did not practice polygamy and allowed Fatima to go to school; on the other hand, he kept his wife illiterate and secluded. The much criticized triangle of mother-son-wife can be observed in the Mernissi household. There were tense relations between Douja and Lalla Mani, who constantly interfered in her daughter-in-law’s mari-

tal life (p. 232) and censured her actions, even her sense of humor (p. 234). Douja was eager to leave the extended family and set up her own separate household, but Fatima's father was devoted to his mother and refused to leave his parental home. "As long as Mother lives,' he often said, 'I wouldn't betray the tradition'" (p. 77).

Like many conservatives, the father expected women to bear the burden of maintaining Moroccan cultural tradition in the face of French colonization (pp. 180–81). He resented the cultural revolution that he was witnessing in the Medina streets: "If women dress like men, it is more than chaos, it is *fana'* (the end of the world)" (p. 119). The author remarks humorously that beauty products were the only area in which her father favored the modern over the traditional because he hated the messy home-made hair and skin treatments that Douja prepared (p. 233). However, since he loved her, he tried to come up with compromises to satisfy her wishes. For example, he enabled her to have her own stock of food so that she could eat breakfast by herself and occasionally organize intimate dinners for them alone on the rooftop. This is what Aunt Habiba meant when she told Fatima, "Your mother has wings inside, too, and your father flies with her whenever he can" (p. 215). The loving yet unequal relations between Fatima's parents are revealed in Douja's dependence on her husband to read out to her passages from her favorite books, especially Qasim Amin's *The Liberation of Women*. In return, she had to pamper him and render special services and favors for him (p. 121).<sup>77</sup>

A pragmatic man, the father was in certain respects more lenient than his wife. For example, Douja would fly into a rage when Fatima dirtied her French white dresses, but her father would argue on her behalf: "Stains are unavoidable if this poor child is to lead a normal life" (p. 199). Fatima was attached to her father and felt uneasy about keeping him uninformed regarding the women's illegal activities of chewing gum and smoking cigarettes on the rooftop. "I did not want to betray his trust. He loved me very much and expected me never to lie" (p. 181). She remembers fondly how she used to climb into his lap and listen to the political discussions that the men of the family held

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<sup>77</sup> In an interview with one of my anonymous reviewers, Mernissi admitted that the part about the husband reading to the wife passages from Qasim Amin's *The Liberation of Women* was based on pure fantasy.

in the men's salon. As she was too young to understand the problems between the Spaniards and the French, or the French and the Germans, her father would later explain everything to her again.

Besides her parents and relatives, Fatima's self-construction was also facilitated by peer relationships, especially with her cousins Samir and Malika. These peers enabled her to view herself as she was seen by significant others, to experiment with new roles, and to engage in same and opposite-sex relationships. Samir, who lived in the same household and was exactly her age, was her closest friend. Malika lived in a separate domestic harem nearby. All three children went to the same Koranic school and spent the afternoons playing together until sunset, when Malika had to return home. One of their favorite activities was to climb to the forbidden terrace and hold secret meetings in which they tried to unravel the mysteries of elusive topics such as frontiers, harem, sex, the war between the Germans and the French, and the arrival of the Americans in Morocco. Malika, who was older than the other two, traded information for cookies and sparked their sexual awakening by telling them about love, sex, and babies—information which was supplemented by what they learned from the theater sessions and from listening to the women talk. Having reached puberty before Fatima, which was evident from her budding breasts and the amount of attention she was getting from the boys in the Koranic school, Malika served as a point of reference for Fatima on popular topics such as femininity, beauty, and sex appeal.

Fatima and Samir were deeply devoted to each other. Their close friendship was based on complementary roles: Samir, who was by nature more self-assertive and aggressive than Fatima, did most of the rebelling for her, and Fatima, who was more inquisitive, made most of the inquiries for their educational projects. Worried that her daughter would grow to be "an obsequious woman" (p. 9), Douja kept saying to her that she could not hang on to Samir for protection all the time and must learn to scream and protest on her own, just as she learned to walk and talk (p. 9). But Fatima was comfortable relying on Samir to do all the rebelling for her. For one thing, she could be certain of the final outcome—victory. For another, he never let her down. Thus, thanks to Samir's theatrical revolts, Fatima got to go to the movies, an exciting experience usually not permitted to children.

Fatima shared many secrets with Samir, including climbing to the forbidden terrace, sliding into empty olive jars, listening to Radio Cairo, and delivering love letters to the neighbors' sons or daughters.

Fatima and Samir were so close to each other that he was the only person allowed to attend the occasional private dinners that her mother would painstakingly organize on the rooftop terrace just for her husband and children. Yet despite their similar upbringing, Samir enjoyed privileges denied to Fatima. He could travel, and sometimes he accompanied his father and uncle on their trips. He would come back and report things to her that she could not go and see for herself because "Uncle and Father said that a girl does not travel. Travel is dangerous and women can't defend themselves" (pp. 2-3). Fatima felt that this exposure increased Samir's knowledge and gave him an advantage over her: "It was his wandering around with uncle and Father which made him so clever. I knew that if you moved around, your mind moved faster, because you were constantly seeing new things that you had to respond to. And you certainly became more intelligent than someone stuck in a courtyard" (p. 186).

Fatima and Samir were inseparable until they reached the age of nine, when Fatima was declared "officially mature" by Cousin Chama and began to show a keen interest in beauty treatments and magic practices. Samir, who was unprepared to invest in such activities, felt left out and started to complain that she was neglecting their games. He told her that she had to choose between play and beauty, because she could not do both. Fatima's spontaneous reply was, "Skin first! Samir... a woman's fate is to be beautiful, and I am going to shine like the moon" (p. 220). When Samir tried to dissuade her, she felt triumphant, realizing how important a companion she was for him. Though it was an agonizing choice for her and though deep down she felt remorse mixed with fear, she remained resolute. "My skin and hair have priority over games. Goodbye Samir. You can start looking for another companion" (p. 221). These decisive words marked the breakup between Fatima and Samir. They also signaled big changes in her life: her differentiation from Samir, her identification with the women around her, and her assumption of gender role.

The breakup coincided with a funny yet revealing incident involving Samir. He was thrown out of the women's *hammam* (public bath) because one of the women there noticed that he had "a man's stare." Complaining that he looked at her breast with "a very erotic stare," she insisted that he was not a child anymore and thus belonged in the men's *hammam*. Comic as it was, the incident betokened, for both Fatima and Samir, "the end of childhood, when the difference between the sexes did not matter" (p. 240). With their separation into male and

female *hammams*, Fatima intuitively understood that society assigned them to two different worlds and that they were “drifting into a new era, maybe into adulthood” (p. 239).

Having visited the men’s *hammam*, Samir hastened to tell Fatima about his experience: the men didn’t eat there, they didn’t talk or laugh, and they didn’t use beauty preparations. When Fatima seized this opportunity to defend Aunt Habiba’s skin theory, he retorted: “I think that men have a different skin” (p. 241). This remark unsettled Fatima. She suddenly realized that there was a huge wall between men and women and that gender created a barrier: “I could feel that I was crossing a frontier, stepping over a threshold, but I could not figure out what kind of new space I was stepping into” (p. 241). Overcome by sadness, she confided in Mina about her conversation with Samir and the incident at the *hammam*. Gently, Mina explained to her: “Childhood is when the difference does not matter... From now on, you won’t be able to escape it. You’ll be ruled by the difference. The world is going to turn ruthless” (p. 242). With these poignant words, Fatima was awakened to the dramatic implications of gender for her everyday life and future relationships with men.

*Dreams of Trespass* begins with Fatima as an infant and ends when she is on the threshold of puberty. As the narrative unfolds, the reader sees Fatima’s sense of self gradually being shaped and defined during the formative years of her life. In this period, her personality was greatly influenced by the patterns of interaction and socialization that she experienced in her family environment. Her sense of self was negotiated among multiple relationships—parents, close relatives, harem co-habitators, and peers—and within the cultural constructions of femininity available to her.

When the reader first meets Fatima, she is a plump little girl who cries and runs to hide in her mother’s caftan when insulted. She has fears and nightmares that she tries to overcome with the help of Grandmother Yasmina. She is dependent on her cousin Samir, whom she calls “my protector” (p. 195), and is “helplessly slow at everything, from eating to speaking” (p. 199). At the same time, she is playful, sociable, and inquisitive; she can sit still, concentrate, and learn; and she has a high degree of self-awareness. As Fatima grows older, she becomes more self-assertive and confident. The transfer from the Koranic school to a modern school, where she studies mathematics, geography, and foreign languages, sharpens her cognitive skills and stimulates her sexual awakening. She begins to get good grades and

shows interest in the topics of love and sex appeal, both of which lead her to invest heavily in beauty treatments and magic practices. This shift in her area of interest reduces her reliance on Samir and makes her more independent. At the same time, her growing knowledge weakens her mother's power over her. As her sense of self becomes more stable and secure, she is able to view herself, her parents, her peers, and the wider society more critically. The establishment of a mature and coherent identity is reflected in her commitment to cultivate her femininity and thus her individuality, a commitment which entails renegotiating her position, especially vis-à-vis Samir.

As is characteristic of a memoir, *Dreams of Trespass* chronicles communal history with a wealth of social and political information. From French colonialism through World War II to independence, the political landscape of Morocco underwent dramatic transformations which left indelible marks on Moroccan culture and society. The text depicts the spread of French as the language of the educated, the adoption of French fashions, and the assimilation of French ideas and values. The phenomenon of bilingualism and biculturalism, which is among the lasting effects of French colonization, is represented by Mrs. Bennis—one of the neighbors of the Mernissi household. Mrs. Bennis led a double life: one in the Ville Nouvelle (the new city built by the French outside the Medina, or old city, in Fez), where she drove around unveiled in her husband's car; and the other in the Medina, where she dressed according to tradition in a *djellaba* and a veil. Mrs. Bennis was a celebrity, especially among the women and children. "The idea of being able to swing between two cultures, two personalities, two codes, and two languages enchanted everyone!" (p. 180). The older men in the family, however, regarded this idea as a threat to Moroccan cultural identity. Yet all of Fatima's young male cousins wore Western attire and hairstyle, listened to the radio news in both Arabic and French, and learned to speak French. Cousin Zin, whose command of French was unrivaled, enjoyed great prestige in the extended family.

The nationalists, who were fighting the French, are credited with improving the position of women. In their overwhelming desire to create a new Morocco, they promised equality for all. Every woman was to have the same right to education as a man, as well as the right to enjoy monogamy. Fatima's father and uncle, who espoused the nationalists' views, each had only one wife (p. 35). The nationalists' decision to encourage women's education was implemented by opening

modern schools for girls and secluded city women. This policy allowed Fatima to escape illiteracy. However, after independence the nationalists failed to live up to many of their promises regarding women's liberation, especially in the area of family legislation.<sup>78</sup> This was also the case in Algeria after the ten-year struggle against French rule.

The text also depicts influences on Moroccan society from within the Arab world. For example, there are references to the provocative book *The Liberation of Women* by the Egyptian lawyer Qasim Amin and to Egyptian feminists marching in the streets of Cairo. Further, there are numerous details pertaining to Arab popular culture, especially the music and movies of the Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum and the Lebanese idol Asmahan. The ancient belief in magic and the practice of sorcery, for which Morocco is known throughout North Africa, are also mirrored in the activities of the women in the Mernissi household.<sup>79</sup>

In conclusion, in *Dreams of Trespass* Mernissi paints a vivid portrait of traditional Arab family life in Morocco during the transitional period from colonialism to independence. Despite the numerous frontiers, both visible and invisible, that confined the narrator, she had a happy childhood, developed a strong feminist consciousness, and went on to launch a brilliant academic career. The narrative reveals what empowered her and shaped her thinking and writing. Fatima was surrounded by a group of supportive women—Douja, Yasmina, Habiba, Chama, and Mina—who taught her the power of words. As Anne Donadey observes, although these women were oppressed, they were not victims. All were strong-willed and active, endowed with wisdom and vision. As individuals, they represented different backgrounds in terms of age, ethnicity, class, and social status.<sup>80</sup> Donadey notes that “the many role models whose contribution [Mernissi] highlights in *Dreams of Trespass* form a chain of transmission of North-African, Middle-Eastern, Arabo-Berber, and Islamic feminism within which she finds her legitimation as the most well-known Moroccan feminist.”<sup>81</sup> Indeed, these women

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<sup>78</sup> Mernissi describes the nationalists' failure to live up to their promises in her book *Beyond the Veil*.

<sup>79</sup> It is worth noting that another Moroccan woman writer, Leila Abouzeid, strongly criticizes this aspect of Moroccan culture in her semi-autobiographical novel, *The Last Chapter* (*Al-Fasl al-akhir*, Rabat, 2000), trans. by the author and John Liechety (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2000).

<sup>80</sup> Donadey, “Portrait of a Maghrebian Feminist,” p. 100.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

not only facilitated Mernissi's journey toward self-knowledge but also provided her with life-long sources of strength, motivation, and inspiration.

### *Conclusion*

The personal accounts of Fadwa Tuqan and Fatima Mernissi reveal similarities in background. Both Tuqan and Mernissi were born into traditional, urban, upper-class families and raised in a harem. However, their childhood experiences were thoroughly different. While those of Tuqan were overwhelmingly negative, those of Mernissi were predominantly positive. Tuqan was scarred by her childhood, Mernissi empowered. In this respect, it is important to note that the two texts reveal a sharp contrast in the ties between mother and daughter. Tuqan had a poor relationship with her mother and no emotional attachment to other women in the extended family. Instead, she developed a strong bond with her brother Ibrahim, who became a father figure to her and her main source of support and nurturance. Conversely, not only did Mernissi have a good relationship with her mother but she also had many surrogate maternal figures—Grandmother Yasmina, Aunt Habiba, Cousin Chama, and the freed slave Mina—all of whom nurtured her and contributed to her self-development.

Why such radical differences in these authors' memories of their childhoods, in their experiences of family life, and in their relationships with their mothers? Part of the answer is that Tuqan was born into a large family, being the seventh of ten children, whereas Mernissi was born into a small family, being the eldest of three children. It is reasonable to assume that both the size of the family and the daughter's place in the birth order influenced the amount of personal attention that the mother could give her. Further, the daughter's traits and "the goodness of fit" with the mother's traits are an important factor. Tuqan's basic disposition, by her own admission, was incompatible with that of her mother, whereas Mernissi's temperament interacted well with that of her mother. In addition, the influence of francophone culture, or more simply, the counterpressure of a modern Western culture, cannot be discounted. Mernissi's mother admired her neighbor, Mrs. Bennis, who spoke French and drove around unveiled in her husband's car. She dressed Fatima in French-style clothes and encouraged her to become an educated, modern woman. Notably, the young men in the Mernissi household wore Western attire and hairstyle, listened

to the radio news in both Arabic and French, and spoke French. In fact, it can be argued that the factor of biculturalism and bilingualism provided the adult Fatima with an escape route that the adult Fadwa did not have, especially as she was deprived of formal education in her youth.<sup>82</sup> The fact remains that while most of Mernissi's books are written in French (and later translated into Arabic), all of Tuqan's books are written in Arabic.

As for the quest for authentic selfhood, in both texts the struggle for national liberation played an important role in the narrator's self-development. In Fadwa Tuqan's case, it catapulted her to the height of her poetic career, earning her recognition as the foremost nationalist poet of the Palestinians. In Fatima Mernissi's case, it helped her escape illiteracy, for it was thanks to the nationalists' policy of encouraging women's education by opening modern schools for girls that she ended up attending one. Even the heroines' mothers benefitted from the struggle for national liberation, being among the first women of their generations to discard the veil in Nablus and Fez. Still, there is a fundamental difference between the two of them: Tuqan's mother was literate but unsupportive of her daughter's education, whereas Mernissi's mother was illiterate but passionately devoted to her daughter's education.

Both *A Mountainous Journey* and *Dreams of Trespass* provide intimate portraits of Arab family life during the 1940s and 1950s in Palestine and Morocco respectively. The assertion that "Arab society is the family generalized or enlarged, and the family is Arab society in miniature"<sup>83</sup> is amply borne out here. We see the hierarchical and patriarchal structure of the Tuqan and Mernissi households, the traditional values and mores, the conflict between individualism and collectivity, the tension between tradition and modernity, the divisive issues of women's liberation and women's solidarity, and the increasing gap between the older and the younger generations. The narrators' construction of the self took place within the dynamics that operated in their families. Although gender is only one component of personal

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<sup>82</sup> When Fadwa Tuqan traveled to England, where she stayed for two years (1962–64) and gained firsthand knowledge of English culture, she was already a middle-aged woman.

<sup>83</sup> Barakat, *The Arab World*, p. 118. Sharabi, "Impact of Class and Culture on Social Behavior", p. 244.

identity, for both Fadwa and Fatima it became a crucial category of self-definition.

These personal accounts dispel many misconceptions about the harem in the Western popular imagination. As Mernissi remarks, "Westerners think the harem is a sex-concept. Arab men are more aware of it as a control-concept. You have to be an Arab [woman] to identify the harem as a fear-concept. Otherwise why the locks?"<sup>84</sup> Is the harem, then, the best place to produce feminists? Strange as the idea may sound, this is the conclusion that Mernissi's text leads to. While Tuqan's narrative highlights her journey to poetic creativity, Mernissi's narrative highlights her path to feminism. Tuqan used her creative gift to set herself apart from the women in her family and her community, rejecting their traditional roles and ideals (particularly marriage and motherhood), whereas Mernissi used her intellectual gift to become the spokesperson for the women in her family and her society, fighting tirelessly for their rights and freedom in her numerous articles, lectures, and books.

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<sup>84</sup> Cited from a word-image exhibition of life in the harem, with text by Fatima Mernissi, photographs by visual artist Ruth Ward, and mixed-media collages by Mansoor Hassan, held at Alif Gallery in Washington D.C. on November 20, 1993; text no. 14.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS IN FICTIONAL WORKS

The novelist does not hesitate to open secret doors before you; the novelist dares to invite you to visit the lower floors of the house and the cellars and locked places in which dust and old furniture and memories gather, and every corridor of the self where electricity is not yet installed and from where a suspicious stale smell emanates.

Ahlem Mosteghanemi<sup>1</sup>

#### *Feminist Fiction and the Coming-of-Age Novel*

Of all the forms of fiction, the *Bildungsroman*, or coming-of-age novel, is particularly suited for exploring mother-daughter relationships in women's literature. The singular attention of the *Bildungsroman* to the protagonist's process of self-development, shaped as it is by interaction with the social environment, renders this genre most relevant to the topic under discussion. As defined by M. H. Abrams, the traditional *Bildungsroman* portrays "the development of the protagonist's mind and character, in the passage from childhood through varied experiences—and usually through a spiritual crisis—into maturity and the recognition of his or her identity and role in the world."<sup>2</sup> The family and the wider society become the site for experience, often embodying forces hostile to the protagonist's ambitions and struggle for authentic selfhood. The protagonist's response to influences and pressures from the environment, namely, the interplay between psychological and social factors, determines the path toward self-development. Successful *Bildung* requires adequate nurturance and "the existence of a social context that will facilitate the unfolding of inner capacities, leading the young person from ignorance and innocence to wisdom and

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<sup>1</sup> Ahlem Mosteghanemi, "Writing against Time and History," in Faqir, *In the House of Silence*, pp. 86–87.

<sup>2</sup> M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Chicago: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1988), p. 120.

maturity.”<sup>3</sup> The particular *Bildung* of the protagonist, its possibilities or limitations, reflects to a large extent the zeitgeist—the spirit of the time and place in question.<sup>4</sup>

Since its origin in Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* in late eighteenth-century Germany, the *Bildungsroman* has undergone significant transformations to accommodate other cultural and historical variables. Specifically, the traditional *Bildungsroman* was mainly concerned with male developmental patterns and goals, whereas its contemporary versions include the crucial social categories of gender, class, race, and ethnicity. Despite its belated emergence in Anglo-American literature of the twentieth century, the female *Bildungsroman* has become a popular fictional form among women writers. Ellen Morgan points out that the upsurge of feminist activity and analysis in the 1960s led to an increase in both the production of the female *Bildungsroman* and feminist criticism of the genre. In her view, the female *Bildungsroman* has become “the most salient form for literature influenced by neo-feminism.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Barbara White labels the modern feminist *Bildungsroman* “the most popular form of feminist fiction,”<sup>6</sup> and Annie Eysturoy considers it “one of the most viable literary forms in women’s and minority literature.”<sup>7</sup>

The popularity of the female *Bildungsroman* seems all the more striking given the tendency among critics of the genre to regard it as dead. As Bonnie Hoover Braendlin remarks, “Underlying the major critical studies of the *Bildungsroman* is the assumption that it is primarily a white male-dominated genre currently eclipsed by the preoccupation of contemporary novelists with alienated man’s loss of societal responsibilities, harmony, and socially sanctioned identity.”<sup>8</sup> Put differently, in an age of information technology and global capitalism where changes in employment, lifestyle, and intimacy are increasingly rapid and disruptive, the self as a project can no longer be pursued

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<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland, *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1983), p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Annie O. Eysturoy, *Daughters of Self-Creation: The Contemporary Chicana Novel* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), pp. 6–7.

<sup>5</sup> Ellen Morgan, “Humanbecoming: Form and Focus in the Neo-Feminist Novel,” in Susan Koppelman Cornillion, ed., *Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1973), p. 185.

<sup>6</sup> Barbara A. White, *Growing Up Female: Adolescent Girlhood in American Fiction* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), p. 195.

<sup>7</sup> Eysturoy, *Daughters of Self-Creation*, pp. 10–11.

<sup>8</sup> Bonnie Hoover Braendlin, “*Bildung* in Ethnic Women Writers,” *Denver Quarterly* 17, no. 4 (Winter 1983): 76.

and hence the genre is moribund. For David Miles, the appearance of Gunther Grass's parodic anti-*Bildungsroman*, *The Tin Drum*, which is "the uninhibited tale of a dwarf whose most remarkable growth is purely phallic," signals the "absolute end" of the genre.<sup>9</sup>

Given the declared demise of the male *Bildungsroman* in contemporary literature, how can the enduring power of the female *Bildungsroman* be explained? Braendlin argues that by virtue of both its formal and thematic characteristics, the *Bildungsroman* is an ideal genre for women writers. With respect to its formal aspects, she notes that "although women often select the subjective lyric to express strong personal feelings, the objectivity of the *Bildungsroman* offers female authors distancing devices, such as irony and retrospective point of view, which convey the complexity of the female quest for selfhood and confirm its universality." With regard to its thematic aspects, she believes that "the focus of the *Bildungsroman* upon the interaction between individual and environment encourages women to expose and to condemn pre- and proscriptive patriarchal social customs and values." In addition to these unique characteristics, "the emphasis of a *Bildungsroman* on repressive environmental factors, on the process of disillusionment necessary for personality change and maturity, and on the possibilities for transformation offered by individual choice makes it an attractive genre to modern women intent on expressing female awakening and consciousness-raising and on proclaiming new, self-defined identities."<sup>10</sup> Braendlin defines the female *Bildungsroman* as "more or less autobiographical novel, reflecting an author's desire to universalize personal experience in order to valorize personal identity."<sup>11</sup> She distinguishes two processes of female *Bildung*: the adolescent development journey, common also to male self-development fiction, and the crisis situation of the mature woman.<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Abel et al. identify two predominant narrative patterns in the female *Bildungsroman*: first, the linear chronological plot, as in male self-development fiction; and second, the awakening, which occurs later in the heroine's life and consists of brief internal epiphanic moments.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> David H. Miles, "The Picaro's Journey to the Confessional: The Changing Image of the Hero in the German *Bildungsroman*," *PMLA* 89 (1974): 990.

<sup>10</sup> Braendlin, "Bildung in Ethnic Women Writers," p. 77.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>13</sup> Abel et al., *The Voyage In*, p. 11.

Considering the enormous appeal of the female *Bildungsroman* for women writers, its belated arrival on the literary scene is puzzling. Esther Kleinbord Labovitz links the emergence of the female *Bildungsroman* to changes in the social conditions of women: "This new genre was made possible only when *Bildung* became a reality for women in general and for the fictional heroine in particular. When cultural and social structures appeared to support women's struggle for independence, to go out into the world, engage in careers, in self-discovery and fulfillment, the heroine in fiction began to reflect these changes."<sup>14</sup> Abel et al. offer a similar explanation: "Women's increased sense of freedom in this century, when women's experience has begun to approach that of the traditional male *Bildungsheld*, finds expression in a variety of fictions." They emphasize that while the central idea underlying the *Bildungsroman*—the development of a coherent identity—is questioned in modernist and avant-garde fiction, it "remains cogent for women writers who now for the first time find themselves in a world increasingly responsive to their needs."<sup>15</sup> Not surprisingly, when these critics examine the female *Bildungsroman* from a cross-cultural perspective, they find similarities in women's experience across linguistic boundaries.<sup>16</sup>

Modern Arabic literature, like other literary traditions, has its own adaptations of the *Bildungsroman*. Sabry Hafez, tracing the development of the Arabic novel during the twentieth century, discusses the effects of major changes in the Arab sociopolitical reality on the novelists' narrative strategies and literary orientations.<sup>17</sup> With the rise of a large number of women writers, for example, female characters began to play important roles in narrative fiction: "They have figured as the heroines of many texts, elbowing male characters aside. The public space of the novel has thus been opened up to women and to the debate of gender issues."<sup>18</sup> In addition, novels written after the 1960s tend to "concentrate on one character, which has the purpose of portraying not just events, but their impact upon the character, his

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<sup>14</sup> Esther Kleinbord Labovitz, *The Myth of the Heroine: The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Peter Lang, 1986), p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> Abel et al., *The Voyage In*, p. 13.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>17</sup> Sabry Hafez, "The Transformation of Reality and the Arabic Novel's Aesthetic Response," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 57, pt. 1 (1994): 93–112.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

relationship to the political and cultural milieu and the dominant social values which affect his psychological development."<sup>19</sup> The central character, who faces many obstacles toward self-fulfillment, is driven by a passionate desire to do away with old relationships and be liberated from the values of the past in order to have a new beginning—a new identity. This desire is at times the main theme of the novel.<sup>20</sup> Although Hafez does not mention the *Bildungsroman* by name, many of the textual characteristics that he describes are unique to the *Bildungsroman*. In addition, some of the works that he cites, such as Abd al-Hakim Qasim's *The Seven Days of Man* (1969) and al-Tayyib Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1966), are outstanding examples of this genre.

As in the case of other national literatures, when the *Bildungsroman* was introduced into the Arabic literary scene, its formal and thematic features were modified. The concept of *Bildung* took on characteristics peculiar to Arab culture, society, time, and place. The Arabic adaptation of the *Bildungsroman* focuses on the particular challenges that the process of *Bildung* presents to the individual Arab in his or her quest for authentic selfhood. Nedal M. al-Mousa argues that the distinct nature of the Arabic novel (a relatively new genre in Arabic literature) is best exemplified by the Arabic *Bildungsroman*.<sup>21</sup> He analyzes six of what he calls "typical Arabic novels" published by male authors between 1938 and 1980.<sup>22</sup> In all these texts, he points out, the hero leaves home to seek his fortune and realize his ambitions. However, his journey is not to the capital city but to the West. There he undergoes a variety of experiences, including love affairs, which form part of his education. Exposure to a foreign culture results in a culture shock, and the hero suffers an emotional crisis and profound alienation. In the end, he acquires an understanding of the world and insights into both his native culture and the foreign culture. In al-Mousa's view, the theme of encounter or confrontation between East and West is what

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>21</sup> Nedal M. al-Mousa, "The Arabic *Bildungsroman*: A Generic Appraisal," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 25 (1993): 223–40.

<sup>22</sup> These novels are Tawfiq al-Hakim's *Bird of the East* (1938), Dhu al-Nun Ayyub's *Al-Duktur Ibrahim* (Doctor Ibrahim, 1939), Yahya Haqqi's *The Saint's Lamp* (1944), Suhayl Idris's *Al-Hayy al-latini* (The Latin Quarter, 1954), al-Tayyib Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1966), and Ghalib Hamza Abu al-Faraj's *Sanawat al-daya'* (The Lost Years, 1980).

gives the *Bildungsroman* its Arabic flavor. Other salient features of the Arabic *Bildungsroman* include a spiritual crisis and a love affair as a means of bringing opposed cultural values into dramatic focus. Most conspicuously, the ultimate goal of the hero's *Bildung* is altered: in the traditional *Bildungsroman* the hero undergoes a series of educational experiences that teach him the "art of living," whereas in the Arabic *Bildungsroman* the theme of the art of living is replaced by the central idea of teaching the hero how to reconcile two opposed cultures.<sup>23</sup>

Al-Mousa does not consider or even mention the female *Bildungsroman*, nor do many other Arab male critics. And yet, Arab women writers have produced a good number of coming-of-age novels. Some examples are Layla Ba'labakki's *Ana ahya* (I Am Alive, 1958), Latifa al-Zayyat's *The Open Door* (1960), Emily Nasrallah's *Tuyur aylul* (September Birds, 1962), Nawal El Saadawi's *Two Women in One* (1975), Ulfat al-Idilbi's *Sabriya: Damascus Bitter Sweet* (1980), Samar Attar's *Lina: A Portrait of a Damascene Girl* (1982), Leila Abouzeid's *Year of the Elephant* (1983), Alia Mamdouh's *Mothballs* (1986), Miral al-Tahawy's *The Blue Aubergine* (1998), and Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* (2007). There is a great variety among these texts in terms of theme and structure. Some present the adolescent development journey (e.g., al-Zayyat's *Open Door*, Attar's *Lina*), while others focus on the crisis situation of the mature woman (e.g., al-Idilbi's *Sabriya*, Abouzeid's *Year of the Elephant*). Some exhibit a linear plot pattern (e.g., El Saadawi's *Two Women in One*), while others employ a nonlinear narrative pattern (e.g., al-Tahawy's *The Blue Aubergine*).

In the coming-of-age novels by Arab women writers, much like in their Western counterparts, "the traditional means and goals of female self-development are explored, rejected, or revalued."<sup>24</sup> The heroine struggles to define herself as an individual and to realize her ambitions against the constraints of family and society. Although patriarchal oppression is a central theme in all these novels, it does not represent the only barrier to female self-development. The heroine may be trapped by class as well as by gender. Family relationships, especially as they affect the heroine's situation and individual self, also figure prominently in these narratives. Rebellion against a mother who embodies passive domesticity—marriage and motherhood—is a

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 238.

<sup>24</sup> Braendlin, "Bildung in Ethnic Women Writers," p. 77.

natural and inevitable step in the heroine's self-development. Most commonly, the heroine's process of *Bildung* is fraught with tensions and conflicts, moral dilemmas and agonizing choices. The heroine is torn between personal ideals and social reality, individualism and communal values, autonomy and relationality, the perils of expressing her sexuality and those of repressing it. Sometimes she shares her developmental journey with a sister, friend, or lover, who help her work out questions of identity, career, and marriage.<sup>25</sup>

Dinah Manisty has examined novels by Egyptian women written over a thirty-year period, between the end of the 1950s and the early 1980s. She concludes that they have a close affinity with the *Bildungsroman*, though they alter some of its basic tenets. While the theme and action of the text revolve around a woman who attempts to find value in a world defined by love and marriage, the developmental process consists of female awakening, that is, the significant changes are internal. This is exemplified in the works of Nawal El Saadawi, Latifa al-Zayyat, Salwa Bakr, and Sakina Fuad. Manisty notes that this developmental plot is becoming a pattern in literature by and about women: "Movement is inwards, towards greater self-knowledge that leads in turn to a revelation of the disparity between that self-knowledge and the nature of the world. The protagonist's growth results typically not in 'an art of living,' as for her male counterpart, but in a realization that for a woman such an art of living is difficult or impossible: it is an awakening to limitations which demand negotiating new spaces."<sup>26</sup> For Manisty, the negotiation of space as a site from which to construct a self is crucial to the understanding of these novels.

The struggle for national liberation often helps the heroine to escape the constraints of her family, gender, and class. Engaging in patriotic activities facilitates the heroine's efforts not only to attain self-knowledge but also to find self-fulfillment. It should be noted that during the first half of the twentieth century most parts of the Arab world were preoccupied with wars of independence from colonial rule. Commitment to the national cause and active participation in the fight against foreign occupation were considered duties of the highest order, taking priority over individual needs and goals. As Joseph Zeidan observes:

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<sup>25</sup> This brief outline is based on salient features in the above-mentioned *Bildungsromane* by Arab women writers and on Abel et al., *The Voyage In*, pp. 12–13.

<sup>26</sup> Dinah Manisty, "Negotiating the Space between Private and Public: Women's Autobiographical Writing in Egypt," in Ostle et al., *Writing the Self*, p. 273.

“When national identity itself was in danger, personal concerns seemed either to diminish or to find expression in the collective struggle for existence.”<sup>27</sup> He points out the paradox embedded in this situation: “to free oneself one had to escape from self-centeredness and embrace the national ‘self.’”<sup>28</sup> Following independence, the Arab world witnessed numerous regional conflicts, including the Palestinian struggle for self-determination, the Lebanese Civil War, and the Gulf Wars. Frequently, direct involvement in a movement of resistance to foreign occupation or oppressive regimes empowers the heroine, grants her the emancipation she craves, and serves as a catalyst in her self-development (e.g., Hamida Na‘na’s *The Homeland*). However, herein may lie the seed of future disillusionment. Although a revolutionary situation encourages men and women to cast off old roles and to develop new and more egalitarian male-female relationships, current evidence suggests that after the enemy that united the nation disappears, women and men may revert to older patterns.<sup>29</sup> The Algerian experience is a case in point, but the Egyptian experience proved the opposite, precipitating the start of the open organized feminist movement. Similarly, in Iraq and other former British or French mandates many women did not go back to the old ways.

In her study of the European female *Bildungsroman*, Labovitz suggests that “the female heroine might not have entered the *Bildungsroman* were it not for her attempt to change the structure of society, the family, the relationships between male and female.”<sup>30</sup> This is true for the Arab female *Bildungsroman* as well. The heroine’s developmental process is characterized by a series of disillusionments and clashes with her hostile environment. These clashes frequently end not in integration into society but in flight (Attar’s *Lina*), withdrawal (Ramadan’s *Leaves of Narcissus*), death (al-Shaykh’s *The Story of Zahra*), or even suicide (al-Idilbi’s *Sabriya*). It is important to note that such endings are not peculiar to the Arab female *Bildungsroman* but rather are common to feminist novels the world over.<sup>31</sup> Some critics interpret the heroine’s death as a reflection of skepticism on

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<sup>27</sup> Joseph T. Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists: The Formative Years and Beyond* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 226–27.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Fernea, *Women and the Family in the Middle East*, p. 162. See also Evelyne Accad, *Sexuality and War*, p. 18.

<sup>30</sup> Labovitz, *The Myth of the Heroine*, p. 251.

<sup>31</sup> Abel et al., *The Voyage In*, p. 6; Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists*, p. 148; Accad, *Veil of Shame*, p. 247.

the author's part regarding possible improvement in the condition of women.<sup>32</sup> Others wonder whether the only form of heroism open to women is martyrdom.<sup>33</sup> And still others point out that "the deaths in which these fictions so often culminate represent less developmental failures than refusals to accept an adulthood that denies profound convictions and desires."<sup>34</sup>

The close affinity between the *Bildungsroman* and the autobiography, both of which employ the same narrative techniques and tell similar stories, makes it at times difficult to classify a particular text as one or the other.<sup>35</sup> Also, because the *Bildungsroman* draws heavily on autobiographical material and contains intimate portraits of family life, it exposes Arab women writers to the same kind of accusations and penalties that are associated with self-narratives. As mentioned earlier, the family domain in Arab societies is regarded as sacrosanct and any public disclosure of "family secrets" is viewed as an act of disloyalty and violation of privacy. Moreover, the topics of sexuality, religion, and politics are considered taboo. In a candid essay about her literary works, the Syrian author Samar Attar writes that the official reason for which her novel *Lina: A Portrait of a Damascene Girl* was rejected by the Arab Writers Union in Syria was a chapter containing a scene of a young girl masturbating. However, she strongly believes that the real reason for the rejection of her book was its criticism of the repressive regime.<sup>36</sup> Attar recounts that her difficulties with this novel were compounded by the tendency among Arab readers and critics alike to confuse the difference between author and narrator and identify her with her heroines. Another Syrian writer, Ghada al-Samman, reveals that she was afraid she might be arrested because one of her heroines had committed a crime.<sup>37</sup> The Egyptian Salwa Bakr says in exasperation: "Every story I have written has been assumed to be my personal story; this notion stifles creativity."<sup>38</sup> The assumption that

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<sup>32</sup> Judi M. Roller, *The politics of the Feminist Novel* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1986), p. 14; cited in Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists*, p. 148.

<sup>33</sup> Phillips, *Beyond the Myths*, p. 320.

<sup>34</sup> Abel et al., *The Voyage In*, p. 11.

<sup>35</sup> Rooke, *In My childhood*, p. 40.

<sup>36</sup> Samar Attar, "To Create and in Creating to Be Created," in Mary Ann Fay, ed., *Auto/Biography and the Construction of Identity and Community in the Middle East* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 219.

<sup>37</sup> Cited in Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists*, p. 232.

<sup>38</sup> Salwa Bakr, "Writing as a Way Out," in Faqir, *In the House of Silence*, p. 38. See a similar complaint by El Saadawi in Georges Tarabishi, *Woman against Her Sex* (London: Saqi Books, 1988), p. 190.

the writer and her heroine are one and the same can have serious consequences for the writer's reputation, especially when the narrative deals with sensitive matters.

In assessing the contribution of Arab women novelists who began their literary careers in the late 1950s, Zeidan notes that they "set out to explore the feminine psyche that had been *terra incognita* throughout the history of Arabic literature, because that literature had been almost exclusively the product of male writers."<sup>39</sup> Arab women writers have come a long way since then and their success in integrating the discourse of a female point of view into the mainstream of Arabic writing is illustrated by the female *Bildungsroman*. An effective vehicle of self-expression and social criticism, the female *Bildungsroman* enables Arab women writers not only to explore the psyche of their heroines but also to chronicle their struggles against the patriarchal system and its institutions, foremost among them the family. As Allen Morgan points out, no other fictional form besides the *Bildungsroman* can adequately depict woman's experience, which is political and social as well as personal and psychological. The *Bildungsroman*, she stresses, "is admirably suited to express the emergence of women from cultural conditioning into struggle with institutional forces, their progress toward the goal of full personhood, and the effort to restructure their lives and society according to their own vision of meaning and right living."<sup>40</sup>

#### *Latifa al-Zayyat's The Open Door*

An Egyptian novelist, short-story writer, and political activist, Latifa al-Zayyat (1923–96) was born in the Delta town of Damietta. She received her higher education at Cairo University, where she studied English literature, and at Ayn Shams University, where she earned her doctorate degree and became a professor of English. As a political activist, al-Zayyat rejected all forms of imperialist hegemony and struggled for national liberation, human rights, freedom of expression, and the emancipation of women. She was twice imprisoned for her political activities, first in 1949 when she was affiliated with the communist party of Egypt, and the second time under Sadat's regime in

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<sup>39</sup> Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists*, p. 139.

<sup>40</sup> Morgan, "Humanbecoming," p. 185.

1981. She has published literary criticism, several novels, a volume of short stories, her autobiography, and a play.

*The Open Door*, published in 1960, was al-Zayyat's first novel.<sup>41</sup> Generally recognized as her *magnum opus*, the novel depicts the coming-of-age of a middle-class girl in Cairo during the 1940s and 1950s. The period in which the novel is set covers turbulent years in Egypt's history, beginning with the mass-demonstrations against the British colonial rule on February 21, 1946, through the popular uprising in the Canal Zone, the Cairo fire, the 1952 revolution, and finally, the battle of Port Said in 1956, following Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal and the Tripartite invasion by British, French, and Israeli forces.

The novel's heroine, Layla Sulayman, grows up in a traditional middle-class Egyptian family consisting of her father, Muhammad Effendi Sulayman, a civil servant, her mother, Saniya Hanim, and her older brother, Mahmud. The small nuclear family maintains close ties with Layla's mother's widowed sister, Samira Hanim, and her two teenage children, Gamila and Isam, who live in the same apartment building, located in the Sayyida Zeinab neighborhood. While the narrative's focus is on Layla's inner development, the interests and concerns of a small group of young characters around her, including her cousins Isam and Gamila, her two intimate classmates, Sanaa and Adila, and her brother Mahmud and his close friend Husayn, are also depicted. Thus the novel presents a broad view of young Egyptians of that time and class. Mohja Kahf borrows a term from Egyptian film criticism to describe this text: "*The Open Door* is a *geel* novel, one that attempts to express the concerns of a rising generation (*geel*) in a manner both individualized and representative."<sup>42</sup> She notes that "*geel* works portray the personal events in a *shilla*—a small group of friends—in a manner that alludes to larger social, economic, and political conditions."<sup>43</sup> Through Layla and her *shilla*, the novel captures the struggle of many young women and men to free themselves from the constraints of family and society. The fact that the individual struggle is embedded in

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<sup>41</sup> Latifa al-Zayyat, *Al-Bab al-maftuh* (Cairo: Maktabat al-anglu al-misriyya, 1960); English translation: *The Open Door*, trans. Marilyn Booth (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2000). All quotations are from this translation.

<sup>42</sup> Mohja Kahf, "Latifa al-Zayyat, *The Open Door*," *World Literature Today* 76, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 227.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

the larger struggle for national independence facilitates the character's path to autonomous selfhood and highlights the reciprocal relationship between the two processes.

When the reader first meets Layla, she is an eleven-year-old girl attending the first year at a secondary school in Cairo. An energetic and diligent student, she is about to experience two major events which will awaken her political and gender consciousness. The first is the participation of her seventeen-year-old brother, an ardent nationalist, in the dramatic mass-demonstrations of February 21, 1946 against the British army. Mahmud is wounded, and the news that he struck English soldiers makes him a hero in Layla's school and fills her with pride and admiration. Layla is so impressed by her brother's action that she resolves to follow in his footsteps: "When I get bigger, I'll show those Englishmen! I'll carry a gun, I really will, and I'll shoot them all. When I grow up" (p. 14). Indeed, when the novel ends, Layla, a university graduate posted by the government as a teacher in Port Said, takes an active part in the battle against the British, French, and Israeli troops.

The second major event to occur to Layla at this age is the onset of her menses. When she tells her mother about it, the mother gives her a melancholy look and, though she usually reproaches her daughter for the slightest misbehavior, she does not treat her roughly for having cut out the stain of blood on her school uniform with a razor. However, when the father hears that his daughter has reached sexual maturity, he begins to weep like a frightened child and calls on God to give him strength. Layla cannot help recalling that when her brother's chin has first sprouted a beard, her father was so pleased that he burst out into a resounding laughter. Her sense of grievance deepens when the next day the father restricts her freedom of movement: from now on she is not allowed to go out by herself, and she must come home straight from school. He also forbids Mahmud to bring home any male friends or indecent novels and magazines. Layla notices that when her father issues his orders, his eyes meet her brother's, "a man to man gaze, and son gave father a knowing smile" (p. 24). Stunned, she is unable to understand the rationale for these new restrictions nor to protest against them. Gradually, she comes to realize that "to reach womanhood was to enter a prison where the confines of one's life were clearly and decisively fixed. At its door stood her father, her brother, and her mother" (p. 24).

The inner dynamics of family life in this narrative conform to the traditional pattern: the father is an authoritarian figure, cold, and

remote, whereas the mother is affectionate but utterly powerless and submissive. The father's oppressive presence is felt the moment he comes home: "Then her father's taciturn, expressionless demeanor would appear, to impose his deathly stillness on everyone in the apartment. Her mother's walk would become a hushed tiptoe as she turned this way and that, peering everywhere with anxious eyes to reassure herself that all was properly prepared" (p. 19). Dinnertime is described as an unpleasant experience. Sitting at the table, the father always finds something for which to rebuke the mother, blaming her even for what any of her relatives has said or done. The mother never responds, "but her tightly pressed lips would grow white" (p. 29).

As typical of traditional Arab family life, both father and mother show favoritism toward the son, a student at the College of Medicine. Their adulation and affection for Mahmud is reflected in the striking transformation that comes over them as they listen to him talking at the dinner table: "His mother's taut, worried features relaxed, her face now that of a sweet child as she laughed in that gentle, quick, understated way she had. But the sight really worth seeing was their father's face. Eyes trained on Mahmud, never lifting off his face, as if the young medical student was a miracle moving across the face of the earth, the father would sit motionless, listening raptly, the mask falling gradually off his face; that dour mien, normally empty of expression, would take on a bearing of affectionate concern" (pp. 29–30). Mahmud loves and respects his father but disagrees with his conservative views and boldly follows his heart rather than his father's wishes in regard to two pivotal issues: the national cause and his personal happiness. While the father forgives his son for disobeying him in joining the popular resistance in the Canal Zone, he does not forgive him for falling in love with Sanaa, one of Layla's intimate friends, and marrying her without his approval. From that point on, the spark goes out of the relationship between father and son: "Now they were strangers to each other: simply two men, civil, but distant" (p. 304). However, the mother-son relationship remains the same, reflecting mutual devotion and affection.

The father's relationship with Layla is characterized by severity and harshness. Regarding his daughter as a burden and a liability, he calls her a "clumsy girl" (*fitiwwa*, p. 18) and a "helpless girl" (*williya*, p. 23). He mocks her for her dark skin, pretending that she is a foundling. "Layla isn't really our daughter. We found her at the entrance to the mosque. Look Mahmud, even our skin—you and I are light, and so is Mama, but Layla—only Layla has such dark skin" (p. 53). Instead of reassuring her daughter, the mother would merely laugh and carry on

with the joke. Layla recalls that her father even objected to sending her to secondary school. It was only thanks to Mahmud's intervention that she was able to continue her education (p. 36). Despite her eagerness to please him and show her love for him, the father rejects Layla, and his impatient, rigid nature and violent temper cause her to fear him deeply. Years later, when the adult Layla reflects on her relationship with her father, she acknowledges that "a huge wall seemed always to sit between the two of them, as if they did not speak the same language" (p. 285).

Layla's relationship with her mother is fraught with tensions. As the person responsible for her daughter's upbringing, the mother is ever vigilant that her daughter will follow "the fundamentals—the rules, the right way to behave" (p. 25). The mother's motto is, "Whoever lives by the fundamentals can't possibly go wrong" (p. 26). Since the fundamentals encompass every move that Layla makes and every word she says, it is inevitable that mother and daughter should constantly clash. Layla feels harassed and oppressed by her mother, who never stops nagging and rebuking her, whether it is for something "improper" or "inappropriate," or "something that did not befit the daughter of respectable folk," or "something out of the bounds of polite conduct" (*adab*, p. 25). The mother teaches her daughter to conform to traditional gender roles and accept her status in the existing social order. She tells Layla: "Everyone has their own slot in this world of ours.... If everyone knew their place, then no one would suffer" (p. 34). A traditional woman who lives in constant fear of "what other people would say," the mother is in conflict with her daughter's romantic and rebellious nature.

Consequently, Layla does not look up to her mother as a role model. In fact, she rejects her weak, hysterical, and hypocritical mother, who represents the "harem mentality" (p. 78). As she lies on her bed after yet another argument with her mother, she feels anger and frustration. To her, "the art of life" (p. 41) in which her mother attempts to train her implies two things: "She must not use her mind, or fall in love. Or else—or else they would kill her" (p. 42). The tragedy of her young relative Safaa, Dawlat Hanim's daughter, reminds Layla how cruel mothers can be. Safaa committed suicide by swallowing an entire bottle of sleeping pills after her mother refused to shelter her or help her obtain a divorce from her husband so that she could marry the man she loved. Dawlat Hanim's response to her daughter's desperate pleas was in accordance with "the fundamentals," but in following these rules, she sacrificed—killed—her daughter. Layla is at a loss

to understand how Dawlat Hanim's conscience does not bother her and why people's respect for her actually increased after her daughter's death. Shocked by this tragic story, Layla is enraged to hear her mother remark: "People don't see your underwear. What's important is a good appearance" (p. 45), and "The only thing that can shame a man is his pocket" (p. 40).

Layla finds escape from her father's commands and her mother's endless nagging and rebukes at school, where she excels at her studies, and in the company of her close friends. One of the defining moments in her inner development occurs at age seventeen, when the radio announces that the government abrogated the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian treaty. The announcement triggers popular demonstrations in the streets of Cairo, and Layla, along with many students from her school, joins a demonstration. Marching amid the excited crowd, Layla is filled with a sense of purpose and belonging. She hears herself shouting with "a voice that summoned her whole being, that united the old Layla with her future self and with the collective self of these thousands of people" (p. 50), and she sees herself "melting into the whole" (p. 51). The feeling of "embarrassed shyness about her full body" gives way to a surge of energy. "She felt alive, at once strong and weightless, as if she were one of those birds circling above" (p. 50). This experience leaves indelible marks on her political consciousness, but it is the resultant punitive measures taken against her at home that awaken her feminist consciousness. Her father, who happens to see her among the demonstrators, promptly disciplines her by giving her a severe beating with a slipper. Crushed, Layla thinks, "I'm not a person any more, just a mat. A doormat for shoes" (p. 55). She painfully admits to herself that "she was weak, she was feeble, just like her mother. And just like her mother she would remain feeble all her life" (p. 54). To her dismay, her mother is not the only person who blames her for scandalizing the family. Her brother, too, disapproves of her action, demanding that she admit she was wrong. Indeed, like many educated people of his generation, Mahmud shows the distance between theory and practice: on paper he argues that women are equal, but when put to the test he reveals traditional attitudes about women. Although the relationship between Layla and Mahmud is loving and close, and Mahmud generally supports his sister and cares about her happiness, he displays on many occasions double standards of behavior.

Layla's sexual awakening follows the beating episode. Her cousin Isam comes to console her, and she discovers that he adores her and is in love with her. Isam, who studies with Mahmud at the College of

Medicine, is a frequent visitor at the Sulayman's home. As Mahmud's best friend, a blood relation, and a neighbor living in the same apartment building, he can see Layla freely. Layla, who shares pleasant childhood memories with Isam and enjoys his company, is elated with her discovery. Her sense of self, especially the feminine self, which was badly bruised by her father's beating, blossoms. She feels attractive, desired, and special. The world of love replaces the world of dreams that her father has shattered, offering her the opportunity to "show her feelings and express herself, like a bird flying unconstrained" (p. 61). Through love, she will be able to escape her parents' somber world.

But Layla's love for Isam ends in a bitter disappointment. Isam develops a possessive attitude toward her and acts like a jealous husband. He flies into a rage when he sees her talking to Sidqi, her handsome and wealthy relative, and threatens to kill her. His violent outbursts frighten and confuse Layla. She is unaware that Isam is tormented by conflicting feelings of passion and guilt. On the one hand, he longs to touch Layla and quench his sexual desire. On the other hand, thinking of Layla in that way makes him feel filthy and sinful, as if he is betraying the trust their families have put in him and violating the moral code. In his view, there are two types of women: "There was the sort in the street, the sort that sparked desire, and then there were mothers, sisters, wives" (p. 72). The former is cheap, a prey to be hunted; the latter is to be honored and respected. "A man did not feel desire for his aunt's daughter," he thinks, "not even for the sister of a friend, not if one was a proper, polite person" (p. 72). In an attempt to solve his dilemma, Isam turns to his mother's maid, Sayyida, for sex. When Layla discovers that Isam betrays her love for him with the maid, she is devastated. She cannot understand how Isam can love one woman with his soul, and another with his body. Isam, on the other hand, remains completely unruffled, convinced that he has done the right thing to protect Layla and safeguard her reputation.

Layla's world collapses; all her beautiful dreams are once again shattered. In a moment of despair, she even tries to kill herself by jumping onto the roof of the building elevator. She feels defeated and humiliated. She has rebelled against her parents by falling in love, hoping to leave their narrow world for one that was wide and alive and filled with light and beauty. But she has failed. So has her brother. Mahmud has defied their parents by joining the popular resistance in the Canal Zone, and returned "crushed, cowering, withdrawn, his wings more clipped" (p. 156). Remembering her mother's motto, "The one who

knows the fundamentals does not suffer" (p. 158), Layla acknowledges that she was wrong. She has lived in the shadow of a silly illusion. From now on, she will stick to those time-honored fundamentals.

During this emotional crisis, Layla's main source of support is her small group of friends, Gamila, Adila, and Sanaa. While these girls are united by a strong sense of solidarity, they have different personalities and different perspectives on life and on womanhood. Each of them makes her own choices and follows a separate path in the quest for self-fulfillment. Gamila succumbs to her mother's pressure to marry a rich old man and forgoes the prospects of love and university education for material security and social status. When the novelty of a life of luxury wears off, she discovers that she is trapped in an unhappy marriage. Unable to break free, she finds an outlet in marital infidelity. Adila is a realistic and practical girl with a forceful personality. Her careful attention to the fundamental rules earn her the title *shaykha* or "madam cleric" (pp. 212, 236). A dutiful daughter, her ambition to graduate quickly from the university is dictated by economic necessity: she has to get a job to support her fatherless family. Sanaa is the total opposite of Adila—romantic, dreamy, and self-indulgent, particularly in the manner she takes care of her appearance and cultivates her beauty. A listener more than a talker, her delicate frame encases an iron will. She falls in love with Mahmud and marries him despite the opposition of her parents, who sever their ties with her in response to her actions. As for Layla, she eventually finds her true love in Husayn Amir, a freedom fighter, and her personal fulfillment in the struggle for her people and her country.

For all their differences, all the young female characters in the novel have a conflicted relationship with their mothers. Safaa commits suicide because her mother, Dawlat Hanim, refuses to help her get a divorce from her husband. Gamila swallows a bottle of aspirin in an attempt to kill herself because her mother tells her "I don't want any scandals" (p. 279) when she confides in her that she is unhappy in her marriage and wants to get a divorce. Sanaa's mother cuts off all communication with her daughter because she marries without her approval. Adila is burdened with the care of her widowed mother and young siblings; she must sacrifice her personal wishes for the sake of her family. The generational gap between mothers and daughters in this novel is highlighted in a conversation between Layla, Sanaa, and Adila following the news of Gamila's arranged marriage. Upset that Gamila has consented to marry a man of her mother's choosing, Layla

protests: “Our mothers were the harem—things possessed by their fathers, who passed them on to husbands. But us?—we don’t have any excuses. Education—we’ve gotten that, and we understand everything, and we are the ones who have to decide our own futures. Even animals choose their mates!” (p. 77). Sanaa expresses a similar view, affirming that the “harem mentality” has changed for the younger generation: “For our mothers, marriage was a fate written on their foreheads from the day they were born. No one could change it in the slightest or escape it. You had to accept it as it was. For us the situation is so different, because the harem mentality has changed. Today’s girl doesn’t accept what her mother took as a given” (p. 78). Adila, however, points out that education has not brought them liberation; on the contrary, it has created considerable ambiguities and confusion for them. “*Wallahi*, we’re the ones in a real bind!” she says. “At the very least our mothers knew exactly what their circumstances were. But we’re lost. We don’t understand—are we the harem or not? We don’t know whether love is *haram*, prohibited by our religion, or permitted, *halal*. Our families say it’s *haram* while the state radio day and night sings love love love, and books tell a girl, ‘Go on, you’re free and independent,’ and if a girl believes *that*, she’s got a disaster on her hands and her reputation will go to hell” (p. 79).

Layla emerges from her experience with Isam with a broken spirit. Her self-image is poor, her self-esteem replaced by self-loathing. Afraid of making herself vulnerable again, she carefully follows the fundamentals, arming herself with them as a protective shield. Unlike her attitude in the past, she now leans on her mother and embraces her views. “And so she had seen life through her mother’s eyes; it was a restricted existence with no reach beyond the four walls within which she lived. . . . You might not know great happiness but at least you would never suffer intense pain” (p. 186). Layla’s friends notice the dramatic transformation that comes over her: she shrinks within herself, and becomes extremely guarded, cold, and unfeeling, “suppressing all the wellsprings of spontaneity and lively inquisitiveness that were in her nature” (p. 213). Notably, before her encounter with Isam, Layla feels closer to Sanaa than to Adila. But after it, she gravitates toward Adila, adopting her rational and pragmatic approach to life.

In this state of mind, the only events that have the power to move Layla are those that are connected to the fate of her country. The Cairo Fire of January 1952, which destroyed institutions and neighborhoods affiliated with the British presence and incurred the harsh repression

of all popular resistance, intensifies her sense of betrayal, whereas the July 1952 revolution lifts her spirits and rekindles her strong identification with the masses. As she sees the spontaneous celebration of the people in the street, "Layla could not move; she stood among them, enjoying her sense of oneness with the crowd. . . . A mood of sympathy, of ease and belonging, swept over her, a sense of confidence in herself and others" (p. 160). Layla experiences the same mood at every critical juncture in her country's history, including the nationalization of the Suez Canal and the Tripartite invasion. To her joy, with the fall of the monarchy and the expulsion of the king from Egypt, many of the jailed freedom fighters are released, among them her brother and his friend, Husayn Amir.

Husayn's background differs from that of Mahmud. He comes from a poor family in a small town in the Delta. He made his way through secondary school in Mansura to the College of Engineering in Cairo, overcoming many hardships, notably the death of his parents. After his graduation he worked for two years to save enough money to marry off his sister. An ardent nationalist, he meets Mahmud in the popular resistance in the Canal Zone, and their friendship is further cemented when they spend six months together in detention. Husayn visits Mahmud at his home, where he meets Layla and falls in love with her. However, despite her attraction to Husayn, she rejects his love. The memories of Isam's betrayal are too painful for her to forget. Layla dismisses the fantasy of love from her mind, determined not to suffer again on account of any man: "She was not going to sacrifice herself for anyone, lose herself in anyone, abase herself for anyone" (p. 197). Instead, she will remain self-sufficient, her own mistress, thus safeguarding her inner equilibrium.

Disappointed, Husayn travels to Germany for three years on a government scholarship, while Layla, beset by feelings of loneliness and alienation, throws herself into her studies. Together with her two best friends, she enrolls in the department of philosophy at Cairo University. Soon after, she receives a letter from Husayn. In this memorable letter, Husayn pledges his love for her, acknowledging that she has become a symbol of the nation for him: "When I think of Egypt, I think of you; when I long for Egypt, I long for you" (p. 217). Husayn implores her to come out of the narrow space of social rules in which she has imprisoned herself, before they strangle her. She must connect her own existence to that of her people and her country, so that her real self will renew itself and flourish. His letter ends with the words:

“So let go, my love, run forward, fling the door wide open, and leave it open. And on the open road, you will find me, my love” (p. 219). This vivid image is central to the thrust of the narrative and helps to explain the novel’s title. The “open door” is the act of liberating the self by becoming part of a larger entity in serving the nation and the country. At the same time, it is the act of breaking loose from the prison of the family, of traditional customs, and of personal fears and desires. The image of the open door becomes a source of inspiration for Layla, repeatedly flashing through her mind during critical moments in her struggle for authentic selfhood.

The next stage in Layla’s development is her engagement to Dr. Fuad Ramzi, her professor of philosophy at Cairo University. Ramzi is a narrow-minded intellectual with conservative views and an egotistical nature. An authoritarian figure, he arouses in Layla both fear and attraction (p. 231). Layla is well aware that Ramzi is cold, aloof, and rigid, but hopes to find strength and protection in his self-confidence, self-control, and moral authority. Ramzi teaches Layla that “philosophy is principles, firm principles; and rules, strict and fundamental rules” (p. 230). Similarly, he emphasizes the importance of respecting the “fundamentals” of their society, for “without them we would be like a tree without roots—the slightest breeze could sway it and even knock it to the ground” (p. 241). Layla is at a phase where she does not feel any particular need to assert her own will (p. 231). She adopts Ramzi’s views and modifies her behavior and thoughts to meet his approval. After all, “he knew the boundaries, and so did she; moreover, so did Adila, her mother, everyone” (p. 244). Gradually, she begins to worship Ramzi like a god, “one of those gods belonging to the Greeks, one who never, ever weakened; who stood erect, believing himself always in the right, wanting her to be in the right. To be in his shadow. He never erred, never let down his guard, never relented, never softened” (p. 241). When Layla’s father, proud that Dr. Ramzi has asked for his daughter’s hand, gives his consent for the marriage without consulting his daughter, Layla forgets this crucial detail amid the flood of congratulations that engulfs her. As for Ramzi, he tells Layla plainly why he chose her as a wife: “Because you are compliant and quiet, and you listen to me, and you do what I say” (p. 272). He is interested in rectitude rather than good looks or romantic love (p. 268). In his mind, “there is no such thing as love. It is just the word that a civilized person uses to tame his instincts” (p. 274).

Under the influence of Ramzi, who teaches her regularly throughout her years at the university, Layla’s transformation is lamentable.

Sanaa observes that “her friend had become unbearable: self-absorbed, judgmental and self-righteous, rigid, dry, emotionless, as if she had lost her powers of sympathy” (p. 245). Layla even changes the style of her clothing, donning high-neck and long-sleeved dresses. She ignores Sanaa’s warning that whoever marries Ramzi “will be put in the deep freeze and locked up” (p. 237). However, as the preparations for her engagement party are underway, she yearns for his affection and wishes that he will bond with her intimately and remove the sense of awe and fear that she feels in his presence. “The professor-student relationship that had brought her into his circuit no longer satisfied her. She wanted to feel that she was his fiancée, his beloved... Up to this point, she had lived in the shadow of his strength; now she craved the shade of his warmth” (p. 256). Having been wounded and repressed, Layla’s feminine self seeks affirmation: “She longed to feel that she was not merely accepted as a person but also loved as a woman, and desired” (p. 256).

Layla’s engagement party brings with it a rude awakening. Several incidents combine to open her eyes to the unhappy future that is awaiting her. She discovers that Sanaa and Mahmud are madly in love with each other, that Gamila, trapped in a loveless marriage, cheats on her husband with Sidqi, and that Ramzi shamelessly eyes Gamila with a lecherous expression on his face. She eavesdrops on her brother’s conversation with Ramzi, who is sent by her father to dissuade Mahmud from marrying Sanaa, and is shocked to hear Ramzi’s vulgar anecdotes and disparaging remarks about women and love. Belatedly, she realizes that Ramzi has many faces: “With her he acted the god; with Gamila, he was a child, saliva dribbling from his mouth; and with Mahmud he was an old friend, relating tales of the past” (p. 287). Filled with loathing for this man, she rushes into her father’s room with the intent to tell him that she wants to break the engagement. But the father, who considers his son’s marriage plans a disaster, is determined to celebrate his daughter’s wedding. Sensing that she wants to call it off, he faces her with a menacing expression. “Layla saw a murderous look in his eyes, murderous but empty of anger; coldly murderous” (p. 292). Trembling with fear, she mumbles some lame excuse and hastens to leave his room.

The date of the wedding is set for October 1, 1956, after Layla will graduate from the university and obtain a teaching position. Unable to muster the courage to rebel, Layla resigns herself to her fate and becomes “numb, as if she were under the influence of a permanent anesthesia” (p. 301). She carries on with her studies and daily activities

in utter indifference, avoiding any inclination to stop and think. Mahmud notices that his sister has changed, “as if the water of life had dried up in her” (p. 306). Despite his genuine concern for her well-being, Layla refuses to confide in him so as not to spoil his own happiness. Husayn’s words echo in her ears, “One morning you will wake up and discover that you love me” (p. 314). That morning has finally come, to find her completely powerless over her own affairs. “Her love for Husayn was sharp and rough, and so was her loathing for Ramzi. And her disgust with her inabilities and weaknesses was even sharper and rougher” (p. 315). Her sense of desolation deepens when Mahmud and Sanaa—the two people who are the closest to her—move to Port Said, where Mahmud has found a job as a physician in the government hospital. During this bleak period, the only time when she does not feel forlorn is when she listens to Nasser’s speech announcing the nationalization of the Suez Canal on July 26, 1956. In a letter to Mahmud, she writes that at that historic moment, “the feelings of pride that had left me—had forgotten me—have come back, and a sense of belonging too” (p. 318). Even her father “seems no longer a stranger” and almost hugs her as he rejoices (p. 318).

An opportune moment for Layla to escape from the tyrannical control of both her father and her fiancé presents itself when she applies for a teaching position. Accompanied by Ramzi, she goes to the office of the General Inspector for Social Studies to request a position in Cairo. When the inspector, a sensitive woman in her fifties, asks her to fill in the request form, Layla writes under the rubric of location, “Port Said.” She hands the paper back to the inspector, encouraged by her serene smile, and breathes in relief when the inspector refuses to let Ramzi examine it. Ironically, when the letter of Layla’s appointment to a school in Port Said arrives, it is Ramzi who persuades her father to let her go, confident that he can arrange for her transfer back to Cairo well in time for their wedding. His motive is purely financial: if Layla rejects this appointment, she will lose a whole year of employment.

In Port Said, Layla is at long last on her own—and well on her way to liberation. Contrary to Ramzi’s expectations, her reassignment to Cairo proves to be a complicated matter and she remains in Port Said. The turning point in her life comes with the outbreak, in late October 1956, of the Suez Crisis. Along with Sanaa and Mahmud, Layla witnesses a battle against parachute troops of the Tripartite invasion. This experience transforms her completely. She insists on staying on the

battlefield to help the wounded and the fighters, facing her brother's opposition with uncharacteristic resolution. Amazed, Mahmud realizes that "what had happened to him during the guerilla campaign in the Canal Zone had now happened to her. She had left the circle of the family, the sphere of the self, for the orbit of all, and no one could keep her back" (p. 343). As Layla lies wounded in the hospital after participating in a fierce round of fighting, Husayn's words again echo in her ears, "To reach shore... we have to face the waves and the ocean.... Do you know what you'll find on shore?... You'll find what it is you have lost, you'll find yourself, you'll find the true Layla" (pp. 190–191, 352). When Mahmud comes to inquire how she feels, he is astonished to hear her say, "I've never been better, Mahmud. Never" (p. 353).

Among the many volunteers who hasten to join the popular resistance against the occupation of Port Said is Husayn. Back from Germany, he has been working in the munitions factories and assisting in designing the Aswan High Dam when the fighting erupted. His meeting with Layla, facilitated by Mahmud and Sanaa, marks the renewal of their relationship as they hug and kiss in joy and tenderness. Layla's quest for autonomous and authentic selfhood culminates with the expulsion of the enemies from Port Said. Together with Husayn, she watches the victorious crowds topple down the statue of De Lesseps. "It was a symbol of the ages of slavery and colonialism that they inherited, a symbol that pulled them back into a loathsome past, that put a barrier between them and a finer future. That symbol must be shattered" (p. 362). The dramatic scene inspires Layla to cast away her engagement ring—the last link with her previous life. This act of self-liberation signifies the conclusion of her formative voyage: Layla has come of age. Her passage from childhood through varied experiences and crises to adulthood and the recognition of her identity and role in the world has been completed. She is now ready for a new beginning, wholly committed to Husayn, her country, and her people.

*The Open Door* presents a panorama of characters, events, views, and issues in Egyptian society during the 1940s and 1950s. The narrative pattern is chronological, reflecting the linear structure of the male *Bildungsroman* in portraying the heroine's gradual development from stage to stage. Some aspects of the narrative technique are innovative, particularly the long passages of dialogue unmediated by description and the use of a colloquial register, though the power of the text

is tempered by its melodramatic quality.<sup>44</sup> Hailed as a landmark in women's writing in Arabic, the novel was a great success when it came out in Egypt in 1960. However, it remained al-Zayyat's only work of fiction for over a quarter of a century, until her collection of short stories appeared in 1986. The author gave various reasons for her long period of silence: disillusion with the usefulness of writing after the Arab defeat of 1967, a tendency toward perfectionism, and a change in the motivation underlying her creative writing.<sup>45</sup> Al-Zayyat was unhappy with the movie version of her novel, especially its ending. As she stated: "The change which the novel's ending suffered in the film has impaired the novel's overall meaning. In the novel the protagonist's liberation is achieved by herself, and through her own action she develops herself, while the film presented her liberation as dependent, to some extent, on the male character, which is precisely what I tried to evade in the novel."<sup>46</sup> In al-Zayyat's view, the movie failed to capture the narrative technique of the novel, which is "built as a sequence of significant and intense dramatic moments," and failed to express all the levels of meanings that are interwoven into the text.<sup>47</sup>

In a candid interview published in 1990,<sup>48</sup> al-Zayyat acknowledged that *The Open Door* contains a lot of autobiographical material: "When I started writing that novel, I entitled it *Arba' sanawat* (Four Years). I intended then to write a novel on my undergraduate years, those years that set my life on a new course. During these years I became politically militant, adopted scientific socialism, and was overwhelmed by my desire for knowledge, which flowed like a torrent."<sup>49</sup> Following the 1956 Suez Crisis, she developed a view of the self based on a deep sense of commitment to her country and her people: "The 'open door' was the opening up to the people and to the homeland, and thus the novel *Al-Bab al-maftuh* [*The Open Door*] came to be."<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Booth, in the introduction to *The Open Door*, pp. xxiv–xxx.

<sup>45</sup> Latifa al-Zayyat, "On Political Commitment and Feminist Writing," in Ferial J. Ghazoul and Barbara Harlow, eds., *The View From Within* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1994), pp. 253–54, 256.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 255.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 256.

<sup>48</sup> The Arabic version of Latifa al-Zayyat, "On Political Commitment and Feminist Writing," was published in *Alif* 10 (1990), four years before the English translation.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 250.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 251.

Al-Zayyat stated that it would have been impossible for her to write a novel like *The Open Door* today, given all the economic, political, and social changes that have taken place in Egyptian society since 1967. She pointed out that *The Open Door* was written at a time of rising revolutionary tide—the years 1946 to 1956—and in the presence of a large reading public, possessing common sentiments, shared values, and a collective sense of belonging, of whose nature she was fully aware beforehand.<sup>51</sup> Three decades later, both the social reality and her vision of reality became more complex. As she put it: “Roads to salvation are blocked; the common ground of shared values seems to break down into multiple different sets of values according to the varied social strata; the common sensibility and its language is no more; people lacking national unity are divided and subdivided until each is turned into an insular island; all these changes resulted in marginalizing the sense of belonging and national struggle.”<sup>52</sup> Despite the greater diversity in values and outlooks that characterize contemporary Egyptian society, as well as the many transformations that have taken place in women’s lives, *The Open Door* remains a popular feminist text. Indeed, it has been called the “gender-and-politics classic” of modern Arabic literature.<sup>53</sup>

#### *Samar Attar’s Lina: A Portrait of a Damascene Girl*

A Syrian poet and novelist, Samar Attar was born in Damascus in 1940. She studied at Damascus University, obtaining a degree in Arabic literature in 1962 and in English literature in 1965. She then left Syria to live in the West, returning to her birthplace for short visits only. She studied at Dalhousie University in Canada and at the State University of New York at Binghamton, where she earned her doctorate in comparative literature in 1973. She is currently a professor of Arabic at the University of Sidney, Australia. Her publications include literary criticism, volumes of translation, poetry, and three novels.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 254.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Kahf, “Latifa al-Zayyat, *The Open Door*,” p. 228.

Attar's first novel, *Lina: A Portrait of a Damascene Girl*,<sup>54</sup> is a revealing study of a girl's coming of age in Syria during the tumultuous political period of the 1950s and early 1960s. The author has declared that the novel, which came out in Arabic in 1982, forms part of a trilogy, the first volume of which is *The House on Arnus Square*, published in Arabic in 1988, and the third book is yet to be written. *Lina* ends with the heroine's decision to leave Syria. *The House on Arnus Square* describes her return to the city of her birth after twenty years of exile. Chronologically, then, *The House on Arnus Square* takes place two decades after *Lina* leaves Damascus, and the actual writing and publication of this novel also followed that of *Lina*. Nevertheless, the author insists that since *The House on Arnus Square* is a flashback to the history of the house and its surroundings it constitutes the first part of the trilogy.<sup>55</sup>

The novel's heroine, Lina, a gifted girl with artistic aspirations, grows up in a traditional middle-class Syrian family. The father dies in her childhood, leaving behind a widow, five daughters, and one son. Told from the viewpoint of an omniscient narrator but interspersed with frequent interior monologues, the narrative depicts Lina's process of development as she struggles to construct an identity and a vision of her future. Like the traditional *Bildungsroman*, the novel is structured chronologically around the three distinct stages in Lina's life: childhood, adolescence, and womanhood (or early adulthood), with the bulk of the pages being devoted to the second, and presumably formative, stage in Lina's development.

The chapter of childhood opens with a lavish funeral dinner given directly after Lina's father is laid to rest. As the bereaved family and several close relatives gather around the dinner table, the twelve-year-old Lina observes in silence how they voraciously devour huge quantities of food, casually discuss religion, feudalism, and sexual repression and, as always, get into a political argument that ends in a fight. The dramatic scene provides a glimpse into the internal dynamics of Lina's family and the conflicts that divide it. The rambling conversation reveals the status, educational background, attitudes, and views of each family

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<sup>54</sup> Samar Attar, *Lina, lawhat fatat dimashqiyya* (Beirut: Dar al-afaq al-jadida, 1982). English translation: *Lina: A Portrait of a Damascene Girl*, trans. Samar Attar (Colorado Springs, CO: Three Continents Press, 1994). All quotations are from this translation.

<sup>55</sup> Attar, "To Create and in Creating to Be Created," p. 219 and p. 224n15.

member. Lina, the youngest of her siblings, fails to understand why her brother, together with her two married sisters and their husbands, form one block against the rest of the family, and why everybody else is against her sister Rima. She is unsettled by the vulgar remarks that are exchanged during the funeral dinner and by the act of violence with which it ends when her brother slaps Rima across the face.

The reader learns quickly that the mother has little say in the affairs of the family. A veiled woman with a traditional upbringing, her main activities center around the kitchen and the preparation of meals, which are always lavish. Aware of the tensions that prevail among her children, she is unable to unite them, and her only reaction to their fighting is to sigh and sob. The son, Khalid, a conservative man, is in conflict with his younger sister, Rima, a university student with outspoken communist views. The eldest sister Bahiya, an old spinster with no occupation, finds an outlet for her energy in ordering the maid around and in cleaning the apartment day and night. Confined to a life of domesticity, Bahiya embraces the prevailing patriarchal ideology and submits unquestioningly to male guidance and authority. She sides with her brother in denouncing communism and the peasants simply because “he was a man, and because she believed sincerely that men understood the world, and that their ability to distinguish between good and evil could not be compared with the ability of women” (p. 46). The two married sisters, as well as their bourgeoisie spouses, are primarily concerned with preserving the family property and avoiding any political affiliation that might incur on them the wrath of the repressive authorities. One of the sisters, Afaf, has the habit of repeating like a parrot whatever her husband says.

Lina is portrayed as a sensitive girl with a vivid imagination and a poetic bent. The scene in which she introduces her name and identity to the reader bears a close resemblance to the scene in which the young Fadwa in Tuqan’s autobiography, *A Mountainous Journey*, identifies herself to the reader. In Tuqan’s autobiography, the thirteen-year-old Fadwa takes her exercise notebook and writes on its cover: Name—Fadwa Tuqan. Teacher—Ibrahim Tuqan. Subject—Learning Poetry. School—The House.<sup>56</sup> In linking the name in its first appearance with poetry, Fadwa indicates that she roots her identity in her creative

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<sup>56</sup> Tuqan, *A Mountainous Journey*, p. 58.

ability.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, in Attar's novel, the twelve-year-old Lina takes her exercise notebook and writes on the first page: "Name: Lina Haseebi. Grade: Seven. Occupation: Poet" (p. 16). As in *A Mountainous Journey*, this brief information comprises the heroine's self-definition. Intriguingly, in each case the circumstances leading to this act of self-identification are connected with a misfortune. In Tuqan's autobiography, it is after she is forbidden to attend school again and her brother Ibrahim promises to teach her poetry that she writes these revealing words. In Attar's novel, Lina lies feverish in bed after her father's funeral, reading a moving elegy which the pre-Islamic poet al-Khansa' wrote for her slain brother. The elegy inspires her to define who she is in her exercise notebook. The fact that the process of self-discovery of both of these heroines is triggered by a misfortune dramatizes Dostoevsky's insight, "Suffering is the sole origin of consciousness."<sup>58</sup>

As a young girl, Lina is baffled by the constant fights between her sister Rima and the rest of the family. The heated political arguments at the dinner table fill her with fear mingled with curiosity. Shy and quiet, at school she does not belong to the children's world, feeling alienated from those who are her age. She has fond memories of her father, and through the filter of her memory the reader learns that he was a lawyer by profession, that he observed the traditions of Islam, and that he was a kind man who respected the peasants.

Fatherless, Lina seeks the warmth, affection, and protection of her mother. Although the mother is always at home, she is neither emotionally available to her daughter nor personally involved in looking after her physical needs—those duties are delegated to a maid. A mournful, taciturn, and passive figure, the mother does not develop a close relationship with Lina or with any of her five daughters after the father's death. Lina, however, being the youngest child, is the most needy of her mother's love and attention. The mother's lack of sensitivity toward Lina is overtly manifested when Lina returns home after a few days' stay with her cousin in the countryside. Sent there immediately after her father's passing to help her recover, Lina is eager to see her mother again. She finds her surrounded by women visitors, totally preoccupied with the news of the army's invasion of the third floor of the family's apartment building. Lina gazes at her mother, expecting

<sup>57</sup> Malti-Douglas, in the introduction to Tuqan's *A Mountainous Journey*, p. 6.

<sup>58</sup> See also chapter 3, p. 110.

that she will notice her, but is ignored. Confused, she is uncertain what to do: "Should she run to her mother? Should she hug her and tell her she missed her so much?" (p. 45). She steps forward, hoping someone would look at her, her eyes fixed on her mother. Only after the women utter hysterical screams that startle her does she run to bury her head in her mother's lap. Throughout this episode, the mother remains utterly oblivious to her daughter's presence, yearning, and fear.

When Lina was a little girl, her mother used to tell her stories from *The Thousand and One Nights*. Although Lina enjoyed listening to these stories, it troubled her that the heroes were always men and that they usually belonged to the ruling or merchant classes. When she inquired why there was no woman Sinbad, her mother laughed at her "mixed up ideas," explaining that "man was different from woman, and that he alone was capable of confronting difficulties" (p. 35). Thus Lina's early attempts to assert her female self were thwarted by the mother, who taught her the patriarchal view of male superiority over women. The mother's traditional upbringing is further reflected in her reluctance to discuss the topic of sex with Lina. During a visit to her cousin in the countryside, Lina overhears a conversation about sex between two peasant girls. Their remarks open her eyes to secrets that her mother has concealed from her: "Her mother had told her about the stork leaving its eggs in beds, and how the eggs break, there emerging from them the soft heads of children with tearful eyes and withered cheeks. All these stories crumbled now" (p. 40). The realization that her mother is an unreliable source of information makes Lina thirst for knowledge. She wishes she could ask the peasant girls many questions: "The adult world was dark, vague, and she didn't understand anything about its rules or secrets" (p. 40).

The mother's relationship with Lina's brother, Khalid, is influenced by the fact that he is her only son and by the untimely death of the father, an event which promotes the son to the position of head of the family. No wonder that the mother worships her son and looks up to him as the supreme authority in the household. When he is drafted into the army, she treats his letters with great importance, even though he says nothing interesting in them. She reads them out to her visitors several times, repeating his boring comments about the rainy weather and evenings spent in playing cards and smoking "as if she were a pupil in the second grade, trying to memorize verses from the Qur'an" (p. 66). Lina resents her mother for this behavior. She resents her, too, for looking down on the peasants, an attitude that she attributes

to her mother's bourgeois background. Altogether, the mother fails to provide Lina with a role model. She does not serve as a source of identification or inspiration for her, and she does not become a guiding force in her life. Considering the absence of a father figure, these maternal shortcomings are more acutely felt by her young daughter.

Nevertheless, the mother has redeeming qualities. First, she is literate, having been educated by her parents up to the fifth grade—an exception among women of her class and generation. She thus recognizes the value of education and supports the ambitions of her younger daughters, Rima and Lina, to pursue university education. Secondly, the mother refused an early marriage proposal for Lina, having sworn not to force her daughters into an arranged marriage and thus spare them her own bitter experience (p. 102). These modern views are of critical importance for the future of Lina, who does not need to struggle in order to overcome the two most formidable obstacles for female self-development, namely, the traps of ignorance and arranged marriage.

The onset of puberty marks the end of Lina's childhood and the beginning of the stage of adolescence in her developmental process. The new chapter opens with Lina, aged fourteen, accompanying her mother on a visit to relatives. Uncomfortable about her developing breasts, she tries to hide them by bending her back. As she walks alongside her mother, she recalls a conversation she has overheard at home. Her aunt Samiya asked her mother, "When did she have her period?" to which her mother replied, "Last week," whereupon the aunt said, "Be careful now. She is a woman" (p. 52). These words have awakened in Lina vague sexual feelings, expressed in erotic dreams. She fantasizes about a boy with violet eyes and brown hair who is madly in love with her (pp. 57, 126, 160–63). She has a passionate romance with this boy, who constantly chases after her, but his irrational jealousy and possessive attitude frighten and alienate her. Lina's sexuality is further stimulated by a conversation she has with Rasha, her teenage relative. Rasha tells her that she engaged in masturbation after reading a lewd tale from *The Thousand and One Nights*. Trembling with shame and excitement, Rasha recounts: "I found myself lying on the bed, taking off my panties, putting a pillow between my hot legs, and moving madly" (p. 125). Rasha's confession arouses "demonic desires" and "obscene images" in Lina's mind. Afraid of sinning, she finds escape in flights of fantasy and channels her sexual energy into writing love poetry.

Within this family dynamics, largely characterized by disharmony and a low tolerance for individuality, Lina's path toward self-knowledge is facilitated by her older sister, Rima. As an adolescent, Lina forms a close bond with Rima, who is eight years her senior. Considering Rima's nonconformist nature, it is not surprising that Lina, who possesses a critical and questioning mind, should gravitate toward her. Rima's aspirations to become independent from her family by completing her studies at the university and getting a job resonate with Lina. In addition, her revolutionary political views, which espouse communism and socialism, intrigue Lina, who feels sympathy for the peasants and the workers. In the beginning, the age difference between the two sisters seems like a barrier, making it hard for Lina to get close to Rima. She offers to do all kinds of favors for Rima, who politely declines her offers. Then the day comes when she happens to accompany Rima to one of her clandestine political meetings and, promising to keep it a secret, wins her trust. Lina, merely in ninth grade, starts attending similar meetings with her schoolmates Samira and Amal, and her mind opens up to new concepts and ideas. She learns about Marx's theory, socialism, communism, and the problems of feudalism, imperialism, and military dictatorship. In immersing herself in reading philosophy, literature, and politics, and in participating in political discussion groups, Lina finds a purpose and a unity of goal with her sister. Thus the age barrier between them vanishes.

Lina's peer relationships also play an important role in her growth process. Samira and Amal, who belong to the same secret political organization operating in her school, contribute to the development of her political consciousness. Samira is a Syrian and a classmate of Lina. Amal is a Palestinian and two grades above Lina. Both girls provide her with an opportunity to explore different identities and gather information that is vital to the formation of her own identity. They also allow her to experiment with new roles and responsibilities and view herself as she is seen by significant others. However, the common aspirations and convictions that initially unite these girls change over time. Amal, who is committed to the liberation of Palestine, remains dedicated to the goal of social revolution, maintaining that one should sacrifice oneself for the sake of the group. In contrast, Lina comes to realize that a social revolution is unlikely to sweep through her country, so she espouses personal freedom, placing the needs and interests of the individual above those of the collective. Despite their differences, the many discussions that Lina has with

Amal help her to crystalize her thoughts, form independent opinions, and gain self-knowledge.

An ordinary episode that happens in Lina's history class sheds light on the educational system of Syria at the time and on the world of children. The traditional Arab method of instruction is based on rote learning and physical punishment, both of which stifle inquiry and creativity while promoting obedience and conformity. A prime example of this method is provided when the Arabic teacher orders a girl in Lina's class to conjugate the verb "to vomit," forcing her to recite out loud, "I am vomiting, you are vomiting, he is vomiting," etc. (p. 12). Samira dares to protest against this method when she asks her history teacher, "Why do we have to memorize facts without attempting to analyze or criticize them?" (p. 80). The teacher answers her derisively that she is too young for such a task, which a student is expected to undertake only at the university level. But Samira retorts, "Young? . . . He who grows up in our environment is not a child once he stops suckling his mother's breasts" (p. 81). Samira's courageous remark reveals how hard it is for children to grow up in her country, where many factors combine to nip the days of their childhood in the bud. As Samar Attar herself observes in an essay about her creative writing: "Childhood does not exist as a stage of development in Syria in a way that is comparable to experiences in Western countries. Syrian children are born women and men. They are indoctrinated in the state ideology from an early age, either by the various political factions or by the ruling party, and they are burdened with fears of real or imagined enemies of the Syrian state and its people."<sup>59</sup> A major source of fear in Lina's family is the long arm of the Syrian secret police. Her aunt Samiya "sincerely believed that the walls had ears," and all the family members "whispered and never talked in natural voices" (p. 66). As a child, Lina was afraid to sit alone in her room to study (p. 47), and "fear accompanied her wherever she went" (p. 66).<sup>60</sup>

The Iraqi writer Alia Mamdouh speaks of a similar feeling of fear that permeated her childhood and dominated her family's behavior, calling herself, her family members, and the people of her country

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<sup>59</sup> Attar, "To Create and in Creating to Be Created," p. 218.

<sup>60</sup> For further information on fear of the regime in Syria, see Miriam Cooke, *Dissident Syria: Making Oppositional Arts Official* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

“creatures of Arab fear.”<sup>61</sup> This bleak view is also shared by Nawal El Saadawi, who describes in detail the pervasive sense of fear that fills the individual in Arab societies:

People in our countries are nurtured on fear. They feed on it the moment they are born. Fear of the Father, the Ruler, of God, are all combined. From a very early age, children are taught to fear punishment or Hell, or the father’s displeasure, which can end in their being thrown out of the home. Women fear divorce, fear to be left alone without shelter, or a future, or security of any kind. Students fear their professors’ whims and are taught to cringe lest they be failed, or given bad marks or refused access to higher studies. Writers are afraid of being dismissed from their jobs, for in developing countries the establishment rules with a heavy hand over all areas of intellectual and artistic creation. Obedience is considered the highest of virtues everywhere, in the family, at school, in religion, morals, administrative systems, and political institutions.<sup>62</sup>

El Saadawi discusses the adverse effects of fear on writers, who may be driven to indulge in hypocrisies, take refuge in silence, or go into self-exile. Notably, Attar’s heroine, Lina, chooses the third option.

Lina’s feminist consciousness is awakened by several incidents. When she reads *The Mother* by Maxim Gorky, she is taken with the figure of Mrs. Vlasova and wishes that every Arab mother in her country was like her, a self-assertive woman who joined the socialists and learned to read and write at a late age. But her sister Rima promptly points out to her the difference in the cultural context, stressing the issues of gender and patriarchal oppression of women as major impediments in the process of female self-development. This information unsettles Lina. In all the political meetings she has attended so far, a human being has been referred to as either poor or rich, owner or owned, but never as a man or a woman. Her sister’s comments focus her attention on the critical importance of gender as a category of self-definition.

Lina’s extra-curricular activities accelerate her development. As her mother laments, “she grew up before her time” (p. 109). Gradually, Lina realizes that the restrictions imposed on her by her family, teachers, religion, and society all have the same purpose of controlling her mind, her actions, and her future. The more knowledge she gains, the more troubled she becomes by the many contradictions she observes

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<sup>61</sup> Alia Mamdouh, “Creatures of Arab Fear,” in Faqir, *In the House of Silence*, pp. 65–69.

<sup>62</sup> El Saadawi, *The Nawal El Saadawi Reader*, p. 205.

in her social environment. Walking daily through the city streets, she sees the squalor and poverty, exploitation and oppression, inequities and deprivations. On the one hand, her religion teacher says that Islam has brought justice and equality to all believers. On the other hand, God's preference for the male over the female is evident in Islam and polygamy, Islam and testimony, Islam and inheritance, Islam and the veil. Yet in class, she is not allowed to question anything, and if she does, she is accused of being "a heretic" (p. 172). Dutiful, Lina bears in mind the words of her religion teacher, "If you obey your parents, then you'll go to heaven" (p. 12), but the adult world, with its cruelty and violence, hypocrisy and double standards, fails to give her security or meaningful values.

Hence Lina looks up to her sister Rima, who serves as her role model. Her ambitions are to follow in her sister's footsteps, namely, to get a university education, find a job, and become independent. Lina recoils from the thought that "she would sit one day on the sofa like her mother, blaming God" (p. 128). When Rima finally graduates from the university and moves to Aleppo, where she finds a job, Lina suffers an inner crisis. Her mentor, ally, and closest friend has left her. She is overcome by feelings of loneliness and despair, uncertain how to face the world again. She seeks comfort in the company of her party members, Samira and Amal. In addition, she finds escape in flights of fantasy and writes poetry. Her literary visions are her gateway to freedom; they enable her to transcend the limitations of her social reality. At the same time, they reinforce her tendency to withdraw within herself and emphasize her reserved and introverted nature. On a school trip with all her classmates, Lina reluctantly admits to herself that she is different from other girls of the same age: "She couldn't experience joy, or immerse herself in frivolous activities, or laugh with full lungs" (p. 143). She always remains inside her shell. "How much she wanted to destroy it, or let the waves play with it from within and without" (p. 144). Her life is always regulated, despite the rebellion that stirs deep within her. "She wanted to loosen up, to laugh if someone splashed her with water, to tell a dirty joke, to forget everything she had learned about morality and immorality" (p. 144). Deep down Lina knows that however hard she tries, she cannot change her mode of behavior: "She remained priestlike in her heart: serious, dull, and with a moral philosophy" (p. 144).

A highly perceptive adolescent, Lina registers what happens in her house, on the street, and in her country. Her evolving sense of self—

her process of becoming—is shaped through daily interaction with her social environment. She is deeply disturbed by the lack of civil liberties, the political divisiveness, and the brutality of the authorities. Two acts of violence in particular leave indelible marks on her consciousness: the army's forceful occupation of the third floor of her family's apartment building and the tragic death, caused by a speeding tank during the Independence Parade, of the only son of the orange vendor on her street. Lina hates any form of violence, especially mental violence: "She could not get used to living with it or accepting it. She was confronting it daily in her home, in her school, in society at large. All she wanted was to grow alone, independent from anything that could exert pressure on her mind or deform it. But the figures who always ran behind her, always trying to tame her by any means, were disguised in different clothing and behind different masks. Her mother sometimes, Bahiya always, her brother, her brothers-in-law" (p. 153). When Lina hears her school principal saying to the girls who have received poor final grades, "Life is full of chains. We have to accept them" (p. 153), she is enraged. She knows from personal experience what the word *chains* means: "She had always to say 'Yes'; she had to accept everything her mother said, or Bahiya, or the religion teacher, or the party girls in school. She had to obey. She was not supposed to think or argue. And if she was allowed to think, then she had to take the decision of the majority as her own. The group was over the individual, the family over everybody, and the men were the ones who form the consciousness and values of the nation" (p. 153).

Time and again, Lina's quest for authentic selfhood clashes with the same obstacles: gender, family, religion, culture, nation. An excursion with her friend Amal to the old city turns out to be a bitter experience. They suffer verbal abuse from passersby—men and women—who condemn them for not wearing a veil. They are also subjected to sexual harassment from teenage boys, one of whom pinches Lina's thigh and another lays his hand on Amal's breast (pp. 156–57). This experience intensifies Lina's sense of imprisonment: "She was not able to wander in her own city on her own, neither in the crowded, nor in the deserted lanes. There was something threatening at all times" (p. 158). Unlike Amal, she becomes skeptical about the prospect of bringing about social change in her country: "Oh, that naive optimism, that fantastic revolution, without a clear plan, or a studied program, without wise leadership" (p. 157). But Amal insists that it is their duty to carry on the struggle: "A man's country comes first and we have no place

for individualists, be they poets or mystics” (p. 158). Exasperated, Lina thinks to herself: “How could she explain to Amal simply that their country was nothing but a cat eating its own children?” (p. 168). Her pessimism derives from the realization that “everything around her, in her home, in her school, in her city, followed the same pattern, the same style” (p. 158).

The chapter of “Adolescence” ends on a symbolic note with Lina playing the part of Desdemona in *Othello* in her graduation party from high school. The part, which ends with Desdemona being strangled by her lover, makes Lina reflect on her role as a woman in her society: “The thought of the part she had to play humiliated her. She was nothing. A white puppet with blond hair desired even by the idiot. A white ewe run by a black ram” (p. 177). When the image of the boy from her erotic dreams flashes through her mind, Lina sees a disturbing parallel: “What was it with him that awaited her except a turbulent life between light and darkness, between love and hate, between peace and violence?” (p. 177). This depressing thought shows that Lina’s feminist consciousness is by now fully developed.

“Womanhood,” the shortest chapter in the novel, presumably because this stage in Lina’s life has just begun and has yet to unfold, continues the narrative with Lina as a student at the university, studying literature and philosophy. The seeds of doubt and disillusion with the theories and values that are preached to her by her professors and party leaders are slowly growing in Lina’s mind. She is unable to reconcile the contradictions between the self and society, ideals and reality, Islam and women’s inequality, communism and individual freedom. The successive military coups and dictatorial regimes in her country, the daily uncertainties, and endless acts of violence committed by rivaling political and religious groups, from Muslim Brothers to Ba’ath members to Communists and Nasserites, all claiming to serve the cause of the nation, make her realize how naive she has been. Bitterly, she asks herself: “How could one build a country before one builds the human being?” (p. 168). Her frustration turns to anger when she thinks of the nonsense her professors teach her: “How they stuffed her mind with trash! How they invented theories, and found excuses!” (p. 193). Acknowledging her own powerlessness in the face of the spreading anarchy and bloodshed, she succumbs to fear and despair.

In a conversation with a male artist at an exhibition featuring paintings of naked women and idyllic scenes from nature, Lina expresses her criticism and discontent. She demands to know, “How can an

artist living in a bloody period of history paint the lanes of the old city bathed in light...or bourgeois women standing in front of mirrors, pouring French perfume on their bare bosoms?" (p. 200) In Lina's view, the duty of artists is to produce an authentic representation of the living reality; they should paint, rather than ignore, the chaos and violence reigning in their society. But this fellow artist disagrees with her, arguing that "he who paints violence gets lost in violence" (p. 201). Unswayed, Lina confronts him with a pressing question: "Is it possible that this violence in its different forms, that of the family against the individual, the state against the citizen, man against woman, the sane against the insane, the enemy against his enemy, would disappear one day?" (p. 201). Dismayed by her question, the artist does not answer. This episode reveals Lina's struggle to assert her artistic sensibilities and express her creative impulse freely. The artist's inquiry whether she is still writing poetry indicates that her literary efforts are thwarted by the oppressive conditions in which she lives.

Lina's misery is compounded by a disappointing love affair. She breaks up with her tyrannical boyfriend, a fellow student at the university. But the man refuses to give up the relationship, pursues her relentlessly, and insists that she belongs to him. Lina is at a loss as to how to disabuse him of his illusions. "How could she make him understand that love was fleeting, like a sound? Short like lightning? And that she wasn't his beautiful doll?" (p. 192). Annoyed by his jealous and possessive attitude, she tells him sarcastically that "even if she were his since birth, there would be someone who would try to steal his right from him" (p. 193). She resists his attempts to intimidate and dominate her, firmly asserting her personal freedom: "Do you understand that I am born free? And that I can change my mind about you?" (p. 193). During this difficult time, Desdemona's fate comes back to haunt her. "She told herself that all lovers were sick, and that they did not strangle their beloveds like Othello only because they did not have a chance" (p. 194). Denouncing the patriarchal values of her culture, particularly the attitude toward love as reflected in classical Arabic poetry, Lina comes to the conclusion that "only a sick civilization like hers could create people like them, the man as a worshipper, the woman as worshipped" (p. 193). The last reference to this former boyfriend occurs after Lina announces her intention to leave Syria. Humiliated by her rejection, the man resorts to accusations and threats. "He followed me to the bus stop opposite the Justice Ministry. Looked like an ewe fleeing from the butcher's knife. Said I

have destroyed his life. A false claim. Said he would do everything to stop me from leaving the country. One word to the Secret Police, and I would be finished” (p. 202). Despite the grave threat to her safety, Lina does not give in.

In a dramatic section presented in the form of pages taken from a diary (pp. 202–6), with a switch in the narrative voice from the third to the first person, the reader learns of Lina’s decision to leave her family, society, and country. Snippets of various conversations that revolve around her announced departure are included. When her literature professor asked her why she was full of anger, she replied: “I was tired of being an Arab, a Moslem, and a woman” (p. 206). When her sociology professor inquired why she was leaving Damascus, she answered: “I wanted to keep my sanity” (p. 202). And to her Palestinian friend Amal, she said: “I’m tired of those chains, whether they’re called friends, family, or country... If I stay I will end up either in prison or dead. Otherwise, I’ll rot like the rest of you” (p. 212). The harshest exchange occurs between Lina and her mother. The mother is shocked by her daughter’s decision to leave and strongly opposes it. Lina records her words: “My mother told me that learning did not help me a bit. On its account, I rejected my family, society, religion, and country. Laughed insolently. Told her she should have arranged a marriage for me when I reached thirteen. Would God I had. And she sighed. Pushed the cup of coffee and stood up. Did she want me to hatch like her every nine months? Impudent, she said angrily. But when I turned my back, going towards the door, I heard her say almost imploringly: Don’t forget you are a woman. And the woman hatches nothing but children” (p. 206).

To accomplish her goal, Lina must first overcome several obstacles, among them obtaining an exit visa—a difficult matter for citizens under a repressive regime. In addition, as an Arab woman she must receive the written permission of her legal male guardian—in this case, her brother—to travel by herself. The violent death of a peasant student during a brawl at the university convinces her all the more of the necessity of her course of action. While Lina knows that she faces a rough road ahead of her, she is undaunted by the price—loneliness and alienation—that she must pay for living in exile. Her parting words to her Palestinian friend Amal are: “I refuse to serve that which I don’t believe in, whether it is my family, my friends, my country. I’ll try the impossible to express myself the way I want, with the freedom I see fit. All that will not be available to me unless I go away from you”

(p. 212). Lina's destination is presumably the West, where she intends to pursue her artistic aspirations and higher education.

Lina's process of self-development has been influenced by many interrelated factors, among them the historical period, urban setting, social class, family, and gender. In the end, her quest for authentic selfhood takes a completely different direction from that of her sister Rima. By breaking away from her family, party, society, religion, and country—all of which seek to control her actions and destiny—by severing all the ties that bind her, Lina braves to sail unknown waters, charting her own course and seeking her own fortune. True to the traditional *Bildungsroman*, the novel ends on a positive note in that it represents “a new beginning for the protagonist, who, having reached a certain stage of selfhood, is ready to profit from her *Bildungs* process and shape her own life in accordance with her awareness and desire for authentic self-fulfillment.”<sup>63</sup> Though Lina's course of action may be interpreted as an escape, and though the option of leaving her country is not available to the overwhelming majority of women in her society, the narrative does succeed in showing an alternative path to female self-definition and self-realization.

In her essay “To Create and in Creating to Be created,” Samar Attar provides intriguing insights into her literary work. She acknowledges that although she has lived most of her life in exile, all her writings revolve around Damascus: “It is true that I ran away from Damascus, but later I wrote about nothing else.”<sup>64</sup> Writing about the past—the experiences of her childhood and youth in her native city—helped her come to terms with this chapter in her personal history: “The semi-autobiographical act was a therapeutic task through which I could deal emotionally with my exiled self.”<sup>65</sup> Attar says that she wrote *Lina* during the years 1975–1976, when she lived in West Germany: “I was very happy then and relaxed, particularly after the very difficult year I spent in Algiers teaching English and American literature at the university.”<sup>66</sup> Paradoxically, the difficulties she experienced in Algeria had a liberating effect on her: “Looking back on it now, Algeria had in fact helped me become a free woman. After Algeria, I did not have to wrestle with

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<sup>63</sup> Eysturoy, *Daughters of Self-Creation*, p. 4.

<sup>64</sup> Attar, “To Create and in Creating to be Created,” p. 215.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 216.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

feelings of guilt for betraying my people. I was then ready to write critically about my past.”<sup>67</sup>

Attar states that *Lina* is based on autobiographical material as well as substantial historical research. In her view, while the text remains primarily a work of fiction, it can be considered a sociopolitical literary treatise about Syria of the 1950s and early 1960s. Indeed, the reader learns a great deal about this turbulent period in the history of Syria. Chronicling the rule of successive military regimes, from Brigadier General Husni al-Za'im (March 1949) to Brigadier General Sami al-Hinnawi (August 1949) to Colonel Adib al-Shishakli (December 1949), the novel also depicts the rise to power of left-wing radicals after the British-French-Israeli invasion of Sinai (October-November 1956), the sense of euphoria that prevailed with the political union between Syria and Egypt under Gamal Abd al-Nasser in 1958, and the spread of despair following another military coup in Damascus in 1961 and the dissolution of the union. On the social level, the novel highlights the dismal conditions of the peasants, the workers, the poor, and the homeless, the tense relations between the classes, and the preoccupation of the bourgeoisie with material security. All these details, which are interwoven into the narrative, combine to paint an intimate portrait of the period.

Attar emphasizes that the conditions of violence and repression that *Lina* leaves behind still exist in her country today, as in other parts of the Arab world. She believes that the strict censor is responsible for the problems she encountered in publishing this novel and for the fact that it is banned in Syria and other Arab countries. To her great disappointment, the fundamental nature of Syrian society has not changed, despite the socialist revolution. “Syria is still a patriarchal, authoritarian, and antidemocratic society,” she laments, and her dream of liberation remains as elusive today as it was thirty years ago, when she wrote this novel.<sup>68</sup>

Attar discusses the mixture of fiction and facts in the first two volumes of her trilogy. She argues that in both of her autobiographical novels, the self is an essence as well as a socially created construction. She believes that “writing the self is not a simple matter and can never

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., pp. 216, 218.

be totally neutral or objective.”<sup>69</sup> This is the reason that she refrains from calling her books autobiographies, memoirs, or confessions and instead presents them as works of art. Attar insists that although the two texts record a specific female experience in a specific culture, they remain fiction, “for the line between truth and illusion is very thin and questionable at times.”<sup>70</sup> It is therefore erroneous for readers or critics to conclude that she has written an account of herself, her life, and her family. “When I wrote *Lina*, a novel of formation, I reflected on my past, my feminist awakening, and transformed only what concerned me into literature.”<sup>71</sup> Attar says that *The House on Arnus Square* has caused her family a lot of grief because of its explicit sexual language and first-person mode of narration, which readers and critics in Arab society tend to identify with the author. She predicts that with time, her authority as author will slowly diminish, and the text, “which blurs the boundaries between history and literature,” will assume a new form and designation in the minds of readers and critics. “The text will be reinvented and rewritten,” she declares, “and I will appear under different guises, if I appear at all.”<sup>72</sup>

### Conclusion

Although al-Zayyat’s heroine, Layla, and Attar’s heroine, Lina, face similar obstacles in their process of self-development, their rebellions and visions of the future are entirely different. Lina rebels against her family, her society, and her country. Rejecting the collective self for the sake of the individual self, she decides to leave Syria and reside in the West, where she can live her life freely. Layla rebels against her family, her fiancé, and the patriarchal values of her society. She ultimately finds her real self in serving her nation and her country; in other words, in transcending her individual self and becoming part of a larger whole—the collective. Thus Layla recognizes the essential ties linking personal and national identities, as well as personal and national liberation,<sup>73</sup> whereas Lina regards these issues as two

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 222.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 226n27.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 223.

<sup>73</sup> Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists*, p. 167.

separate struggles. Lina feels primary responsibility toward the self rather than the collective; she dares to be selfish, seeking artistic self-fulfillment outside the confines of her society. Layla is altruistic; driven by patriotic feelings, she envisions a role for herself that is situated at the intersection of feminism and nationalism. Hence she is relatively reconciled to her society. Obviously, these two novels present opposing perspectives on the female quest for authentic selfhood. The intriguing question which is left open is: How well will these heroines do later on in life? As for Layla, active involvement in the struggle for national liberation empowers her and enables her to become emancipated. Indeed, the Egyptian experience proved to be a positive one, as women were able to retain the gains they made in their status. However, the Algerian experience showed the opposite: after the enemy that united the nation disappeared, women and men reverted to the old, traditional ways. Thus another Layla in another Arab society may end up having to fight all over again for her hard-won rights. As for Lina, it is not clear how she will fare as an Arab living in the West. The factors of ethnicity and nationality do not come into play as long as she lives in her own country. But once she emigrates to a foreign country, ethnicity and nationality become crucial components of her self-definition and self-development. Will she feel marginalized in a culture that is not her own or will her self-image and self-esteem be enhanced? Such questions are explored at length by Hanan al-Shaykh in her novel *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, which is discussed in the next chapter.

The depiction of family life in these two novels shows the profound changes affecting traditional relationships, roles, and values within the family. In *The Open Door*, Mahmud, Layla, and Sanaa seek jobs far away from Cairo—and their parents. Under the combined impact of public education, government employment, and geographic mobility, Mahmud is able to leave the “space of filial obedience entirely” (p. 142) and assert his freedom and independence vis-a-vis his father. Once he graduates as a medical doctor and is posted to a government hospital in Port Said, he can support himself and marry Sanaa, a woman of his own choosing. The same factors—education, employment, and mobility—facilitate Layla’s road to emancipation. The economic independence of these young adults undermines the power and authority of the father as the sole provider and protector of the family. Similar changes can be observed in *Lina*. Rima, Lina’s older sister, gains

her independence from family control by following the same path: acquiring a profession through university education and getting a job in a distant city, Aleppo. Lina puts a much greater distance between her and her family by traveling abroad. In both novels, the ideal of extended household is superseded by a nuclear household, at least among middle-class urban families. More dramatically, the concept of loyalty to the family, which requires placing the family's wishes above the self and society, is challenged. Many of the young characters in these novels are intent on pursuing their personal happiness by making their own choices with regard to marriage, career, and service to the nation.

Education plays a key role in all these changes. It is the reason that Lina's mother emerges as a more positive figure than Layla's mother. Although her education is modest—only up to the fifth grade—it is consequential enough to make her reject an early marriage proposal for Lina and support her aspirations to obtain a university degree and a job. Despite the new trends, both novels show that traditional attitudes to marriage and motherhood as the primary avenues for female self-fulfillment are still widespread among Arab women. In *The Open Door*, when the girls in Layla's school want to participate in the general demonstration against the British colonial presence, the headmistress tries to stop them. "The headmistress approached the microphone. Woman's job was motherhood, she said. Woman's place was in the home, she said. Weapons and fighting were for men" (p. 48). In *Lina*, the mother recounts a conversation she had with a woman whose son's offer of marriage for Lina she declined: "But Lina is young, plus she wants to finish her education.' 'Education?' The fat lady approached me shivering out of anger. 'Doesn't she know how to read and write? This is enough. Then if everything turns all right between us, your daughter does not have to work anyway. My son is rich and only the poor girls work.' 'You are right,' I told her, 'but the times have changed.' 'How did they change?' the other woman interrupted me. 'If you don't marry your daughter before she is twenty, she'll become an old maid'" (p. 56). However, holding traditional or modern notions of women's roles and paths to self-fulfillment is not simply a matter of belonging to the younger or older generation. Among Lina's classmates, there are girls who are secularists, socialists, communists, nationalists, and even Islamists. Wafiq, for example, is a veiled student who is a member of the Muslim Brothers. She is often singled out for special praise by the

religion teacher: “According to him, she was the ideal Moslem woman who knew her position in society, and accepted what God had decreed for her” (p. 172). Indeed, Arab women respond in many different ways to the problems and challenges facing them. The increasing complexity of their social realities compels them to adopt a variety of solutions and approaches.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### PORTRAITS OF SURROGATE MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIPS

[Nanny] was in many ways not only the person who looked after me but also my closest companion, the person with whom I spent the most time in childhood and adolescence.

Leila Ahmed<sup>1</sup>

#### *The Theme of Nurturance in Feminist Writing*

“Few women growing up in patriarchal society can feel mothered enough,” argues Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born*.<sup>2</sup> Not only is the mother’s power too limited to give her daughter the protection and support she needs, but it is through the mother that patriarchy instills in the young daughter her proper, conventional expectations. For Rich, this type of mothering, which transmits to the daughter a legacy of victimization and exploitation rather than of equality and worthiness, is fundamentally deficient: “The anxious pressure of one female on another to conform to a degrading and dispiriting role can hardly be termed ‘mothering,’ even if she does this believing it will help her daughter to survive.”<sup>3</sup> What a daughter needs is not the old, institutionalized, sacrificial, mother love which men have demanded, but rather courageous mothering which empowers her, enhances her self-esteem, and expands her sense of actual possibilities.<sup>4</sup>

The issue of nurturance is central to the dynamics that develop in the relationship between mothers and daughters. Broadly defined as “the degree of warmth, support, and acceptance that is expressed toward the child,”<sup>5</sup> nurturance is the most vital resource for individual

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<sup>1</sup> Ahmed, *A Border Passage*, p. 64.

<sup>2</sup> Rich, *Of Woman Born*, p. 243.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 246.

<sup>5</sup> Anderson and Sabatelli, *Family Interaction*, p. 205.

growth and development. For Phyllis Chesler, nurturance is “the consistent and readily available gift of physical, domestic, and emotional support in childhood, together with the added gift of compassion and respect in adulthood.”<sup>6</sup> Chesler observes that most women are “motherless daughters” in patriarchal society. By this she means that daughters are not mothered into heroism and do not inherit power or wealth; rather, their legacy is one of capitulation and deprivation.<sup>7</sup> “Female children,” she writes, “are quite literally starved for . . . physical nurturance and a legacy of power and humanity from adults of their own sex (‘mothers’).”<sup>8</sup> Using the term *nurturance* in the sense of “unconditional love and care,” the feminist theorist Jane Flax suggests that “what women want is an experience of both nurturance and autonomy within an intimate relationship.”<sup>9</sup> This wish is for many women unattainable because psychological development occurs within the patriarchal family in which the mother is the primary nurturer and the father is the symbol of authority. In this context, learning about one’s gender means recognizing that men and women are not valued equally and that men are socially more esteemed than women. This knowledge affects a woman’s feelings about herself, both as a person and as a mother, which, in turn, influence the type of mothering she provides a child. Flax argues that mothering is not gender neutral and that women relate differently to male and female children. This is the basis for many daughters’ complaints that they did not receive enough nurturance, support, and encouragement for autonomy from their mothers. “It is not that women totally lack the experience of being nurtured,” Flax remarks, “but it is rather that their experience takes place within a context in which the mother’s conflicts render the experience less than optimal and, in some cases, profoundly inadequate.”<sup>10</sup>

Many women in Arab societies find themselves in a similar bind. Cultural values as well as age-old customs and traditions make it difficult for a mother to be fully available and responsive to her daughter’s

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<sup>6</sup> Phyllis Chesler, *Women and Madness* (1972; New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1997), p. 59.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 57–58, and Phyllis Chesler, *Woman’s Inhumanity to Woman* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press/Nation Books, 2001), p. 212.

<sup>8</sup> Chesler, *Women and Madness*, p. 58.

<sup>9</sup> Flax, “The Conflict between Nurturance and Autonomy,” pp. 171, 187n4.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

needs. As mentioned in chapter 2, Arab culture valorizes the son as the prime offspring of his parents. To acquire status in her family, a woman must give birth to a son. It is only natural that the emotional gratification felt by a woman who presents her husband with a son will be reflected in her treatment of this child: "She will be much more lenient with him, will take better care of him, devote more attention to him, and be more affectionately inclined toward him than she would to a daughter."<sup>11</sup> Needless to say, the quality of mothering accorded to daughters in Arab families is affected by additional factors, including class, family size, and level of education.

Patriarchal ideology, then, plays a critical role in defining and controlling the mothering practices of women in Arab societies. Rich argues that patriarchal culture pits daughters against mothers and distorts the relationship between them in order to render women powerless, perpetuate patterns of submission, and reproduce the conditions of women's inequality.<sup>12</sup> Many mothers raise their daughters to conform to oppressive customs and traditions, telling them that their lot is to "suffer in silence," and that "a woman's fate is predetermined."<sup>13</sup> Many daughters live in rage at their mothers for having resigned too readily and passively to their inferior position. Rich emphasizes that a mother's victimization humiliates and mutilates the daughter, who regards her mother as a role model: "Like the traditional foot-bound Chinese woman, she passes on her own affliction. The mother's self-hatred and low expectations are the binding-rags for the psyche of the daughter."<sup>14</sup> While Freudian psychoanalytic theory attributes the rage of daughters against their mothers to resentment for not having been given a penis, Rich supports an alternative explanation which ascribes the daughter's rage to the fact that her mother has relegated her to a second-class status while indulging the son and relying on him to fulfill her own frustrated needs.<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, patriarchal culture creates a breach between mothers and daughters, destroying the potential for intimacy, love, and solidarity between them.

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<sup>11</sup> Patai, *The Arab Mind*, p. 29.

<sup>12</sup> Rich, *Of Woman Born*, pp. 218–55.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248. For a discussion of fatalistic attitudes in Arab culture, see Cohen-Mor, *A Matter of Fate*, pp. 3–32, 131–41.

<sup>14</sup> Rich, *Of Woman Born*, p. 243.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 244.

For Rich, this sorry state of affairs explains why many daughters have split themselves between two mothers, “one, usually the biological one, who represents the culture of domesticity, of male-centeredness, of conventional expectations, and another, perhaps a woman artist or teacher, who becomes the countervailing force.”<sup>16</sup> Frequently, the “counter-mother” is “an athletics teacher who exemplifies strength and pride in her body, a freer way of being in the world; or an unmarried woman professor, alive with ideas, who represents the choice of a vigorous work life, of ‘living alone and liking it.’”<sup>17</sup> The splitting between two different identifications allows the daughter to act out the role model of each “mother” alternately. This situation may continue indefinitely without a resolution of the choices, thus producing a life-long ambivalence in the daughter.<sup>18</sup> Rich views the phenomenon of surrogate mothers as the inevitable outcome of deficient mothering under patriarchy. She pays tribute to these nonbiological mothers, without whom civilization as we know it today would not have existed: “For centuries, daughters have been strengthened and energized by non-biological mothers, who have combined a care for the practical values of survival with an incitement toward further horizons, a compassion for vulnerability with an insistence on our strengths. It is precisely this that has allowed us to survive.”<sup>19</sup>

Highlighting the deleterious effects of inadequate nurturance on the daughter’s psyche and later adult behavior, Rich describes several neurotic patterns of behavior that are characteristic of unnurtured daughters. In many cases, “the woman who has felt ‘unmothered’ may seek mothers all her life—may even seek them in men.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, an unmothered woman may follow blindly any person who offers her the slightest maternal warmth. Her desperate search for a substitute mother with whom she can become intimately connected may lead her to form unhealthy sexual and interpersonal relationships. She may become emotionally dependent on a lover or a husband. Obviously, a woman who behaves in this way is more vulnerable to exploitation and victimization. Another way a “motherless” woman may react is to deny what she herself has lacked and spend her life in the

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 247.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 252–53.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 242.

mothering of others, “mothering men, whose weakness makes her feel strong, or mothering in the role of teacher, doctor, political activist, psychotherapist.”<sup>21</sup> Rich is critical of a woman who devotes her energies to mothering because she needs the neediness of others in order to go on feeling her own strength. Flax points out that this pattern of behavior does not lead to success in the social world. For example, a woman professor who invests a lot of efforts in her students and becomes involved in their lives has less time for research and publishing, which may hinder the advancement of her academic career.<sup>22</sup>

Lesbianism has also been attributed to unsatisfied wishes for nurturance from the mother. Chesler argues that “from a psychological point of view, it is only women who can ‘make up’ to each other for their lack of mothering.”<sup>23</sup> She draws on the work of the psychiatrist Charlotte Wolff, who regards “emotional incest with the mother” as the essence of lesbianism.<sup>24</sup> Insisting that love is possible only within a context of “sameness and harmony,” Wolff is sympathetic to a heterosexual woman’s loneliness and nurturance deprivation: “The love a man can give her is bound to fall short in essentials, which only a mother can provide. It is she herself who has to supply these. She has to become what she could not possess—the mother—in her relationship with the male.”<sup>25</sup> Wolff believes that it is not *homosexuality* but *homoemotional-ity* which is the center of women’s love for each other.<sup>26</sup>

The connection between lesbianism and mothering has received much attention in feminist scholarship. Flax suggests that “women’s unresolved wishes for the mother is the truth behind Freud’s claim that what women wish for in a husband is their mother.”<sup>27</sup> As the first love object for both the girl and the boy, all adults carry erotic memories of the experience of their mother’s body—her warmth, smell, and touch. While the girl is required by patriarchal ideology to repress her erotic feelings for her mother and direct her nurturing energies toward a man, the boy receives a promise of another mother in a wife. Flax acknowledges that for women to have sexual relations with other

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 243.

<sup>22</sup> Flax, “The Conflict between Nurturance and Autonomy,” p. 181.

<sup>23</sup> Chesler, *Women and Madness*, p. 211.

<sup>24</sup> Charlotte Wolff, *Love between Women* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 72; cited in *ibid.*, p. 216.

<sup>25</sup> Wolff, *Love between Women*, p. 71.

<sup>26</sup> Wolff, *Love between Women*, p. 86.

<sup>27</sup> Flax, “The Conflict between Nurturance and Autonomy,” p. 179.

women is no guarantee of the resolution of these problems.<sup>28</sup> Rich links rethinking the mother-daughter relationship to rethinking sexual love for another woman: both of these issues have been distorted and repressed under patriarchy. More specifically, institutionalized heterosexuality and the homophobic character of society have made lesbianism a taboo.<sup>29</sup> Suzanna Walters points out that viewing lesbianism as a “return” to the mother makes it a regressive form of sexuality because in the psychoanalytic discourse separation from the mother is supposed to mark a person as adult.<sup>30</sup> Nancy Chodorow observes that “lesbian relationships do tend to recreate mother-daughter emotions and connections, but most women are heterosexual.”<sup>31</sup> She states that this heterosexual preference, prevailing taboos against homosexuality, and objective economic dependence on men make the pursuit of primary sexual bonds with other women unlikely—though more common in recent years.

Contrary to theorists who regard lesbianism as biologically determined, Simone de Beauvoir takes the position that lesbianism is a matter of personal choice, though it may be influenced by environmental circumstances:

The truth is that homosexuality is no more a perversion deliberately indulged in than it is a curse of fate. It is an attitude *chosen in a certain situation*—that is, at once motivated and freely adopted. No one of the factors that mark the subject in connection with this choice—physiological conditions, psychological history, social circumstances—is the determining element, though they all contribute to its explanation. It is one way, among others, in which woman solves the problems posed by her condition in general, by her erotic situation in particular.<sup>32</sup>

De Beauvoir notes that, like all human behavior, homosexuality can lead to frustration and exploitation or, conversely, it can become the source of rewarding experiences. Her comments, as well as the preceding points of view, offer plausible explanations for lesbian relations in Arab societies, a taboo topic which remains largely unexplored in the social science literature.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 179, 183, 184.

<sup>29</sup> Rich, *Of Woman Born*, pp. 218–19, 226.

<sup>30</sup> Walters, *Lives Together, Worlds Apart*, p. 147.

<sup>31</sup> Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, p. 200.

<sup>32</sup> De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 424; emphasis in the original.

Whatever solution “motherless daughters” adopt in their search for nurturance, they are frequently unaware of the tremendous challenge that caring for them presents to their mothers, given their own predicament in patriarchal culture. Rich emphasizes that “the nurture of daughters in patriarchy calls for a strong sense of *self*-nurture in the mother.”<sup>33</sup> The mutuality of mother-daughter nurturing will empower both of them and liberate their relationship from the distorted images created by patriarchal ideology. Once united, mothers and daughters can dismantle patriarchal motherhood and strengthen the ties of friendship and solidarity between women.<sup>34</sup>

It should be noted that in traditional Arab society the extended family provides alternative sources of nurturance to a daughter who does not receive enough from her own mother. In a three-generation household, for example, the daughter can develop a close attachment to and identification with other adult women: a grandmother, aunt, or niece. Such ties are usually relaxed and free of the tensions and pressures inherent in the parent-child relationship. In the nuclear family, by contrast, the availability of another mother figure for the daughter is limited to another sibling, usually an older sister. For the mother, too, the extended family is an important source of emotional support because it reduces her isolation. In the company of other women, a young mother can form intimate friendships, exchange practical advice, and share domestic and child care responsibilities. A strong brother-sister relationship in Arab families is also common. Regarded as “running a close second” to the powerful mother-son relationship, the brother-sister bond is one of the few cross-sexual relationships that are allowed to flourish openly.<sup>35</sup>

Although Arab women’s literature abounds in works that depict mother-daughter relationships, intimate bonding of mothers and daughters is rare.<sup>36</sup> There are many ways in which daughters, be they autobiographical or fictional, attempt to satisfy their needs for maternal love and warmth. Some find surrogate mother figures within the family circle and establish close relationships with them. Most commonly,

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<sup>33</sup> Rich, *Of Woman Born*, p. 245; emphasis in the original.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 253.

<sup>35</sup> Ahmed, “Between Two Worlds,” p. 160. See also Bowen and Early, *Everyday Life in the Muslim Middle East*, p. 14.

<sup>36</sup> See a similar conclusion in Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists*, p. 140.

a grandmother (as in Alia Mamdouh's *Mothballs*), or an older sister (as in Samar Attar's *Lina: A Portrait of a Damascene Girl*), or an aunt (as in Fadwa Tuqan's *A Mountainous Journey*), serves as a surrogate mother. The polygamous household affords lonely daughters additional sources of affection and support. In *Harem Years*, the memoirs of the Egyptian feminist Huda Shaarawi, the young Huda felt inhibited and insecure around her mother but found empathy and understanding in her father's widow, Umm Kabira (literally, Big Mother), who allayed her fears and anxieties. "I loved Umm Kabira immensely," says Huda, "and she returned that love and showed compassion toward me. She, alone, talked frankly with me on a number of matters, making it easy for me to confide in her. She knew how I felt when people favored my brother over me because he was a boy."<sup>37</sup> Umm Kabira, who lost both her son and her husband, found in Huda an outlet for her maternal instincts and comfort in her grief. Because of Umm Kabira's "kindness and openness," Huda trusted her completely and unburdened her heart to her, daring to ask troubling questions that she could not present to her mother. Umm Kabira compensated Huda for the discrimination she suffered as a female child, sharing many tender moments with her, such as sleeping together in the same bed. The fact that throughout her life Huda wore on her finger a ring that Umm Kabira had given her shows the special bond she had forged with her.

In the homes of the wealthy, a daughter can find a surrogate mother figure in her nanny. This is poignantly depicted in Leila Ahmed's personal account, *A Border Passage*. Ahmed describes her nanny as her guardian angel and closest companion throughout her childhood. Her nostalgic recollections of this period in her life are intimately connected with the nanny: "Nanny, her voice calling me in from the garden at nightfall, singing out my name into the dark in a music that was part of the music of childhood" (p. 58). The delicious taste of kugelof, cannelloni, and apricot jam, which the nanny—a Yugoslavian woman—made, still represent for the adult Leila the "distillation of childhood" (p. 60). Ahmed recounts that she slept with her nanny in the same bed until the age of six or seven, and even after she was made to move into her own bed, at her mother's insistence and against her own will, she continued to sleep in the same room with her nanny.

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<sup>37</sup> Huda Shaarawi, *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist*, trans. Margot Badran (New York: The Feminist Press, 1987), p. 34.

Ahmed's deep attachment to her nanny stands in sharp contrast to her relationship with her mother, or what she at times refers to as the "centrally somber connection" between her and her mother (p. 89). She portrays her mother, an upper-class woman of Turkish descent, as cold, remote, and strict. "Mother did have difficulty in connecting with us, and with children in general... She kept us all, I am tempted to say, at an equal distance" (p. 54). The mother was uninvolved in the daily lives of her four children: "Looking after the children was Nanny's province and Mother was evidently perfectly happy to leave all the details of our lives to her" (pp. 55–56). At the same time, the mother was the supreme moral authority in the house and, as Ahmed recalls, "forbidding and categorical in my experience of her, particularly in matters of sexuality" (p. 69). She felt no intimacy with her mother: "I was not at all wont in my memory of our relationship to speak to her of my secret desires" (p. 74).

Conversely, Ahmed was so attached to her nanny that her biggest fear throughout her childhood was that her nanny might die before she grew up. She writes that she used to pray every night that "Nanny would not die before I was old enough to bear it. I told God that I had to be fifteen at a minimum" (p. 51). The nanny, a devout Catholic, disliked her mistress—Leila Ahmed's mother—regarding her as an idle woman of the spoiled upper classes who applied herself to no useful work and wasted her days. "She was plain, at least with me, about not liking Mother," Ahmed recounts (p. 54). This dislike created friction between the mother and the nanny, at one point resulting in a terrible row. Ahmed recalls that she inserted herself between the two of them, protecting the nanny, who was threatened with dismissal. The mother accused the nanny of using Leila, making her daughter unnecessarily dependent on her, thinking that this would make it impossible to dismiss her. Although the fight blew over, the young Leila was left with "a fine legacy of anxieties," foremost among them the fear that her nanny would be dismissed (p. 56). The nanny was kept; she died in her late seventies in Ahmed's parental home in Cairo, when Leila was in her late teens, studying in a college in England.

The nanny figures in a similar maternal role in Somaya Ramadan's novel, *Leaves of Narcissus*.<sup>38</sup> In this narrative, Kimi, a fragile heroine

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<sup>38</sup> Somaya Ramadan, *Leaves of Narcissus*, trans. Marilyn Booth (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2002).

who suffers from a rift in her personality, lies to a friend that her mother's name is Amna (p. 82), which is, in fact, her nanny's name. Through flashbacks to her childhood and past experiences, it becomes clear that the heroine has no connection with her mother and it is Amna who always looks after all her needs, emotional and physical. The disjointed narrative, which is meant to mirror the heroine's fragmented consciousness, contains a recollection of an ordinary morning in her life as a child, when she prepares to go to school. This recollection is most revealing with regard to the nature of her relationship with both the mother and the nanny: "I swallow my breakfast and kiss her rapidly. Nana Amna; and my mother is somewhere in the background. When I open the door Amna appears and stands with me until the elevator arrives. I don't hear a sound from my mother, but Amna is clear and forceful" (p. 11). As in Ahmed's account *A Border Passage*, there is no love lost between the mother and the nanny, and this exacerbates the disharmony in Kimi's life and adds to the stress on her delicate psyche. It pains and confuses the young Kimi to hear her mother's denigrating remarks about her beloved nanny. "Her mother always said that Amna was dim—even though Amna was vigorous, never seemed to tire, and was always clean and neat. Her mother also would declare that Amna was as stubborn as a mule. That made her wince, because she loved Amna in spite of the woman's hard discipline and wounding tongue. Whenever the grownups went out, Amna was the one who filled the world and kept it from crumbling. She'd sit cross-legged on the floor in the bedroom and tell stories" (pp. 14–15).

The gulf between mother and daughter becomes all the more unbridgeable after Kimi travels to the West in pursuit of university education. During a ten-year stay in Dublin, she suffers a severe identity crisis caused by an intense sense of exile as well as alienation from her family, culture, and society.<sup>39</sup> One of her professors takes her to a mental hospital, where she is diagnosed with schizophrenia. Significantly, when interviewed by the doctors, Kimi refers to herself as Amna, saying, "Amna is very tired, Professor" (p. 28). She also relates to herself as Amna in one of her inner monologues: "I have no edges, no borders to separate my aches from the pains of others. I am Amna, and I am her tale, and I am the girl in the legend of the King of the

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<sup>39</sup> This plot pattern supports al-Mousa's conclusions about the characteristics of the Arabic *Bildungsroman*. See chapter 4, pp. 139–40.

Atlas Mountains” (p. 19). The heroine’s assumption of her nanny’s identity shows that the nanny serves as the only point of sanity for her as well as a haven of safety. The nanny is like a life raft that carries her over the dangerous waves of the stormy sea of life. Upon her release from the hospital in Dublin, Kimi returns to her parents’ home in Cairo, where it is, as usual, the nanny who nurses her and tries to comfort her in her dark moments of total despair and desolation.

In a polygamous household, a surrogate mother-daughter relationship can develop between older and younger co-wives. In Fatima Mernissi’s *Dreams of Trespass*, for example, Grandmother Yasmina, who lives in a harem with eight other co-wives, takes care of the new co-wife, Tamou. Sharing her pavilion with Tamou, she nurses her for many months during her emotional collapse from grief over the loss of her children and first husband. Thereafter, Yasmina and Tamou become such close friends that their pavilion serves as the center of women’s solidarity in this polygamous family. Although polygamy is less common nowadays in the Arab world, in areas where it is still practiced, as in the countryside and the conservative Arab Gulf states, such idyllic pictures of family life are rather rare. As Om Naema, the fisherwoman in *Khul Khaal*, remarks: “Life in a family where there is more than one wife is bitter. A second wife is always subject to the hatred of her stepchildren, and we always say, ‘May God see fit to cut short her days among the living.’ Can one wife ever trust her husband’s other wife or wives? It is not possible, and they can only wish each other heartbreaks and misfortune.”<sup>40</sup> Hanan al-Shaykh’s short story, “Sun, I Am the Moon,” depicts the tragedy of being a co-wife in a polygamous marriage, especially for the teenaged, third wife, who seeks protection in the first, middle-aged, childless wife.<sup>41</sup>

A surrogate mother-daughter relationship can also develop outside the family circle. In Salwa Bakr’s novel *The Golden Chariot*,<sup>42</sup> several inmates in a women’s prison forge close ties with each other that provide them with mutual help and support. A striking figure among them is the peasant woman Umm El Khayr, who, in her overflowing tenderness and compassion toward others, is “maternal love personified” and the “true

<sup>40</sup> Atiya, *Khul Khaal*, p. 129.

<sup>41</sup> Hanan al-Shaykh, “Sun, I Am the Moon,” in Cohen-Mor, *Arab Women Writers*, pp. 133–40.

<sup>42</sup> Salwa Bakr, *The Golden Chariot*, trans. Dinah Manisty (Reading, U.K.: Garnet Publishing, 1995).

mother-goddess" (p. 78). Through Aziza, a fellow prisoner who creates an imaginary golden chariot to take her to heaven, the reader learns that "Umm El-Khayr treated all the women she came into contact with in the prison as her daughters, including those amongst them who were older than she was; her maternal instinct even extended to the pampered prison cat" (p. 77). Aziza confesses that until she "encountered Umm El-Khayr's overflowing maternal love she had been completely unaware of such qualities, having never experienced this kind of love, even from her mother" (p. 77). Contemplating which of her fellow prisoners she should take with her on her voyage to heaven, Aziza resolves to include Umm El-Khayr among her companions and to seat her right next to her, in the front of the chariot. In this novel, the women's prison serves as a symbol of the female condition in Arab societies. The narrative depicts poverty, exploitation, and patriarchal oppression as the leading causes of crimes—from stealing to prostitution to drug dealing to murder—committed by women. In some instances, the harsh reality of their lives induces nervous breakdowns in women or drives them into insanity. The novel shows that although life in prison is isolated from the outside world, human behavior continues to be governed by the same drives and motives, especially the need for intimacy and affection. This need propels the inmates to form surrogate mother-daughter relationships.<sup>43</sup>

Failure to find nurturing relationships with substitute maternal figures may lead daughters to adopt other forms of compensatory behavior. In Nawal El Saadawi's *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*,<sup>44</sup> the heroine is alienated from her mother because of her preferential treatment of the son and constant preoccupation with cooking and cleaning. Rejecting a life of domesticity, she decides to pursue a professional career. She studies medicine and becomes a successful doctor. After a brief and unhappy marriage, she throws herself into her work, finding in it satisfaction and a purpose for her life. In the end, she meets a man with whom she develops a close and loving relationship. The heroine's final words express tremendous joy and relief: "For the first time in my life I felt I needed someone else, something I hadn't felt

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<sup>43</sup> For further discussion of this novel, see Magda M. al-Nowaihi, "Reenvisioning National Community in Salwa Bakr's *Golden Chariot*," in Majaj et al., *Intersections*, pp. 68–93.

<sup>44</sup> El Saadawi, *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, trans. Catherine Cobham (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1989).

even about my mother. I buried my head in his chest and wept tears of relief” (pp. 110–11).

Other heroines devote their time and efforts to public or national causes. They engage in a variety of political activities, including communism (Samar Attar’s *Lina: A Portrait of a Damascene Girl*), Islamic fundamentalism (Mir al-Tahawy’s *Blue Aubergine*), and struggles for national liberation (Latifa al-Zayyat’s *The Open Door*, Hamida Na’na’s *The Homeland*). For some heroines, loyalty to the revolutionary movement takes precedence over the family, and the political party may even replace the family. For example, in an autobiographical essay entitled “Writing away the Prison,” the Syrian author Hamida Na’na recounts: “An intelligent woman teacher made me enroll in a political party while I was still at secondary school. This party was to change the course of my life. For the first time, I realized that I had another family which was more progressive than my biological family. This family was the Party.”<sup>45</sup>

In extreme circumstances of loneliness and emotional deprivation, the fictional daughter may seek consolation in illicit sexual relations with men, as illustrated by Zahra in Hanan al-Shaykh’s novel *The Story of Zahra*, or in lesbian relations, as illustrated by Nur in another novel by al-Shaykh, *Women of Sand and Myrrh*. Some heroines may run away from home at a great risk to their safety, as happens in Nawal El Saadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero*. In this fact-based novel, Firdaus is an orphan who is married off by her uncle to an ugly old man. Starved for love, compassion, and kindness, she runs away from her abusive husband and ends up on the street as a prostitute. Her freedom is short-lived, for she is forced to kill her pimp in self-defense, an act for which she is condemned to death. Firdaus welcomes death—the price society exacts for her rebellion—as the only freedom available to her. Indeed, committing suicide is another escape route for the desperate daughter. In Ulfat al-Idilbi’s *Sabriya: Damascus Bitter Sweet*, the heroine, Sabriya, is forbidden to marry the man she loves, to complete her education, and to participate in the national revolt against the French colonial regime. Instead, she is saddled with the care of her old and ailing parents, keenly aware that she is sacrificing her youth and happiness on the altar of her filial duties. After both of her parents die,

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<sup>45</sup> Hamida Na’na, “Writing away the Prison,” in Faqir, *In the House of Silence*, p. 96.

Sabriya learns that her selfish and ungrateful brothers scheme to evict her from the family home. Betrayed and forsaken, she chooses to hang herself rather than suffer the disgrace of becoming homeless.

Freud writes about the turn to religion in an effort to recreate the lost feeling of oneness,<sup>46</sup> a phenomenon which is depicted in *Year of the Elephant* by Leila Abouzeid. In this novella, the childless, middle-aged heroine, divorced by her husband and left lonely and destitute, finds purpose in life through the teachings of Islam. Similarly, in Alia Mamdouh's *Mothballs*, the widowed grandmother, who has lived through several family tragedies, finds consolation in piety. These and many other works of modern Arabic literature demonstrate the profound need of men and women to live a meaningful life in which they are connected to other people with ties of trust and tenderness. Without these ties the core of their personalities is threatened with alienation, fragmentation, and madness.

#### *Alia Mamdouh's Mothballs*

An Iraqi novelist, short-story writer, and journalist, Alia Mamdouh was born in Baghdad in 1944. She graduated with a degree in psychology from al-Mustansiriya University in 1971 and worked in journalism. She left Baghdad in 1982 and has lived in exile since then, residing in Beirut, Tunis, Morocco, and England before settling in Paris. A regular contributor to the main journals and newspapers of the Arab world, she is the author of five novels and two collections of short stories.

*Mothballs*, Mamdouh's second novel,<sup>47</sup> tells the story of Huda, a young Iraqi girl growing up in a working-class family in Baghdad during the late 1940s and early 1950s. Centering on the reality of daily life in Huda's home, the narrative unfolds a complex web of family relationships, a household full of unfulfilled women, and an unforgettable childhood lived in an old neighborhood scheduled for demolition by the government.

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<sup>46</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1961).

<sup>47</sup> Alia Mamdouh, *Habbat al-naftalin* (Cairo: Al-Hay'a al-misriyya al-'amma lil-kitab, 1986); English translation: *Mothballs*, trans. Peter Theroux (Reading, U.K.: Garnet, 1996). This translation was revised and published under the title *Naphtalene*, with an afterword by Farida Abu Haidar (New York: the Feminist Press, 2005). Unless otherwise stated, all quotations are from the first edition.

The extended al-Maarouf family consists of the paternal grandmother, Wafiqā, her married son, Jamil, his wife, Iqbal, his unmarried sister, Farida, and his two children, Huda and her younger brother, Adil. They live in a small house in the poor but bustling quarter of al-A'dhamiyya, located along the east bank of the Tigris river. Huda, a nine-year-old girl, is the central character in the novel. It is through her eyes, her voice, and her evolving consciousness that the reader learns about the lives of the people in the household, the atmosphere in the neighborhood, and the political events that shake the city of Baghdad. The narrative technique is innovative in that there is a constant switch between the first-person narrator, where the "I" stands for Huda, and the second-person narrator, where Huda seems to be talking to herself (as in the opening line of the novel, "The clouds are over your head, and the test is always waiting for you"). There are also passages where the third-person narrator is used. For readers, this technique creates the impression that they are witnessing events from different points of view.<sup>48</sup> In addition to the changing mode of narration, the time frame is constantly shifting between the past and the present.

Huda's father, Jamil al-Maarouf, is a police officer who works in a prison in Karbala and comes home once a fortnight. A bully with a violent temper, the father is full of repressed hatred and rage. His fearsome appearance—he wears police uniform and carries a pistol—provokes terror and awe among his family and neighbors. Brutal and mean-spirited, he beats up his children, who huddle together "like terrified puppies" in his presence (p. 25). His arrival destroys the peace in the house and fills it with tension. Vain and self-indulgent, he spends most of his salary on clothes and magazines, and has a weakness for arak. His tyrannical conduct, however, conceals a high level of anxiety and frustration: at work he has a miserable existence, having to deal with the incessant screams of his captain as well as of the prisoners all day long.

Jamil is cruel to his wife, Iqbal, who is afflicted with tuberculosis. A fatherless Syrian woman who migrated to Iraq with her mother and siblings, she was orphaned shortly after her marriage, so that her husband and his family became her whole world. Iqbal is depicted as a quiet, docile, and eager-to-please woman who is loved by all the members of the household, including her mother-in-law. Wafiqā cultivates

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<sup>48</sup> Publisher's note, in *Naphtalene*, p. ix.

a positive image of Iqbal in Huda's mind: "She was the sweetest of all, like a rose. She spoke little. She was gentle and calm and never harmed an ant" (p. 35). Selfless and submissive, Iqbal is largely confined to the house, where she is slowly wasting away, coughing and spitting blood. Shortly after Jamil takes a second wife and sends Iqbal back to Syria, supposedly to convalesce, she succumbs to her disease and dies.

Huda remembers her mother as "a mythological creature, stripped of all her roles" (p. 5). She paints a loving picture of her mother: "She was extraordinarily slender, fair skinned and tall. Her hair was the brown of an old walnut; her eyes were honey-colored but showed no light. The skin of her face was dry, her cheeks hollow, her teeth crooked" (p. 3). Despite her young age, Huda intuitively understands that her mother cannot bear any more children because of her poor health. Neither can she look after Huda and Adil, who are moved into the grandmother's room and placed in her care. Sorrowfully, Huda says of her mother: "We called her 'Mama' only when we were frightened or needed help, but after giving birth to us she lowered a dark curtain of secrecy around her narrow domain" (p. 5). The fear of infection results in the mother's increasing isolation from her children, who are not told the truth about her condition. In spite of the separation, Huda sympathizes with her mother, who, like herself, is abused and terrorized by the father. She is aware of her mother's servile position and marginal existence: "After pouring and serving the tea, she sat on the low wooden bench like a dejected sentry. She opened and closed, rinsed and dried, came and went. She finished everything slowly: cooking, eating, loving her husband" (p. 5). However, when this existence, marginal as it is, becomes threatened, the mother musters enough courage to rebel against her oppressive husband. After Jamil tells her that he has taken another wife and that she must leave his house and go back to Syria, she bursts into his room in his absence, opens his wardrobe, and throws all his precious clothes on the floor: "She turned about, flushed with anger. These were the clothes of the long nights of waiting... This was the bed where she had learned he was a man, that he was the ruler, the father and the chosen one. She trod and leapt and wailed" (p. 41). The mother's act of defiance is deeply imprinted in her daughter's memory. Her forced departure and subsequent death away from home come as a shock to Huda, who grieves deeply over her mother's loss and tragic fate.

Huda is depicted as a free-spirited girl with a sharp tongue and a feisty nature. According to a popular story narrated by her aunts, she

was impossible from the day she was born and was given *khishkhash*—a mild opiate—to quiet her down (p. 23). Willful, rebellious, and mischievous, she is regarded as a tomboy and a bit of a devil (p. 24, 51). By contrast, her brother Adil, who is one year younger than she, is gentle and docile. Huda admits that “he was order, melancholy, and introspection. You were anarchy, insolence, and violence” (p. 4). Jealous of her brother, whose good looks and congenial nature earn him everyone’s affection, Huda turns against him and subjects him to childish forms of abuse. Adil admires his sister and is deeply devoted to her. Instead of opposing her, he indulges her every whim. In her brother, Huda finds a loyal ally and a close companion who shares in her joys and sorrows. Central among the threads that unite brother and sister is a deadly fear of the father, and together they learn to survive his violent outbursts and punishments.

Huda’s relationship with her father is hopelessly antagonistic. Loathed by her father since birth because she was a fussy baby and a girl, Huda’s childhood is marked by battering. The father unleashes his wrath on her for the slightest offense, be it playing on the street with the neighborhood boys or going up to the rooftop at night. Huda is aware of her predicament: “We found the only way he relaxed completely was when someone was in front of him. It was always me. I provided an outlet for his talents, from his uniform to his lethal weapon, to his boots, which abolished all dreams” (p. 28). Although Huda fears her father, she continues to defy him and, in fact, derives a certain degree of satisfaction from provoking him. In one of the most shocking scenes, the father points his pistol to her head and threatens to kill her. Shaken by the experience but still defiant, Huda remarks: “At ten you confronted the first policeman in your life, your father” (p. 50). Years later, in a moment of weakness, the father admits to his second wife: “Huda is a boy. She is not afraid of me or anyone else” (p. 160).

In this family dynamics, characterized by the father’s tyranny and the mother’s powerlessness, Huda finds a safe haven in her grandmother. Grandmother Wafiqah is depicted as the most powerful figure in the household, “the center of the circle” (p. 29), to whom everyone looks for love and approval. Huda describes her with reverence and admiration: “She was strong without showing signs of it, mighty without raising her voice, beautiful without finery” (p. 29). A woman who knew many sorrows—her husband drowned in a boat accident and several of her children died young—the grandmother derives

her authority and fortitude from her faith: "Her only passion was for God. She explored herself with prayers that never ended... She freed herself from all her difficulties by referring them to the Omnipotent Deity" (p. 12). In the absence of her son, who works in Karbala, the grandmother functions as the head of the family, seeing to all their needs and providing them with her guidance and protection. The only privilege that Wafiqah allows herself is exemption from doing domestic chores, "as if she were created only for worship" (p. 1). Her calm demeanor, righteous nature, and deep piety earn her great respect not only in her household but also in the neighborhood.

The grandmother's children, Jamil and Farida, are fifteen years apart. She agrees to marry off Farida, a beautiful young woman in her early twenties, to her cousin Munir, a rich but ugly middle-aged man. Besides material security, Munir promises to enlarge the house of the Maarouf family and move in with them so that the grandmother will continue to live with her daughter, "keep her company and await her first birth" (p. 57). Wafiqah's dream turns into a nightmare when Munir, a corrupt character with a weakness for alcohol and women, abandons Farida immediately after the wedding ceremony, and the marriage is never consummated. The resulting scandal, humiliation, and gossip take a heavy toll on the grandmother, who feels responsible for her daughter's predicament. With both her future and reputation in ruin, Farida suffers a nervous breakdown. She "learnt to talk to herself for hours. She looked at herself in the mirror, took a knife and began to pass it by her neck" (p. 134). The mother-daughter relationship becomes strained, and for a while "these two women never spoke or went near one another" (p. 134).

As characteristic of the attitude to sons in traditional Arab culture, the grandmother values Jamil and her grandson Adil above other members of her family: "After your father, this [Adil] was her king" (p. 55). Her relationship with her son demonstrates the typical pattern of parental authority and filial obedience. Jamil, who tyrannizes over everyone else in the household, respects Wafiqah and accepts her authority: "When your father saw her, he changed; he calmed down. He loved and honored her, and weakened in her presence" (p. 28). As for Wafiqah, she never confronts her son in front of others, even when he brutally assaults his children. "It was her way of pacifying him" (p. 29). However, in private, she chastises him: "She loved justice and set great store by it. She rebuked my father and scolded him behind our backs, suddenly setting upon him, taking all her time, scattering

him and tearing him apart, exposing him anew to us” (p. 30). When Jamil takes another wife despite Wafiqā’s disapproval, she punishes him severely, first by cutting off communication with him, and secondly by refusing to let his new wife move in with her even after she bears him three sons.

Unlike the animosity that commonly prevails between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law in Arab families, Grandmother Wafiqā loves Iqbal, is kind to her, and speaks well of her. She tenderly tells her grandchildren: “You and Adil are the apple of my eye—you’re the children of that dear sweet woman who has never said an unkind word. Poor thing, Iqbal!” (p. 32). She defends Iqbal’s position as her son’s only lawful wife and remains loyal to her memory even after her death.

Given the grandmother’s strength of character, it is no wonder that Huda gravitates to her and forges a close bond with her. Huda admits that although she learned lying early and “lied as easily as washing myself” (p. 156), she never lied to her grandmother. She feels safe and secure with Wafiqā: “At her breast I mixed her good with my evil. I gave voice to all my sorrows and dreams, and never feared punishment from her” (p. 33). The grandmother perceives the sensitive soul hiding behind her granddaughter’s rough exterior. “No one knows my Huda as I do,” she declares (p. 33). In fact, it is the grandmother who named her granddaughter. “When you came,” she tells her, “I chose your name, Huda—guidance—because I said, perhaps God will guide her on the true path” (p. 134). Wafiqā and Huda share moments of great intimacy: “She hugged me, her arms tight around me. I kissed her and hugged her, burying my head beneath her ribs. I felt her belly, her soft breasts, and her long, narrow neck. I raised my face to her calm, sorrowful, inspired face, which never scolded when I was bad, but which was always responsive when I was sorry” (p. 32). In her grandmother, Huda finds a source of nurturance that compensates her for both maternal and paternal deprivation. She speaks of her with the utmost regard, gratitude, and affection: “She tamed us one after the other, without our shedding a single drop of blood. She shared her thoughts with everyone, trained us without threats, and took us to her bosom without menace. She prayed over us when we were ill, and fetched us from the end of the road if we ran away. She stood guard at the gates to our souls when we erred” (pp. 32–33). For Huda, then, the grandmother represents not only a surrogate mother figure but also a positive role model.

Among the many characters that populate Huda's world, her aunts Najiya and Bahija stand out. Frequent visitors to Wafiq's house, these aunts conduct a lesbian love affair freely and openly. As the Iraqi critic Farida Abu Haidar observes, their relationship "is frowned upon, but not totally censored in the day-to-day existence of sexually frustrated women whose contact with men, other than their husbands, fathers, and brothers, is non-existent."<sup>49</sup> Huda is witness not only to their overt sexual remarks, but also to their intimate body language and caresses. Their sexuality arouses her curiosity and introduces her to some of the secrets of the female world that she belongs to. The women's public bath (*hammam*) provides her with additional opportunities to explore the female world. "There I made my first discoveries" (p. 19), she declares. Overwhelmed by the sight of so many naked female bodies, she exclaims: "Laugh and look well: the hair on the limbs is delicate, fine, coarse, long, short, plucked out. Then all these limbs descended at once and removed their underclothes. You gaped at that continent of femininity" (p. 20). Huda is intrigued not only by what she sees but also by what she hears, for the public bath is a place where women gossip and exchange confidences: "The talk was of neighbors, children, and husbands. There were no great scandals on our street, nor any great abominations in our houses" (p. 21).

Huda's love for Mahmoud, a neighborhood boy with whom she spends much of her time, marks her sexual awakening and transition into adolescence. A bright student in middle school, Mahmoud helps Huda, who gets poor grades, to improve her math skills. "He was the bravest child in the neighborhood," Huda says. "I chose him for myself. This would be my first man. That is how free I was throughout all those years" (p. 24). When she tries to impress Mahmoud by saying, "I'm not a boy, but I can be like a boy," he replies, "But I want you to keep on being a girl" (p. 51). It is from Mahmoud that Huda learns that her mother has tuberculosis, a secret that was kept from her and her brother. Huda's love for Mahmoud is revealed when he falls ill with typhoid and she goes to visit him. As she tenderly recounts: "I took his hand and folded it, smelled it, and kissed it. These were the fingers of the first man in my life" (p. 59). A few years later, when Mahmoud goes to high school, he becomes involved in a secret communist organization. This activity transforms his personality and

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<sup>49</sup> Abu Haidar, in the afterword to *Naphtalene*, p. 205.

his behavior: "His face was harsh and his appearance was different, his luxuriant moustache was thinning, and a strange stillness had slowed his rapid gait. He had changed and become introverted; he was tense, no longer among us. When he stood near me, he used big words and the titles of thick books" (pp. 144–45). Mahmoud's political activity puts an end to his relationship with Huda. He drops out of sight, passes through the neighborhood only after dark, and greets no one. Huda runs into him once when he distributes leaflets in the street, but they hardly exchange any words. She then realizes that her love story with Mahmoud is over and that from now on he will live only in her memory. Nevertheless, she continues to think of him and fantasize about him. In her dreams, she spends precious moments with Mahmoud, who shares with her his vision of the future:

When we grow up, Huda, we won't beat our children, and we won't pull their hair, and we won't make them run to the shore in the afternoon. We'll go and swim with them. We'll ride the trains, and who knows? Maybe we'll ride in that aeroplane. Perhaps we won't see each other much. That's not important. I will see you when I grow up; I'll wait for your news from far away. Don't worry—I won't change (p. 158).

Change, however, is the driving force of the narrative. Nothing in the novel remains static. The passage of time brings with it dramatic developments that transform the characters, the neighborhood, and the country. In the span of about six years in which the narrative unfolds (p. 156), the father has three more sons by his new wife in Karbala and awaits the birth of another child. However, his aspiration to be promoted to the rank of a police captain so that he can be transferred back to Baghdad is not fulfilled. Moreover, his stubborn mother continues to shun his new wife and does not allow her to move in with her. Financially strained by maintaining two households and mentally drained by the harsh prison conditions, the father begins to drink heavily. His drunkenness, accompanied by verbal abuse and fighting, has negative effects on his health and his prospects for promotion. When Huda and Adil, on a pilgrimage with their grandmother to the holy places in Karbala, go to visit him at the prison, he breaks into tears in front of them. Huda is amazed to see her father so frail and vulnerable—a far cry from his image as "the Lord in his prime" (p. 28). The thought that runs through her head is, "If only Iqbal knew; if only Wafiqah knew; if only the whole neighborhood knew" (p. 126). The father hugs and kisses his children, and all three of them have a good cry. The meeting exposes his inner weakness and shows him in

a more sympathetic light. As Huda remarks: "He dared, he dared us, and got to know us; all that was before us was tears and sorrow and fright" (p. 126).

Thereafter, the father's mental health deteriorates rapidly. During his subsequent visits to his family in Baghdad, he appears like a shadow of himself: "My father came several times, looking weary, sallow, and old. His clothes were faded and his shirt wrinkled, his boots dirty, and his face pale, melancholy, and unshaven, as if he had emerged from a shroud. He did not shout or curse. He did not strike or torment us. *That* Jamil had been stolen for good, and we were even more terrified" (p. 152). In the end, the vicious cycle of drinking-failure-more drinking takes its toll on the father, and shortly before Huda's family moves from their old neighborhood he suffers a nervous breakdown that results in his dismissal from government service.

Farida, the father's sister, changes too. After her mental breakdown, her behavior remains erratic, with bouts of insanity. Having been abandoned by her husband for no apparent reason is a heavy blow not only to her femininity but also to her social standing. Her personal status has become ambivalent: she is neither a free woman nor a married one and may remain in that state of limbo for years. While waiting indefinitely for Munir's return, her beauty and youth fade away. She compulsively thinks of committing suicide or murder. Then, one year after his disappearance, Munir suddenly shows up at the Maarouf's house. When Farida sees him she explodes in anger and hastens to exact her revenge. She attacks him violently, venting out all her sorrows and frustrations: "She grabbed him by his shirt and brought him down to the floor as he kicked about... She pulled him to the middle of the house, snatched the pillows and threw them at him, stepped on him and pushed him, got on top of him and sat on him" (p. 141). Amazed by her aunt's actions, Huda realizes that Farida has overcome her fear of patriarchal power: "Let us forget fear and put it aside, but it is present and tyrannous. Only Farida beat it before her, and did not speak to it without mocking it. She approached her fear with natural muscles and found it worked in the end: to make Munir stagger, with the rest looking on" (p. 151). Although Jamil eventually succeeds in obtaining his sister's divorce from Munir through the courts, the traumatic experience leaves her scarred for life. "My aunt remained the virgin, lifting up the title and contemplating it day and night. She took off the black dress, washed her dusty skin, and proceeded to put on a seductive nightgown; madness returned to her face" (p. 151).

Even Grandmother Wafiqā, that symbol of tranquility and fortitude, changes. Her daughter's ordeal breaks her heart and exhausts her strength: "Grandmother had lost her former authority and her calm. She had lost weight and looked emaciated, purer than before, yet with a resigned face. She bore a heavy load on her shoulders" (p. 134). Wafiqā suffers from feelings of guilt, for she was the one who pushed her daughter to marry her cousin. The crisis makes her all the more steeped in religion: "She knelt and prayed, opened her arms, made incessant supplications, lamented all alone" (p. 134).

Adil, Huda's younger brother, also changes. From a little eight-year-old boy who was paralyzed with fear in his father's presence he turns into a seventh-grader, tall, with broad shoulders and thick locks that require a haircut every month. Adil falls in love with Khulud, a beautiful but arrogant girl from the upper social class: "He revolved around his only star, but never uttered her name" (p. 148). The agonies of his unrequited love are not lost on Huda, who sees the "legions of sorrows" (p. 137) in his eyes and sympathizes with him. Adil's love for Khulud, much like Huda's love for Mahmoud, serves as a catalyst in his process of self-development.

The most striking transformation, however, can be observed in Huda—the novel's protagonist. The major events in her childhood—her mother's illness and death, her father's second marriage and downfall, her Aunt Farida's marriage fiasco—have shattered her innocence and aged her soul. As Huda moves into early adolescence, she discovers fundamental changes in her life. For one thing, she is no longer subjected to physical punishment: "No one had hit me for long months. They said I had grown, and it was wrong to hit a girl who had come of age" (p. 124). For another, she has her menses. "Puberty: the unknown door had opened before me, and I saw drops of blood on wide, unbleached clothing" (p. 123). Huda recounts that what frightened her was not the sight of blood but what her grandmother and Aunt Widad have told her: "'When you become of age, you should fear men, all men. You can be a mother or a goddess'" (p. 124). Having reached the age of puberty induces Huda to exercise more self-restraint and caution in her actions. She acquires a new sense of responsibility, as reflected in her determination to become a better student at school. She also assumes more duties at home, from cleaning to tidying up to window washing. When her grandmother goes to the market and gives her the keys to all the rooms, Huda feels completely in charge: "It was the first time I was the lady of the house" (p. 136).

In order to attain maturity and develop a stable and harmonious sense of self, Huda must come to terms with her mother's death. Like Fatima, the heroine in Miral al-Tahawy's novel *The Tent*,<sup>50</sup> so Huda too decides to move into her mother's empty room, a step that signifies her identification and reconciliation with her dead mother. The grandmother is surprised to hear Huda say, "I want to sleep and study in my mother's room. I'm grown up now and I want to study by myself" (p. 84). For Huda, the act of occupying her mother's room becomes an empowering experience: "The first night I could not sleep. I was not afraid. No ghosts faltered on their way to me, nor was I afflicted by nostalgia. I was gaining my mother for myself, and gathering the power to challenge my father" (p. 85).

Indeed, Huda must also come to terms with her father. Her visit to the prison in Karbala opens her eyes to the miserable conditions in which he works and consequently softens his image as a bully. She observes further signs of transformation in him when he comes to see them in Baghdad: "His eyes were lifeless, as if exhausted by hatred and rage. He did not take Adil in his arms, or call out to either of us. He was not tender, he was dejected and quiet" (p. 152). When the government forces Huda's family to move out of the house in which they have lived for years as part of a plan to redevelop the area, Huda is overwhelmed by sadness. The pain of the impending separation from her beloved childhood home arouses in her a feeling of sympathy for her father: "I understood fatherhood, and instantly my father became precious. In our street, only my father was real. He never concocted stories or lied, never won or remembered" (p. 155). Although Huda can relate better to her father now that his behavior has changed, she cannot forget his fierce temper in the past: "My father became effusive with his compassion: he became tender and indulgent. But my imagination had not killed his old cruel self, and my dreams had not conjured up such an honorable gentleman" (p. 157). Ironically, her earlier fear of her father is now replaced by a fear for her father, especially as his health continues to deteriorate: "You had never known him to be so weak and in such a state. We feared for him more than before and our spirits were troubled" (p. 157).

And the country changes as well. The novel provides a glimpse of postcolonial Iraq, weaving historical events into the narrative without

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<sup>50</sup> See chapter 6, pp. 244–45.

engaging overtly in politics. There are references to anti-monarchist and anti-British demonstrations in Baghdad during the mid-1950s, the public sympathy for the last king, Faisal II, the people's adulation for the Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser, especially after the Suez Crisis of 1956, the popularity of the Egyptian *Voice of the Arabs* radio station, which promoted Arab nationalism, the opposition to the corrupt, pro-British government through leafleting, and the spread of communism. Most of the events depicted in the novel occur during the last years of the monarchy, which ended in 1958, when the king was assassinated in a military coup and Iraq was declared a republic.

Huda's formative years have passed in the quarter of al-A'dhamiyya. Her process of becoming is intimately connected not only with her family but also with her neighborhood—people, places, traditions. The narrative contains rich descriptions of the ancient Abu Hanifa mosque, the public bath, the traditional market place or bazaar, the Tigris river, religious festivals, a wedding celebration, and a funeral procession. There are also vivid depictions of the ordinary folk who populate the neighborhood: the butcher, the baker, the cheese seller, the carpenter, the midwife, the Jewish seamstress—all of whom know each other well and form part of Huda's world and personal history. The government's decision to demolish the neighborhood imparts a sense of finality to Huda's departure from the site of her childhood. Overwhelmed by nostalgia, she feels an urgent need to preserve the memories of the past, "the brightly colored beads of childhood scattered—stolen, gilded with light touches, longings, and delegations of tears, and the spongy mud we washed our feet with as we played sliding down slopes or streams" (p. 147). Hence the title *Mothballs* and its symbolic meaning. As Fadia Faqir remarks: "Metaphorical mothballs are sprinkled everywhere in the novel—real incidents, news items, fantasies, dreams, histories, folktales are thrown into a melting pot of reference as the author desperately, frantically attempts to preserve her memories. Mothballs are put in the wardrobe of memory to stop the moth attacking the soul."<sup>51</sup> Mamdouh's extraordinary act of preservation yields not only a fascinating literary work but also an important social document.

*Mothballs* is rich in autobiographical material. Farida Abu Haidar states that Mamdouh has often said in interviews that "what drove her

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<sup>51</sup> Faqir, in the introduction to *Mothballs*, p. v.

to write this novel was a sudden urge to immortalize the world of her childhood and the individuals who inhabited it.”<sup>52</sup> Abu Haidar identifies the character of Huda as Mamdouh’s “one-time alter ego.” She points out the similarities between the author and her heroine. Mamdouh grew up in the quarter of al-A’dhamiyya in Baghdad, where the novel is set. Her mother, like Huda’s, was Syrian and died of tuberculosis when Mamdouh’s was three years old. Mamdouh had a powerful grandmother who assumed the role of both parents in caring for her and her younger brother. However, Abu Haidar makes no mention of Mamdouh’s father.<sup>53</sup>

In an autobiographical essay entitled “Creatures of Arab Fear,” Mamdouh talks openly about her father. “My father was a handsome man, boisterous and good but also tormented by neurosis,” she says. “He was the first policeman—his profession—I had to face and I was determined to confuse him by being submissive at home and rebellious outside.”<sup>54</sup> Mamdouh admits that the single most important motivation in her life is fear. She constantly explores this dark emotion and attempts to control it through writing: “Fear shapes the space of my writing. It has resolved many things and is behind many decisions. No sooner is the cupboard of childhood opened than the aroma of the house—a mixture of fear and submission—wafts into my face and settles there.”<sup>55</sup> Mamdouh emphasizes that her fear is not limited to male excesses only: “Page after page of my diaries record the acts of women. They were even more tyrannical and moralistic than the men.”<sup>56</sup> Worse yet, her fear is not an isolated case: “My family’s behavior in public derived from the secret fear which lived in everyone, rotating in an ever widening circle, from the living room to the shared bedrooms, encompassing the school, the street, and even public baths.”<sup>57</sup> Indeed, fear resides everywhere in her society and is one of its characteristic features: “Thus our Arab fear appears to be a multi-headed monster feeding on the poison which stems from our conditioning to submit, to fragment and to keep it all to ourselves. It is our upbringing which, upon analysis, proves utterly dangerous,

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<sup>52</sup> Abu Haidar, in the afterword to *Naphtalene*, p. 197.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Alia Mamdouh, “Creatures of Arab Fear,” in Faqir, *In the House of Silence*, p. 66.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

even criminal.”<sup>58</sup> In Mamdouh’s view, fear not only motivates her to write but also “justifies a cycle of personal writing” that brings her ever closer to the self she longs to find.<sup>59</sup>

### *Hanan al-Shaykh’s Women of Sand and Myrrh*

A Lebanese novelist and short story writer, Hanan al-Shaykh was born in Beirut in 1945. She attended a traditional Muslim girls’ primary school but received her secondary education in a secular school. She studied at the American College for Girls in Cairo (1964–1966), then returned to Beirut and worked as a journalist. With the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War in 1975, she left Beirut and lived for several years in the Arabian Gulf before relocating to London, where she settled in 1982. One of the few Arab novelists with an international reputation, al-Shaykh’s work focuses on issues of female sexuality and autonomy. She is the author of two collections of short stories and six novels, most of which are available in English translation.

*Women of Sand and Myrrh*,<sup>60</sup> al-Shaykh’s fourth novel, offers a penetrating portrait of what life is like for women living in a conservative Arab society. Set in an unnamed Arab desert state, most likely Saudi Arabia, the novel features four women who are struggling to cope in a society which affords them many luxuries except freedom. The text is structured as a series of monologues by these women, each of whom narrates her own story. Besides unraveling the inner world of each heroine, this technique allows for the portrayal of the central characters from different points of view. In addition, the constant cross-reference between the narrators enables the reader to gain further insight into their personalities and motivations.

The four women are Suha, Tamr, Suzanne, and Nur. Tamr and Nur are both natives of this country. They come from different socio-economic backgrounds: Tamr belongs to a middle-class rural family, Nur to an upper-class urban family. Suha and Suzanne are both foreign nationals. Suha is a Lebanese Arab who, along with her husband, is

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Hanan al-Shaykh, *Misk al-ghazal* (Beirut: Dar al-adab, 1988); English translation: *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, trans. Catherine Cobham (London: Quartet Books, 1989). All quotations are from this translation.

fleeing her home in Beirut because of the civil war. Suzanne is an Anglo-American from Texas whose husband has been offered a lucrative job in this Arab desert state. The lives of these four women are loosely connected. Suha is the only character who is acquainted with the other three on a personal level. Her friendship with each of them develops in a different direction, with different consequences.

The first monologue is by Suha, a twenty-five year old wife and mother. A professional woman with a university degree in management, her lifestyle changes dramatically when she moves from Beirut to this Arab desert state with her husband, Basem, a banker who was forced to transfer his business abroad because of the Lebanese Civil War. In Beirut, a city known before the fighting as the “Switzerland of the Middle East,” Suha enjoyed many liberties: she could work outside her home, drive a car, go alone for a walk or to the shops or to the cinema, and dress the way she liked, without having to cover her face, arms, and legs. As she quickly discovers, these liberties are denied to women in this conservative Arab society. Women are absent from public life, their freedom of movement is severely restricted, and veiling and sexual segregation are strictly enforced by the ubiquitous morals police. As for entertainment, there are no movie theaters, playing cards for fun is forbidden (p. 13), Western music is regarded as “the work of the devil” (p. 35), and newspapers and magazines are heavily censored.

Trapped in an oppressive social environment, Suha feels like a prisoner. She is unable to occupy her time in a meaningful way. Even the desert, whose mysteries initially sparked her intellectual curiosity, disappoints her. “I felt disillusioned: this wasn’t the desert I’d seen from the aircraft, nor the one I’d read about or imagined to myself” (p. 9). She discovers the corrosive influence of petrodollars, materialism, and consumerism on this desert society. The adoption of the external trappings of modernity has destroyed the traditional way of life that “revolved around human beings without possessions or skills” (p. 280). Flooded by imported goods, from telephones to videos to liquor, this society lacks a defined or authentic character. “She was neither in the desert nor in the city” (p. 31). While the native inhabitants accept the technology of the West, which helps them to tap their petroleum and turn it into modern buildings, swimming pools, and air conditioners, they reject the values and way of life that it represents.

Suha is portrayed as an intelligent and passionate woman with an open mind and positive attitude. Despite the fact that as an Arab she

shares linguistic, religious, and ethnic ties with the local people, she experiences a severe culture shock. Her efforts to acclimatize herself to the new place and make the best of the situation fail. She finds no satisfaction in filling her time with superficial social visits, cooking classes, or needlework—the usual outlets available to the local women—and finally gives up all these activities and stays at home. Isolated, frustrated, and alienated, she feels that the walls surrounding her house, like all the other houses, close in on her: they shut her off from any external stimulus, deadening her senses and numbing her personality. Suha recognizes the debilitating effects that this pattern of living has on her: “Like every woman coming here I felt that this was time lost out of my life” (p. 9); “I was scared of the enormous disgust that I felt because I was leading such a sterile, unnatural existence” (p. 12). Afraid that she might lose her sanity, she pleads with her husband to shorten their stay and return to Beirut: “I’ll go mad. I could accept life in the fighting, but not this” (p. 24); “Don’t you have the feeling that life here isn’t normal?” (p. 33).

Suha’s husband is happily immersed in his work and unwilling to shorten their three-year stay. Despite their mutual love for each other, Suha’s inability to adapt to the desert culture creates tension in their marriage. Their young son, Umar, goes to school and does not require constant care to keep her fully occupied. Twice she finds a temporary job, first as a clerk in a supermarket and then as a teacher at a literacy center for women. But repeated raids by the morals police force her to quit both jobs. After that, she withdraws into herself and rarely leaves her house or receives visitors. This sets the stage for her relationship with Nur.

When Suha meets Nur at the swimming pool of a posh hotel, both women are extremely bored and malcontent. Nur is an emotionally impoverished woman with a shallow personality and a decadent lifestyle. The mother of a young daughter and the estranged wife of a prominent businessman, she has had multiple liaisons with both men and women. Nur is attracted to Suha because of her proud demeanor and apparent lack of interest in her. Nur has never met anyone who was immune to her beauty and wealth, and Suha’s indifference provokes her to try to subdue and dominate her. As she recounts: “Being turned down by her had a magic effect similar to the feeling I had when I was chasing my cat to pick her up and cuddle her: when I finally succeeded in catching hold of her I was always overwhelmed by a desire to give her a lesson she wouldn’t forget” (p. 241).

Suha is unaware of Nur's secret designs. Although she maintains a distance from other women on the pretext that her friends are in Beirut and she doesn't feel in tune with anyone else, Nur's personality and the atmosphere of her house intrigue her. As she admits: "Nur reawakened my curiosity, but only for a short time. Her house was like a peep-show where servants and nannies of different races milled around with children, gazelles, and Saluki dogs" (p. 39). Suha finds temporary relief from her boredom in looking at the expensive furniture, high fashion, exquisite garden, and endless stream of female friends and relations that fill Nur's house. But after seeing the show over and over, the novelty of the experience wears off and she no longer cares to visit her. However, she discovers that she cannot break off relations with Nur as she has done with other women because of Nur's persistence.

Reluctantly, Suha continues to see Nur and gradually becomes involved in her personal problems: her unhappy marriage, her lack of freedom to take trips abroad. Suha realizes that Nur, for all her high class and social standing, is extremely lonely. Out of sympathy, she allows Nur to use her house for her clandestine meetings with men—complete strangers whom she encounters accidentally. Suha is aware that these meetings are Nur's lifesavers; they are "like food and drink to her" (p. 46). But she also knows that given the strict sexual code of the conservative society in which they live, both she and Nur are playing with fire.

Before long, Suha's connection with Nur turns into a lesbian love affair. One day Nur summons her to her house, pretending to have an emotional crisis over her uncaring husband and her confined existence. As Suha tries to comfort her, Nur suddenly begins to kiss and caress her, then passionately makes love to her. Suha is shocked by the experience and confused by the erotic gratification she derived from it. Her first reaction is shame: "I felt a sudden nausea, then disgust, and wished I could disappear through the cracks in the ceiling" (p. 50). She tries to reassure herself that she is normal and to forget the incident, but is eventually swept by passion: "This was no longer an experiment; I'd tried a new fruit which I'd thought would be inedible and instead I'd found it intoxicatingly sweet; I couldn't just spit out the stone and go on my way" (p. 57). Unlike Nur, she is tormented by feelings of guilt toward her husband and her son. Despite her inner conflict, the sexual fulfillment she finds in this illicit relationship compels her to continue to see Nur: "I knew that my need to meet her, no longer to exchange conversation or to complain to each other or have fun, was aroused by

the thought of one specific aspect, and our muscular spasms increased in intensity whenever circumstances threatened to intervene or impede our activity: a visitor, Nur's mother, Nur's daughter" (p. 66). The affair with Nur relieves Suha of her boredom and depression: she no longer feels how slowly the time creeps by in the desert, or how bleak and barren her surroundings are.

The turning point in Suha's relationship with Nur comes when she attends a closed female concert during which an old woman from the audience performs a lewd dance with the songstress. The sight of the lust-crazed woman dancing with brazen movements to the cheers and laughter of the crowd embarrasses Suha and jolts her back into reality. Suddenly confronted with the image of her own distorted self, she is forced to come to terms with her identity, sexuality, behavior, and priorities. She realizes that she must define who she is and what she really wants. Suha decides to terminate her relationship with Nur.

Nur resists Suha's attempts to end the affair. She continues to pursue her and even sends her nanny, Mother Kaukab, to bribe her or intimidate her into resuming their relationship. Nur's manipulations, however, only strengthen Suha's determination not to give in. Acutely aware that she has been merely a plaything for Nur, Suha is now anxious to expel her from her life, whatever it takes. "Nur and her mother are vampires," she thinks, "and I'm their prey. I've got to escape fast" (p. 74). The only escape route that is available to her is going back to Beirut. She resolves to take this step: "That's it. I'm leaving this country, whatever happens. I'm no better off than the people still living in Lebanon" (p. 77). She privately rehearses what to tell her husband: "I'm an Arab. I'm supposed to feel some connection with the culture here, but I feel none at all...I want to live a normal life. I want to walk about, not to go in the car all the time, and I want to dress how I like" (pp. 77-78). Basem tries to dissuade Suha but fails, then he plays his last card: "I'm sure you'll change your mind after one week there. Life with your mother isn't easy; you'll probably quarrel with each other the day after you arrive. And I'm not prepared to come back with you to sort out the house or buy a flat at the moment. And renting's impossible..." (p. 80). Unswayed by his words, Suha expresses her willingness to put up with her mother.

Suha's ties with her mother are fraught with tension. While she admits that people love to visit her mother's house and find its atmosphere relaxing, she criticizes her mother for being self-absorbed and craving constant attention:

My mother was a talker; she wanted to be the focal point of any gathering and without meaning to, she was always waiting for approval: of the food, the furniture, the pistachio nuts, or of her hairstyle, her lipstick, her outfit, her high heels, the way she'd preserved her youth and had so few wrinkles in spite of her fifty years; then of her liveliness, her original conversation, and the way she kept up with politics and world affairs (p. 80).

Suha persists in her plan to leave this desert state and return with her son to Beirut. Although her experience with Nur is deeply shocking to her and she cannot easily forget it, she still considers herself lucky because she isn't lonely and doesn't suffer from emotional impoverishment and can travel by herself wherever she pleases for as long as she wishes (p. 76). On the way to the airport, she says to her husband: "Do you know what annoyed me the most here?... The walls, constricting everybody" (p. 278). She feels immensely relieved to escape the claustrophobic atmosphere of this society. Looking down from the airplane at the desert for the last time, it appears to her as mysterious as she has first imagined it: "Sand and palm trees, a way of life that revolved around human beings without possessions or skills..." (p. 280).

The third character in the novel, Suzanne, is in many ways the polar opposite of Suha. Although Suha is a Middle Easterner, she feels no affinity to this Arab society and cannot adjust to it. Moreover, she experiences it as oppressive and flees from it. In contrast, Suzanne is a Westerner who thrives in this society and vows not to leave it. Suha's stay there erodes her self-image and self-esteem, whereas Suzanne's stay enhances her self-image and self-esteem. For both women, the new social setting provides an opportunity to explore their sexuality and affirm their autonomous selfhood.

Suzanne is an unhappily married, middle-aged woman. She has an eight-year-old son who lives with her and three older daughters, with whom she has little contact, in a boarding school in Switzerland. Her husband of fifteen years has no interest in her, sexual or otherwise. Starved for attention and affection, she discovers that her blond hair, blue eyes, and plump body are appealing to Arab men, who admire her as if she were the "Marilyn Monroe of the desert" (p. 194). As a foreign woman who enjoys freedom of movement, she is readily available to engage in sexual activity. In fact, Suzanne undergoes a sexual revolution. Whereas in Texas there was nothing in her life but sentimental soap operas (p. 209), now she lives like a character from *The Thousand and One Nights*. Suzanne's sexual adventures boost her ego

and affirm her femininity. Indeed, sex becomes a liberating force for her, eventually leading her to terminate her dysfunctional marriage and embark on a new, though uncertain, beginning.

The friendship between Suha and Suzanne develops following a chance encounter in a store. Suzanne's Arab lover, Maaz, a married businessman with a weakness for alcohol, has left her, and she asks Suha to help her win him back. Suha writes Maaz letters in Arabic on Suzanne's behalf, advises her what to do, and also takes her to Sita, a Bedouin woman skilled in magic and herbal medicine, to get a secret love potion to put in his drink. Suha's involvement, as usual, is altruistic, though not free of personal risk. Her efforts are not appreciated by Suzanne, whose remarks reveal racial bias and lack of respect: "Irritably, I thought to myself that in spite of her clothes and her excellent English, she was like Sita and the rest of them whom I saw walking around the streets like sacks of coal" (p. 162). Despite all her attempts, Suzanne fails to get back together with her lover. The last time she visits him in his house, she is shocked to discover that his newly born baby is afflicted with syphilis. Although this brings home to her the costly price of sexual liberation, it does not weaken her resolve to stay in this country, come what may.

Tamr, an uneducated woman from a traditional background, is in many ways the most oppressed yet resilient of the four female characters. Twice divorced, she was first married off when she was twelve. As a young divorcée, she is under the guardianship of her half-brother, in whose household she lives with her teenage son and deranged mother. Despite the many constraints on her freedom, she is attached to her native country and cannot contemplate leaving it. As she tells Suha: "A person away from his country and his nearest and dearest isn't worth a stick of incense" (p. 96). A strong-willed woman with a coherent sense of self and a positive attitude to life, she is driven by a desire to improve her situation. Her ambition is to open a hairdressing and dressmaking salon so that she can earn her own living and attain a measure of independence. The first obstacle that she must overcome is her lack of schooling. However, to enroll in a literacy center she must first obtain her half-brother's permission, which he grants her only after she goes on a long hunger strike. Tamr attends the Gulf Institute for Women and Girls, where Suha works briefly as a teacher, and the two of them become friends.

Seen through Tamr's eyes, Suha appears as an attractive and fashionable woman in tight-waisted, low-cut dresses and cascading black

hair. Tamr is impressed by her level of sophistication and self-assured demeanor as much as she is touched by her kindness and generosity. Suha helps her set up her business by accompanying her to important meetings and by letting her use her car and driver. She also opens up her mind to new things and ideas by inviting her to her home, where Tamr gets a glimpse of her modern lifestyle. Tamr is the only person among Suha's friends who appreciates her help, particularly her efforts to introduce her to a new world. "I don't know what I would have done without you," she tells Suha, referring in her heart to "another way of life in the desert which I'd known nothing of, starting with color and furnishings and ending up with civilization... It was all new and my mind had picked it up and recorded it" (p. 97). In Suha, her teacher and role model, Tamr finds another surrogate mother figure. In Tamr, her model student and spiritual daughter, Suha finds a way to sublimate her energies and redeem her dignity and integrity, which were compromised by Nur.

Tamr's mother, a rootless Turkish woman who became the third wife of an Arab merchant, only to be divorced by him a few years later, is an illiterate, superstitious, and demented character. With her striking foreign features—red hair, green eyes, fair skin, and freckled face—she provokes fear and astonishment. The mother has a habit of telling bizarre stories that are embarrassing to Tamr, especially when she recounts that she was four years pregnant with her and that she was previously married to a sultan. Tamr remembers her childhood as a bleak period passed in poverty and isolation. She lacked not only a father figure but also proper maternal care, as her mother had recurrent fits of rage and incoherence. Tamr's gloomy circumstances improved substantially after moving in with her paternal aunt Nasab, who gave her helpless mother shelter. As she recalls: "Life was different in my aunt's home... For my aunt had an abundance of love, a broad smile, and a laugh which everyone in the house could hear" (p. 115). The aunt provided Tamr with a healthy, happy, and stable home environment. She also introduced her to the outside world: she took her to the market, to ride in a car, to see the desert, and to sleep in a tent. Moreover, the aunt's children offered Tamr peer company, sharing their school experiences with her and stimulating her development. Tamr formed a deep attachment to her aunt, who became a surrogate mother to her. Throughout the years, the aunt remained Tamr's staunch ally, defending her against her conservative half-brother, Rashid, and interceding with him on her behalf. The strong

bond between them was manifested when the aunt had to travel to London to receive medical treatment for her leg. Tamr insisted on accompanying her, and at the hospital she stayed by her side and never left her (pp. 101–2).

A dutiful daughter, Tamr treats her mother with respect, kindness, and patience, but she is tense and anxious when they have company. As she admits, “I was afraid of the remarks my mother would make and the stories she’d tell” (p. 89). Although Tamr’s aunt is also illiterate and superstitious and has absurd tales of her own to tell—for example, that her daughter Awatef was born with her “insides hanging out” (p. 99)—she elicits a different reaction from Tamr: “My aunt Nasab captured my attention more than my mother; her powerful voice, which had a huskiness about it, her gold teeth, her deep coloring, her gold heavy-looking neck chain, the henna reddening and blackening her hands and feet, everything about her was exaggerated” (p. 99). The intimate ties between Tamr and Aunt Nasab do not escape the mother’s notice, and she feels jealous. To placate her, Tamr explains her alliance with her aunt as a means of protection against her tyrannical half-brother. She constantly fears that her mother might lapse into one of her fits: “I knew she wouldn’t stop crying for days and nights as usual, and I was scared that she’d revert to her raving and chattering, losing her mind as she always did when she became very angry” (p. 109). As much as Tamr sympathizes with her mother, when she contemplates the peculiar colors of her hair, eyes, and skin, she cannot help thinking how weird she looks. Despite the difficulties she faces in dealing with her unbalanced mother, she displays a strong sense of filial obligation to her.

Tamr’s ambitious plan bears fruit. Through her resourcefulness and perseverance, she succeeds in overcoming many obstacles and finally opens a workshop for dressmaking and hairstyling which quickly turns into a thriving business. Her entrepreneurial success instantly enhances her status and self-image: “I got up and walked proudly around, at ease with every step I took now among the women who sat waiting to be called, as if they were in a government clinic. I’d felt that I had to open up a business like this to establish my independence, and I’d become well-known among families here and in other areas” (p. 130). As a result of her success, Tamr becomes more outspoken and self-assertive. When her aunt brings up the topic of marriage and gives her the names of three eligible men so that she can speak to them on the phone and choose one of them, Tamr refuses. “I insisted that

I should meet them: I would only marry a man whom I'd seen and talked to" (p. 152).

Tamr is arguably the only woman in the novel who evolves from victimization to self-affirmation. Her quest for autonomous selfhood contrasts sharply with that of Nur. Tamr does not have the financial resources that Nur has and must work hard to achieve her goals. Both Tamr and Nur rebel against the patriarchal order that controls their actions and destinies. However, Tamr's rebellion is positive: it allows her to channel her energies constructively, whereas Nur's rebellion is negative and self-destructive. Tamr operates within the legitimate avenues that are available to her in this conservative society; Nur seeks illicit outlets and activities. Considering these fundamental differences, it is a foregone conclusion that Nur will fail.

Nur's monologue sheds light on her upbringing, personality, and behavior. Born into a social class distinguished by wealth and privilege, she was spoiled to excess by both of her parents, who lavished on her expensive gifts of all kinds: clothes, jewelry, furniture, and servants. At the age of thirteen, they built her a separate mansion into which she moved with a distant relation, Mother Kaukab, who served as her nanny and companion. However, unlike the beloved nanny in Leila Ahmed's personal account, *A Border Passage*, or in Somaya Ramadan's novel, *Leaves of Narcissus*, Mother Kaukab failed to provide Nur with proper care. She only pampered her and blindly obeyed her. While Nur enjoyed a life of opulence, she lacked what every child needs most: parental guidance and nurturance. Her childhood recollections reveal a profound sense of loneliness and abandonment:

My mother was one of the first women to go abroad and discover life beyond the desert, and she would return bringing back with her everything which these other countries produced. I got used to her not being at home, or rather to not seeing her there, for if she wasn't abroad or visiting one of her friends, she would be asleep or talking on the telephone. From when I was small, I'd been aware of her criticizing my father for staying out late with his friends, and sometimes talking about him in a depressed sort of way and crying in front of Mother Kaukab (p. 245).

Nur grows up without parental supervision, without a proper role model, without a coherent set of values. Alone in her big mansion, she does not even attend school regularly because she stays up late at night watching videos and sleeps through the morning. The private Lebanese tutor who is hired to help her catch up with her studies soon begins to criticize the shortcomings of her upbringing and the

anarchy of her life. "She advised me to go back and live with my family and told me I didn't need a personal driver or a cook or Mother Kaukab, but my mother and father and brothers and sisters" (p. 248). In response to Nur's request, her parents send her to a private girls' school in Cairo, where she discovers that the freedom she thought she would gain by moving into a house by herself was nothing compared to what Cairo had to offer: "Just walking down the street on my own two feet was freedom, so walking without an abaya was out of this world" (p. 248). After her return from Cairo, Nur begins to think about marriage. Her reasons are purely utilitarian: "I wanted to have a husband and a wedding and then I would become my own mistress" (p. 249); "I had thought of marriage as a way of being free and gaining access to others" (p. 253); "More and more I felt that marriage meant freedom, and especially material freedom" (p. 263).

Nur's first marriage, at the age of seventeen, is short-lived. Her husband turns out to be bisexual, and he leaves her for his male lover. Nur's second husband, Saleh, a progressive Arab and the only sympathetic male character in the novel, quickly discovers that they are hopelessly incompatible: Nur must have people around her every minute of the day, or else she feels lonely, but Saleh despises her visitors and views them as spongers; he prefers to have quiet evenings with his wife. When Nur finds out that she is pregnant, she wants an abortion. Although she eventually keeps the baby, she does not feel fulfilled as a woman by having it. She shows lack of concern for her infant daughter and leaves her entirely in the care of nannies and maids. She then devotes all her time to late-night parties, sexual liaisons with both men and women, and trips abroad. For a person blessed with many fortunes, she behaves in an odd, self-destructive way. But why?

As depicted in the novel, Nur is the product of a dysfunctional family life. While her parents indulge her every wish and whim, they are unavailable to her emotionally and show no concern for her psychological well-being. Growing up without close ties to any family member and without basic guidance, Nur fails to develop a clear sense of identity or the capacity for intimacy with significant others. Her neurotic personality is reflected in her inability to make mature commitments to adult roles and responsibilities. In fact, the interactional patterns of separateness and connectedness that she establishes with her husband and daughter are similar to those that she has internalized growing up in her own family. As she admits, seeing her daughter sit alone in her room watching repeatedly Michael Jackson's "Thriller"

video brings back childhood memories: “She reminded me of myself when I was little and used to sit alone with my Somali nanny watching Arabic and foreign films one after another” (p. 243). As a daughter, Nur suffered from maternal neglect. As a mother, she carries on this legacy by neglecting her own daughter, thus perpetuating the cycle of maternal deprivation.

Nur’s promiscuity and confused sexuality reflect the maladaptive aspect of her personality. She lacks a clear sense of personal identity; for example, her beauty is Oriental, but her clothes and everything around her is Western (p. 249). She also lacks the capacity to form meaningful relationships with significant others. In using sex as the main outlet for her feelings, she appears to be free and liberated, but in fact she degrades herself and loses her humanity. No wonder that she suffers from loneliness, depression, and emotional outbursts, all of which betray her poor functioning and failure to manage her life. Nur’s promiscuity can also be seen as a rebellion against the sexual repression that exists in her society. As Suha observes during her stay in this country: “The severity with which [sex] was forbidden reminded people of it at every moment, and it wormed its way into their minds and bodies” (p. 54). She further notes that despite the risk of penalties, both men and women constantly violate the rigid sexual code: “I thought to myself how human beings continually manage to overcome their circumstances, thinking up the strangest ways to give substance to their desires” (pp. 46–47). Lastly, Nur’s love affairs, like her trips abroad, her late-night parties, and her material possessions, are forms of escape from her oppressive reality. Suha notices that Nur’s sexual liaisons seem to relieve her tension: “It was plain that these clandestine meetings were dispelling all the grief and confusion that she’d been suffering from, leaving her calm and in control for the rest of the day” (p. 46). While Nur’s lesbian love affairs are most likely related to her confused sense of identity, it is also possible that she consorts with women because she does not have easy access to men in this segregated society and because consorting with women carries a smaller risk of discovery and a lesser penalty.

Nur’s monologue ends on a bleak note. As she tries on the new punk-style clothes that her mother has brought her from her recent trip abroad, she examines her face in the mirror:

Not a single spot or line marred its purity, even though my nights merged into my days and I was assailed by heat and cold and lack of

sleep; though pills to put me to sleep and pills to wake me up fought each other down my throat, and my body was on display to both sexes like a shirt on the washing line, in frantic motion or quiet and still, depending on which way the wind blew (p. 274).

Nur's bids for autonomy—first, by living alone in a house of her own from the age of thirteen, then by twice getting married, and lastly by frequent trips abroad—all end in failure. Stuck in an estranged marriage and without access to her passport—her gateway to freedom—she feels like a bird in a golden cage, trapped, isolated, and forlorn.

Hanan al-Shaykh's *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, much like her previous novel, *The Story of Zahra*, is groundbreaking in its treatment of female sexuality—a taboo topic in Arab societies.<sup>61</sup> The four female characters of *Women of Sand and Myrrh* represent different perspectives on women's lives and varying degrees of entrapment within the patriarchal system.<sup>62</sup> Each of them chooses a different solution for her problems. Suha finds freedom by escaping this desert society, while Tamr finds some freedom by remaining in it. Nur and Suzanne seek their self-fulfillment in sexual liberation. The solutions these women adopt depend largely on their individual personalities and the avenues available to them.

### Conclusion

Mamdouh's *Mothballs* and al-Shaykh's *Women of Sand and Myrrh* depict various sets of surrogate mother-daughter relationships that women forge in order to satisfy their needs for intimacy and nurturance. Both novels show the paramount importance of the family form for developing such relationships. In the extended family, both mother and daughter have more opportunities for cultivating intimate ties with other family members than in the nuclear family. Notably, cross-generational alliances (e.g., granddaughter-grandmother) or close kin relationships

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<sup>61</sup> Despite censorship and the risk of retribution, the topic of lesbianism has been explored by several Arab women writers, among them Nura Amin, in her short story "My Mother's Friend" (in Cohen-Mor, *Arab Women Writers*, pp. 81–82); Alifa Rifaat, in her short story "My World of the Unknown" (in *Distant View of a Minaret*, pp. 61–76); and Nawal El Saadawi, in her novel *The Innocence of the Devil* (trans. Sherif Hetata (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998)).

<sup>62</sup> Charles R. Larson, "The Fiction of Hanan al-Shaykh, Reluctant Feminist," *World Literature Today* 65 (1991): 15.

(e.g., daughter-aunt) can develop and flourish. By contrast, in the nuclear family the daughter's alternative source of love and support is limited to her siblings and that of the mother to her children.

The family composition, specifically the presence or absence of a father figure, does not necessarily promote or inhibit good relationships between mothers and daughters. In Samar Attar's *Lina: A Portrait of a Damascene Girl*, the father's death does not bring Lina closer to her mother; instead, she gravitates toward her sister. In al-Shaykh's *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, the absence of a father figure propels Tamr to forge intimate ties with her paternal aunt (especially as her own mother is unstable). In Mamdouh's *Mothballs*, the oppressive father drives Huda to form a close bond with her powerful grandmother (especially as her own mother is weak and ailing). By contrast, the presence of a son in the family frequently strains the mother-daughter relationship because of the mother's preferential treatment of the son. In Mamdouh's *Mothballs*, even the righteous grandmother favors her son above her daughter and regards him as "her king" (p. 55), until he disobeys her and marries without her approval. Intriguingly, the absence of a son in the family may have a negative, rather than positive, influence on the mother-daughter relationship. In Miral al-Tahawy's *The Tent*, for example, the mother's failure to bear her husband a son precipitates her mental collapse, a situation which removes her completely from her daughters' lives.

Al-Shaykh's novel suggests that class is not a determining factor in the dynamics that develop between mothers and daughters. All the heroines, regardless of their socioeconomic backgrounds, complain about their mothers and have issues with them. Moreover, class is not necessarily an obstacle for female self-development. Some women can rise above the limitations of their economic and social circumstances, as demonstrated by Tamr, whereas others who come from a privileged background may fail to develop their potential, as exemplified by Nur. In this case, character seems to be the critical factor.<sup>63</sup>

Further, al-Shaykh's novel suggests that ethnicity (or nationality) has no influence on the quality of the mother-daughter relationship. Suzanne, an Anglo-American, has little contact with her daughters, who are in a boarding school in Switzerland; Suha, a Lebanese Arab,

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<sup>63</sup> For a discussion of character as fate in Arab culture and literature, see Cohen-Mor, *A Matter of Fate*, pp. 79–104.

has tensions with her mother; and Nur, a native of this unnamed Arab desert state, is completely alienated from her mother. Ethnicity (or nationality), however, does have a dramatic influence on female self-development. Suzanne flourishes in this conservative Arab society and is therefore determined to prolong her stay there. But Suha feels oppressed in this society and is desperate to shorten her stay and return to Beirut.<sup>64</sup> In this connection, it is important to note that although the patriarchal system invariably oppresses women and deprives them of their rights, it nonetheless exhibits variations within and across Arab societies. Suha is considered lucky because she is Lebanese and enjoys certain forms of freedom that the women in the unnamed Arab desert state do not have. These forms of freedom also exist for Egyptian women, as Nur is pleasantly surprised to discover when she attends a boarding school in Cairo.

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<sup>64</sup> Al-Shaykh explores this theme—characters who find themselves at the intersection of East and West—at greater length in her collection of short stories, *I Sweep the Sun off Rooftops* (*Aknusu al-shams 'an al-sutuh*, Beirut, 1994), trans. Catherine Cobham (New York: Anchor Books, 1998).

CHAPTER SIX

NARRATIVES OF ALIENATION AND DESCENT  
INTO MADNESS

Then he turned to me and asked me my age.  
“The age of madness,” I replied.

Hanan al-Shaykh<sup>1</sup>

*Women, Madness, and Literature*

Madness has long been the focus of feminist inquiry. The striking statistical evidence that more women than men suffer from madness, often regardless of nationality, marital status, age, class, or race, and the pervasive cultural representation of madness as a “female malady,” have stimulated a great deal of feminist scholarship.<sup>2</sup> Many feminists have expressed dissatisfaction with the principles of psychology and psychiatry, which they fault for representing exclusively male-defined values and norms. As Barbara Hill Rigney puts it: “The feminist feud with Freud is more basic than a disagreement over the issues of female sexuality or therapeutic technique. The real quarrel is one of fundamental ideology: Freud’s deterministic philosophy, what Weisstein terms ‘the fundamentalist myth of sex organ causality,’ is perceived...as invalidating social and cultural explanations for psychosis.”<sup>3</sup> Most feminist scholars attribute women’s high rate of mental illness to their social conditions, especially their devalued and narrowly defined roles as daughters, wives, and mothers, and to their mistreatment by a male-dominated and possibly misogynist medical practice. In her classic work, *Women and Madness*, the psychologist Phyllis Chesler argues that the key to understanding madness in women lies in patriarchal oppression: “What we consider ‘madness,’ whether it appears in

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<sup>1</sup> Hanan al-Shaykh, “A Season of Madness,” in *I Sweep the Sun off Rooftops*, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830–1980* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Hill Rigney, *Madness and Sexual Politics in the Feminist Novel* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), p. 6.

women or in men, is either the acting out of the devalued female role or the total or partial rejection of one's sex-role stereotype."<sup>4</sup> Emphasizing that unlike men, women are categorically denied the experience of cultural supremacy, humanity, and renewal based on their sexual identity, she theorizes that some women are driven mad by this situation. In her view, "such madness is essentially an intense experience of female biological, sexual, and cultural castration, and a doomed search for potency."<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the literary critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in their insightful study *The Madwoman in the Attic*, conclude that "patriarchal socialization literally makes women sick, both physically and mentally."<sup>6</sup> They show that the fictional character of the madwoman who appears repeatedly in the poetry and fiction of women writers of the nineteenth century is the author's double, an image of her own anxiety and anger at the institutions and conventions of patriarchal culture. In creating a dark double for herself, the female author "enacts her own raging desire to escape male houses and male texts,"<sup>7</sup> while at the same time expressing her despair and protest.

Other feminist scholars take the position that the association of women with madness goes beyond economic, social, and political structures to the very foundations of logos, reasoning, and articulation. They point out that within the dualistic systems of language and representation operating in Western culture, women are typically situated on the side of irrationality, silence, nature, and body, while men are situated on the side of reason, discourse, culture, and mind.<sup>8</sup> Luce Irigaray, for example, suggests that it is the repression of women's sexuality, identity, and language in patriarchal cultures which gives rise to women's madness.<sup>9</sup> Elaine Showalter, in her historical account of psychiatry and madness in England, provocatively entitled *The*

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<sup>4</sup> Chesler, *Women and Madness*, p. 93.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>6</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 53.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Shoshana Felman, "Women and Madness: The Critical Phal-lacy," in Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, eds., *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, rev. ed. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1997), pp. 7–20.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of Luce Irigaray's theory of women and madness, see Denise Russell, *Women, Madness and Medicine* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 1995), pp. 117–26.

*Female Malady*, points out that at the end of the eighteenth century the dialectic of reason and unreason took on specifically sexual meanings and that the symbolic gender of the insane person shifted from male to female. Her examination of the period between 1830 and 1980 reveals how cultural ideas about the “proper behavior” of women have influenced both the definition and the treatment of madness as a female malady.<sup>10</sup>

Some feminist research into madness has focused on the arena of motherhood, exploring topics such as the option and experience of motherhood as a socially constructed institution, the psychodynamics of mothering and gender, and the centrality of the mother-daughter relationship. Nancy Chodorow and Adrienne Rich have highlighted the pivotal role that mothers play in their daughters’ psychic lives, especially the influence of maternal care on the emerging self, personality structure, gender roles, and heterosexual relations. These scholars have argued that the institution of motherhood as defined by patriarchy is detrimental to the mental health of both mother and daughter. In her landmark book, *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich writes: “Many daughters live in rage at their mothers for having accepted, too readily and passively, ‘whatever comes.’ A mother’s victimization does not merely humiliate her, it mutilates the daughter who watches her for clues as to what it means to be a woman. Like the traditional foot-bound Chinese woman, she passes on her own affliction. The mother’s self-hatred and low expectations are the binding-rags for the psyche of the daughter.”<sup>11</sup> Nancy Chodorow, in *The Reproduction of Mothering*, asserts that by depicting motherhood as the most valuable activity for a woman, men are able to leave most parenting to women. This lets mothers dominate their children’s emotional lives and overinvest in or manipulate the relationship. Chodorow’s conclusion is unequivocal: “Exclusive single parenting is bad for mother and child alike.”<sup>12</sup> Children are better off in situations where love and affection are freely available and not a scarce resource controlled by a single person.<sup>13</sup> Phyllis Chesler emphasizes the dire consequences of mother-love deprivation for the mental health of female children in particular, given the restrictions imposed on them in patriarchal culture. She believes that “most women are

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<sup>10</sup> Showalter, *The Female Malady*, pts. 1–3.

<sup>11</sup> Rich, *Of Woman Born*, p. 243.

<sup>12</sup> Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, p. 217.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

glassed into infancy, and perhaps into some form of madness, by an unmet need for maternal nurturance.”<sup>14</sup>

Not all feminists support the view that patriarchal society is the key to understanding madness in women. Marilyn Yalom, for instance, states that “most of our sociological theories of psychosis simply do not fit current psychiatric evidence, which argues strongly in favor of some biological basis for many forms of mental disease.”<sup>15</sup> She points out that madness, which she considers “an imprecise, nonmedical term for a variety of abnormal mental states characterized by major impairment of personality functions, loss of reality testing, and marked disorders of mood,” derives from sources that are complexly bio-psycho-social but fundamentally similar for both women and men, although the triggering agencies, such as war or childbirth, are often different for the two sexes.<sup>16</sup> She identifies maternity and mortality as the boundary experiences or catalysts for women’s mental breakdown. Her study illustrates the ways in which maternity and motherhood represent common forms of anxiety for all women, reactivating the fear of death that has been discovered and repressed in childhood, and sometimes precipitating mental breakdown. Like many feminist critics, Yalom draws on the novels and life histories of prominent women writers to explore madness both as a pan-human and as a gender-specific experience, and to look for insights into the female condition. Her analysis demonstrates how gifted women “write their way out” of madness, that is, deal with the stresses inherent in the dialectic between art and motherhood, creation and procreation, through the written word, for example by writing autobiographical narratives.<sup>17</sup>

The increasing number of publications by Western women—be they philosophers, literary critics, or social scientists—on the phenomenon and experience of the alienated female consciousness is especially significant considering the paucity of attention paid to this topic in the past. Traditionally, works on madness, whether historical, cultural, medical, psychological, or literary, were predominantly male-authored and male-centered. They took little account of sexual difference and tended to leave out, even silence, women’s voices. A prime example is

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<sup>14</sup> Chesler, *Women and Madness*, p. 58.

<sup>15</sup> Marilyn Yalom, *Maternity, Mortality, and the Literature of Madness* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1985), p. 7.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 108–12.

Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*, which, despite its incisive examination of the history of insanity in the West, lacks gender analysis. As Elaine Showalter points out: "While he brilliantly exposed the repressive ideologies that lay behind the reform of the asylum, Foucault did not explore the possibility that the irrationality and difference the asylum silenced and confined is also the feminine."<sup>18</sup> Twentieth-century women writers have broken the male monopoly on the subject of madness. Currently, they produce works that rival those written by men both quantitatively and qualitatively.<sup>19</sup>

In Arab culture, the psychic experience revealed in madness, as well as the various manifestations of madness, have preoccupied scholars, writers, and artists at all times. The keen interest in madness in Arab culture is most strikingly evident in the Arabic language. Arabic offers a wide variety of words for madness, each with a different shade of meaning. Karim Hussam-el-Din attributes the rich terminology of madness in Arabic partly to the many dialects spoken among the tribes of ancient Arabia, whose diverse words for madness were collected by the early lexicographers. More importantly, he believes that in Arabo-Islamic culture the ideal of the "perfect human being" (*al-insan al-kamil*) characterized by wisdom was so powerful that any deviations from it were singled out and given names.<sup>20</sup> Analyzing the salient features of the Arabic words for madness, he shows that they all have a close association with obscurity, confusion, excess, contradiction, and inconsistency. For example, the most common Arabic term for madness, *junun*, is related to genie (*jinn*) and the foetus (*janin*) because they share the quality of invisibility. Thus the term carries the undertone of vagueness or that which defies clarity.<sup>21</sup>

Notably, prophecy in ancient Arabia was regarded as a form of madness, a vision of reality unavailable to the rational mind. As W. Montgomery Watt elucidates, a madman was *majnun*, that is, a person "affected or inspired by jinn." Jinn were invisible spirits associated with deserts, ruins, and other eerie places, who occasionally assumed the form of animals, serpents, or other creeping creatures, and who were vaguely feared but not always malevolent. Jinn sometimes helped

<sup>18</sup> Showalter, *The Female Malady*, p. 6.

<sup>19</sup> Yalom, *Maternity, Mortality, and the Literature of Madness*, pp. 2–3.

<sup>20</sup> Karim Hussam-el-Din, "The Terminology and Notion of Madness in Arabic," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 14 (1994): 7 (Arabic section).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

men to supernatural knowledge. Originally, there was little difference between the soothsayer, the poet, and the madman. The poet or *sha'ir* was etymologically “the one who is aware,” “the knower,” who had insight into matters beyond the ability of ordinary men. Since both the soothsayer and the poet were aided to knowledge of the unseen by one of the jinn, they were regarded as *majnun*, that is to say, “under the spell of a jinn.” This pre-Islamic conception explains why the Koran denies the allegation that Muhammad was a poet, emphatically stating that the source of his revelations was God and not a jinn.<sup>22</sup>

Muhammad was not the only messenger of God who faced such accusations and opposition to his mission. Karim Hussam-el-Din notes that a number of ancient prophets, including Noah, Job, and Moses, were accused of madness by their people because their message could not be grasped or appreciated. In addition, several poets from the classical period were called “mad” by their contemporaries and their names bore epithets to that effect. For example, Qays Ibn Mulawah was called “Majnun Layla” (“the Madman of Layla”) because he was madly in love with a woman named Layla. Another poet, Isma'il Ibn Qasim, came to be known as Abu al-'Atahiya (literally, “the father of mental derangement”) because he was in love with a slave girl who refused him. And yet another poet, Ka'ab Ibn Rabi'a from the tribe Banu Sa'id, was called “Al-Mukhabbal al-Sa'idi” (literally, “the demented from the tribe of Banu Sa'id”). In all these instances, the cause of madness was thought to be unrequited love. Given the connection between love and madness, Hussam-el-Din finds it only natural that the longing for the beloved was eventually translated into the longing of the Sufis (Muslim mystics) for the divine, and that sacred madness or frenzy came to be attributed to them.<sup>23</sup>

The Sufis adopted practices such as fasting, dhikr (incessant recitation of God's names and other formulas, often accompanied by music and dancing), whirling dance, and night vigil, which sometimes resulted in ostensibly bizarre and unrestrained behavior, all in order to help them achieve an alternative state of consciousness or ecstatic trance. As Reynold A. Nicholson observes: “The whole of Sufism rests on the belief that when the individual self is lost, the Universal Self is

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<sup>22</sup> W. Montgomery Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'an* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1970), pp. 77–78, 153–54. Koran 69:41 and 52:29 contain denials that Muhammad was a poet inspired by the jinn.

<sup>23</sup> Hussam-el-Din, “The Terminology and Notion of Madness in Arabic,” pp. 9–16.

found, or, in religious language, that ecstasy affords the only means by which the soul can directly communicate and become united with God. Asceticism, purification, love, gnosis, saintship—all the leading ideas of Sufism—are developed from this cardinal principle.”<sup>24</sup> The whirling dervishes, for example, would spin around and around to let the boundaries of selfhood dissolve. “The systematic destruction of the ego,” Karen Armstrong remarks, “led to a sense of absorption into a larger, ineffable reality.” This state of annihilation (*fana*) meant the end of the experience of “separation” and “alienation” (words which resonate with key terms from modern psychoanalytic theory), and a reunion with the Creator.<sup>25</sup> For the medieval theologian and scholar al-Naysaburi (d. 1016), whose book *Wise Fools* (*Uqala al-majanin*) is considered a landmark in the history of folly in the Islamic heritage, the “wise fools” were the Sufis as perceived by popular wisdom. They lived in abstinence and prayer, admonished the rulers, and, like all fools, spoke the truth. The book presents an intriguing dilemma: Should one choose the folly of men or the folly of God? Rather than take a stand, al-Naysaburi provides a series of accounts about all kinds of “mad” men and women, and lets his readers decide for themselves.<sup>26</sup>

*Al-junun funun*, “Madness has many varieties,” runs a popular Arabic saying. While some forms of deviant behavior are feared, others are revered. In *Pagan Survivals in Mohammedan Civilisation*, a study of ancient ideas, rituals, and magic that have survived in popular Islam, Edward Westermarck writes about “a class of holy men and women that is recruited from idiots and madmen.” Emphasizing that derangement of the mind is in any case attributed to supernatural influence, he states that “maniacs are regarded as possessed by *jinn*, and may be locked up in a prison for frantic madmen; but harmless lunatics are venerated as saints, whose reason is in heaven while the body is on earth. They are not held responsible for any absurdities they commit.”<sup>27</sup> The forgiving attitude toward lunatics is evidenced by the fact that

<sup>24</sup> Reynold A. Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam* (London: Arkana, 1989), p. 59.

<sup>25</sup> Karen Armstrong, *A History of God* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), pp. 226–27.

<sup>26</sup> Ceza Kassem-Draz, “Erasmus and al-Naysaburi on Madness,” *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 14 (1994): 229–30. See also Shereen El Ezabi, “Al-Naysaburi’s Wise Madmen,” in *ibid.*, pp. 192–205.

<sup>27</sup> Edward Westermarck, *Pagan Survivals in Mohammedan Civilisation* (Amsterdam: Philo Press, 1973), p. 93.

they are not even obliged to observe the Ramadan fast, which is popularly considered to be the most imperative of all religious duties.<sup>28</sup>

From a clinical perspective, little is known about the current state of mental health in the Arab world, primarily because of a paucity of publications. The Lebanese psychiatrist John Racy reports the preponderance of male over female patients in mental hospitals throughout the Arab East.<sup>29</sup> He acknowledges that it is unclear whether this numerical imbalance reflects the greater value attached to males, or inhibitions regarding the exposure of women and their ailments, or the fact that agitated men are a greater threat than agitated women. In his view, the least likely possibility is that mental illness is less common in women.<sup>30</sup>

Racy's assumption is borne out by more recent studies.<sup>31</sup> The female physician Nahid Toubia, discussing women and health in Sudan, writes that "psycho-neuroses and depression are more common amongst women than officially recognized in medical statistics. Very few professionals understand them as a group phenomenon or analyze them as such. Instead they are seen as individual cases and as an expression of maladjustment with society or as a woman's failure to face up to her marital responsibilities as a wife and a mother. They are considered as pathological illnesses divorced from their causes which may be found in the woman's position in the family and in society."<sup>32</sup> Toubia mentions compulsive eating, excessive extroversion or introversion, and psychosomatic illness as some of the common manifestations of women's socially induced psychological problems.

The psychologist Mouinne Chelhi arrives at similar conclusions in her studies on hysteria and nervous breakdowns among Tunisian women. Chelhi attributes the causes of their illnesses to prevailing social conditions rather than to biological sources or genetic predisposition. In her view, the women are pulled in opposing directions by

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> John Racy, "Psychiatry in the Arab East," in Brown and Itzkowitz, *Psychological Dimensions of Near Eastern Studies*, pp. 294, 320.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 320.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Ramadan A. Ahmed and Uwe P. Gielen, eds., *Psychology in the Arab Countries* (Menoufia, Egypt: Menoufia University Press, 1998); and Ihsan al-Issa, *Al-Junun: Mental Illness in the Islamic World* (Madison, Conn.: International Universities Press, 2000).

<sup>32</sup> Nahid Toubia, "Women and Health in Sudan," in Toubia, ed., *Women of the Arab World: The Coming Challenge* (London: Zed Books, 1988), p. 104.

a twofold structuring of interpersonal relations imposed on them in contemporary Tunisian society. The first stems from the traditional agrarian society and tends to subordinate the individual to the social group, allowing only the minimum of self-differentiation. The second stems from modern industrial society and tends to free the individual from the social group, allowing a high degree of individuation. These two contradictory tendencies, acting simultaneously within a person, subject women to such a great stress that hysteria and nervous breakdown become escape routes for them. In other words, hysteria and nervous breakdown are the ways in which women express their lack of adaptation to a society whose official ideology is modern and egalitarian but whose dominant ideology, regulating all interpersonal relations, is traditional and authoritarian. Chelhi notes that the contradiction between these two ideologies is most conspicuous in the urban setting.<sup>33</sup>

The Egyptian feminist Nawal El Saadawi has written several social studies, including the seminal book *The Hidden Face of Eve*, which are informed by her experience as a physician in both the countryside and the city. El Saadawi discusses the various forms and effects of women's oppression, physical, emotional, and mental, boldly addressing sensitive issues such as prostitution, female genital mutilation, and incest. Many of her literary works portray the psychological problems developed by women who are systematically brutalized and victimized by the men in their families, particularly fathers and husbands. The story "Eyes," for example, is based on the case history of a young Egyptian woman whom El Saadawi treated for psychosis.<sup>34</sup> El Saadawi depicts the strict upbringing and isolated existence of this woman, who endured multiple deprivations at the hands of her father, to account for her profound alienation, mental breakdown, and bleak prospects for recovery.

Modern Arabic literature abounds with explorations of madness. Contemporary Arab writers have adopted the theme of madness for practical as well as artistic reasons. Given that most of the regimes in the Arab world exercise censorship, the theme of madness allows writers

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<sup>33</sup> Mouinne Chelhi, "The Modern Tunisian Woman between Hysteria and Depression," in Toubia, *Women of the Arab World*, pp. 110–16. In 1978, Fatima Mernissi described a similar clash of ideologies in contemporary Moroccan society as the primary cause of anomie in male-female relations. See Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, pp. 97–98, 136.

<sup>34</sup> Nawal El Saadawi, "Eyes," in Badran and Cooke, *Opening the Gates*, pp. 205–12.

to express their criticism without risking the wrath of the authorities. From a literary perspective, as part of the innovative movement of the 1960s, many Arab writers have shifted from realism to symbolism and surrealism, regarding these modes of writing as more suitable for depicting the conflicts and contradictions in their societies, the pressures and complexities of modern life, and the struggle of the individual for freedom and personal identity. In many ways, literary madness has become the language of despair and alienation, protest and rebellion, anguish and salvation. This is exemplified in the writings of leading Arab authors such as the Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz, his compatriot Yusuf Idris, and the Syrian Zakariya Tamir.<sup>35</sup>

The particular problems facing women writers in Arab societies make it all the more expedient for them to resort to literary madness. Not only must they heed the vengeful censor, but they have to contend with a male-dominated field of activity, from publishers to readers to critics. The theme of madness provides Arab women writers with a relatively safe outlet: they can “speak the truth,” that is, voice their protest and criticism, and still avoid persecution. Not surprisingly, the heroine’s escape from the bondage of her gender into an empowering and violent madness has become a popular theme in Arab women’s literature. In many texts, madness serves as a metaphor for female victimization on the one hand, and for female resistance on the other. Dinah Manisty argues that Arab women writers use the fictional convention of madness as a textual strategy to subvert the status quo which silences and marginalizes women. By focusing on madness, they identify one of the principal sites of female oppression—the voice. The fictional character of the madwoman that they create is symbolically empowered by assuming a central, narrating role. The very act of narration enables the mad heroine to resist marginalization of voice and space and to question the norms and assumptions of her patriarchal society.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Some examples are: Naguib Mahfouz, “The Whisper of Madness,” in *God’s World: An Anthology of Short Stories* trans. Akef Abadir and Roger Allen (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1973), pp. 47–54; Yusuf Idris, “The Omitted Letter” and “The Aorta,” in Roger Allen, ed., *In the Eye of the Beholder: Tales of Egyptian Life from the Writings of Yusuf Idris* (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1978), pp. 89–110, 111–18 respectively; and Zakariya Tamir, “The Family,” in *Tigers on the Tenth Day and Other Stories*, trans. Denys Johnson-Davies (London: Quartet Books, 1985), pp. 35–36.

<sup>36</sup> Dinah Manisty, “Madness as Textual Strategy in the Narratives of Three Egyptian Women Writers,” *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 14 (1994): 152–74.

The body of literature on madness by Arab women writers continues to grow and develop. Some outstanding examples are Andrée Chedid's *From Sleep Unbound* (1952), Hanan al-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra* (1980), Alia Mamdouh's *Mothballs* (1986), Sahar Khalifeh's *Mudhakkirat imra'a ghayr waqi'iyya* (Memoirs of an Unrealistic Woman, 1986),<sup>37</sup> Salwa Bakr's *The Golden Chariot* (1991), Nawal El Saadawi's *The Innocence of the Devil* (1992), Miral al-Tahawy's *The Tent* (1996), and Somaya Ramadan's *Leaves of Narcissus* (2001). In addition to these novels, there are numerous short stories which dramatize this theme, including Ghada al-Samman's "Another Scarecrow"; Sharifa al-Shamlan's "Fragments from a Life"; Radwa Ashour's "I Saw the Date-Palms"; Salwa Bakr's "Thirty-One Beautiful Green Trees" and "That Beautiful Undiscovered Voice"; Hanan al-Shaykh's "A Season of Madness"; and Daisy al-Amir's "Weeping."<sup>38</sup> Not only has this creative output enriched the Arabic literary tradition, but the many female-authored and female-centered works on the topic of madness make it possible to speak of a distinct subgenre of fiction in Arab women's literature.

#### *Miral al-Tahawy's The Tent*

An Egyptian novelist of the younger generation, Miral al-Tahawy was born in 1968 in Sharqiya in the Nile Delta into a Bedouin family of the al-Hanadi tribe. She earned her M.A. in Arabic language and literature from Cairo University in 1995. Her first novel, *The Tent*,<sup>39</sup> appeared in Arabic in 1996, and her second, *The Blue Aubergine*, two years later. Al-Tahawy is considered the first female novelist to portray Egyptian Bedouin life sensitively and authentically. Focusing on the clash of Bedouin traditions with modern life, she depicts the crises of Bedouin women, who live in a world of contradictions, and their desire to break free.

<sup>37</sup> A selection from this novel is available in Salma Khadra Jayyusi, ed., *Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), pp. 589–96.

<sup>38</sup> See the bibliography for the publication data of these novels and short stories.

<sup>39</sup> Miral al-Tahawy, *Al-Khiba'* (Cairo: Dar sharqiyat, 1996); English translation: *The Tent*, trans. Anthony Calderbank (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1998). All quotations are from this translation.

*The Tent* revolves around the tragic figure of Fatima, a Bedouin girl who grows up among cloistered women in a closed society. The novel tells of her desperate efforts to reconcile the world of the Bedouins with the outside world and attain a degree of freedom. Her failure to find a balance between the two worlds is symbolized by her breaking her leg: it becomes infected and it must be amputated. This trauma precipitates the unraveling of her personality and her descent into madness.

The narrative is told by Fatima, the central character. Through the filter of her consciousness, the reader is provided with details, incidents, conversations, and anecdotes that describe her development from childhood to adulthood and chronicle her mental history.

Fatima (nickname: Fatim) is the youngest daughter of a Bedouin lord who lives in the desert with his emotionally unstable wife, Samawaat, his domineering mother, Hakima, and his four daughters. The father, who remains unnamed, is frequently absent on hunting trips or inspection tours of his feudal lands, which are farmed by the peasants. The women, supported by a group of female slaves and servants, are secluded from men and from the outside world by barred windows and a walled courtyard with a massive, locked gate.

The narrative opens with a telling episode: Fatima, five years old, is awakened from her night sleep in the embrace of her maid, Sardoub, to be washed and combed by her eldest sister, Safiya. The thought that runs through her little head is: "It would be a morning like all previous mornings, full of tension and anxiety. Either my mother wouldn't open the door of her room, or, if she did open it, she would watch us with apprehensive eyes. Her pale, emaciated figure, the thin veins on her eyelids, and her nose swollen from floods of tears, choked my heart with sadness" (p. 3). Her mother's constant sobbing haunts Fatima throughout her childhood. Bed-ridden and dysfunctional, the mother grieves over her repeated miscarriages and failure to bear her husband a son. Her inconsolable sobbing, punctuated by audible screams or periods of total silence, impose an atmosphere of gloom and doom on the household. As a child, Fatima is more afraid of her mother's sobbing than of the night. On one occasion, she enters her mother's room and is terrified by her pathetic sight: "She cupped my face in her hands and burst into tears. I fled from the room, from the stench of her tears" (p. 4). On another occasion, Fatima spontaneously jumps into her mother's bed, only to be greeted by profuse tears, which instantly scare her away (p. 20). In the absence of a mother figure, Fatima is looked

after by her eldest sister, Safiya, who assumes a maternal role, and by the slave Sardoub. The mother's mental condition, which is deeply imprinted on Fatima's psyche, leads to the father's long absences, thus leaving Fatima effectively without any parental care. Eventually, the mother dies from complications arising from yet another miscarriage, and Fatima must cope not only with the trauma of her death but also with the appearance of two successive stepmothers.

A sensitive and inquisitive girl, Fatima deals with her sense of loneliness, abandonment, and confinement by living in a fantasy world inhabited by legendary figures from Bedouin folk tales: Sigeema, Musallam, and their daughter Zahwa. In her imagination, Zahwa is also a genie who dwells in the empty well in the courtyard of the house, and it becomes her place of refuge. Fatima's favorite pastime—and coping strategy—is climbing treetops to catch a glimpse of the world that lies beyond the high walls surrounding her house. Her unruly behavior provokes the wrath of Hakima, her mean-spirited paternal grandmother, who senses the affinity in nature between her emotionally unstable daughter-in-law and her granddaughter. Often referring to her son's wife by derogatory names such as “the deranged woman” (p. 9), she calls Fatima “demented girl” (p. 52) and, after she falls from a tree and breaks her leg, “demented cripple” (p. 82).

Fatima's relationship with her grandmother is characterized by fear and hostility. In contrast to Alia Mamdouh's *Mothballs*, where the motherless heroine finds a surrogate mother figure in her grandmother, here the grandmother does not provide Fatima with an alternative source of maternal love and nurturance. Hakima is a hard-hearted and foul-mouthed woman who wears a man's cloak and has gold-capped teeth that give her a diabolical look. Fatima sees her as “our great demon mother who wrapped herself in men's scarves” (p. 7). She has nightmares in which the grandmother chases after her with the intent to break her neck, causing her to trip and fall into a bottomless well. The grandmother has a habit of poking her stick in everything—cupboards, chests, jars, crates of provision. She runs the household with an iron fist, lording over everyone, cursing, and smoking. A frustrated female who internalized sexism, she believes that it is a misfortune to bear daughters: “By God, they bring nothing but bad luck! It's a waste to look after them. They're like a piece of merchandise you get ready for someone else. If you keep her she goes fallow and if you sell her you make a loss” (p. 60). Declaring that she did not have a single daughter who survived after birth, she claims that this is

because she prayed all the time and God answered her prayers. But her explanation is doubted by the womenfolk, who suspect that she had a hand in her daughters' deaths. In the father's absence, it is the grandmother who wields authority and enforces the rules in the household. She is the person who decides when the time has come to marry off her granddaughters and who their prospective husbands should be. Craving a male grandchild, she pressures her widowed son to remarry and also chooses his bride. Strong-willed and ill-tempered, Hakima is feared and disliked by all the members of the household. Her tyrannical reign comes to an end after she joins a pilgrimage caravan and dies in one of the Muslim holy places.

In this oppressive family environment, Fatima's relationship with her father becomes all important. She worships her father, who is the only source of security and protection in her life, and declares her unconditional love for him: "I loved him and loved him . . . I loved his silence, when he was lost in deep thought" (p. 38). The father dotes on Fatima, who is his youngest daughter, often calling her "my little darling" (p. 6), "my gazelle" (p. 32), "my princess" (p. 33), and "a pure Adnanian filly" (p. 49). He brings her special gifts, such as a young gazelle and a thoroughbred Arabian filly. Overjoyed, Fatima pledges her lifelong devotion to him: "I'll stay with you. I won't marry anyone else" (p. 33). The deep attachment between the father and his little daughter is unrivaled in this complex web of family relationships. However, this bond has neurotic elements that are detrimental to Fatima's well-being. The father creates in her great expectations that cannot be fulfilled under the existing patriarchal system. He thus sets her up for terrible future disappointments with which she is ill-prepared to cope. The closeness between father and daughter endures until Fatima loses her leg—and subsequently her mind—at which point the elderly father turns to Fatima's younger half-sister, Samawaat, to look after him and keep him company.

The father is portrayed as a taciturn, restless, and lonely man. Distant—he prefers to sleep outside the house in his tent—and often absent on travels—his favorite pastimes are hunting and shooting—he is nevertheless the supreme authority in the household. His attitude toward his wife is aloof and reserved. He doesn't talk to her, and his visits to her room are limited to sexual encounters after which there are dark lines on her neck and dried blood on her bed. These marks lead the maids and the daughters to believe that he "strangles" her, namely, rapes her. Fatima notices that her father's homecomings always

make her mother cry, just like his brief visits to her room. The only tender scene between husband and wife is when she is on her deathbed: "He held her hand and tears poured down from her heavy eyelids and mingled with his sweat. He took off his *igaaal* and dried her face with his headcloth. He dried a tear that brimmed in his own eye and then let out that long sigh of his" (p. 67). The father's reaction to his wife's approaching end reveals that deep down he cares for her. Grief-stricken over her death, he becomes even more distant and withdrawn.

While the father is proud and authoritative in the presence of his children and dependents, he is humble and submissive before his mother. The mother-son relationship in this narrative conforms to the traditional pattern observed in Arab family life. A revealing scene is the father's reception upon his return from his travels. First, he is greeted by the peasants and his servants, who bow their heads before him and kiss the tips of his fingers in an act of deference and submission. Then, when he enters the house to greet his family, he sinks to his knees before his mother and kisses her hands. The marked contrast in his demeanor does not escape Fatima: "He sat in front of her meekly. It was as if I had never seen his chest swollen with pride, or the people move aside in awe as he walked past" (p. 9). The father entrusts the upbringing of his daughters and the affairs of the household to his mother. Whatever decisions she makes, he accepts. He never argues with her or opposes her. The only way in which he shows his displeasure is by absenting himself from the family house, packing his tent, and setting off on another long travel.

Clearly, the prevailing ambience and internal dynamics in this socially and economically privileged family are devoid of bliss and harmony. But why? The all-consuming desire to have a male offspring lies at the heart of this family's tragedy. The wife can gain social status only by bearing a son. Three times her sons are stillborn, and the last miscarriage results in her own death. The husband reveals his frustration at his wife's failure to produce a live son by abandoning her and going off on extended trips. The grandmother, who is overtly hostile toward her daughter-in-law, condemns her for bearing only daughters, puts the responsibility for the repeated miscarriages solely on her shoulders, and accuses her of criminal negligence, the evil eye, and mental derangement. However, the fact that the father's second wife also suffers several miscarriages shows that a pregnant woman is extremely vulnerable to psychological pressure and can lose her baby in a stressful situation.

Fatima vaguely grasps that there is a connection between her father's acts of "strangling" her mother and her death. Still, she forgives him, saying: "I had given you pride of place in my affections, and in spite of everything, I still love you" (p. 79). The father deals with his wife's death just as he does with every other crisis in his family: by deserting the scene. When he returns, Fatima notices that he has changed: "His face was more haggard than before, and there were shadows under his eyes...He was gentler and more affectionate" (p. 77). When Grandmother Hakima begins to nag him about family problems, he says, "Fatima, my dear, tell your grandmother that all the pain has crushed your father" (p. 77). Although he accepts the second marriage that his mother arranges for him, he shows little interest in his new wife, constantly neglects her, and eventually divorces her. At the end of the novel, the father is old and feeble and married for the third time. His favorite companion is Samawaat, the daughter born to him by his second wife. The fact that Samawaat (literally, "heavens") is named after his first wife reveals that he was attached to her. Significantly, Fatima discovers her mother's name only after the birth of her half-sister. As she admits: "I didn't know my mother's name was Samawaat. All I knew was that she was my mother, with her tearful eyes" (p. 91). This sad detail shows that the mother's identity has become obliterated in her daughter's mind.

In the absence of parental care, Fatima's sisters serve as points of reference for her. Although they do not share her disposition, they are kind and sympathetic to her. Safiya, the eldest, is a model of filial duty. Selfless and devoted, she is extremely loyal to her mother and siblings. She defies the grandmother's instructions and remains in her father's house even after her marriage in order to look after her ailing mother and younger sisters. She also defends the mother's honor in the face of the grandmother's constant attacks. However, with the passage of time, she develops a bossy attitude reminiscent of Grandmother Hakima. On later visits to her father's house, when her grandmother is already dead and her father is very old, she pokes her stick in every cupboard, chest, and crate of provision, just as Grandmother Hakima used to do. Fouz and Rihana, the younger sisters, are simple-minded and compliant girls whose main preoccupation is embroidering their trousseaux. They are close friends and their habit of exchanging confidences makes Fatima feel left out. Still, their presence in the house comforts her and alleviates her feeling of loneliness. After they get married as well and join their husbands' households, the parental house

becomes empty and dreary, and Fatima's behavior grows increasingly more erratic and desperate.

Given this portrait of family life, which is fraught with unresolved tensions and conflicts, it is not surprising that it should elicit maladaptive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors from some of its members, particularly those with a delicate psyche, such as Fatima. With a mother who is dysfunctional, a grandmother who is tyrannical, and sisters who are submissive and powerless, Fatima has no positive female role model to relate to. As a result, she is unable to develop a stable sense of self and coherent identity. Trapped in the prison of her family house, where her self-development is stunted by a lack of adequate nurturance, no tolerance for autonomy or individuality, and a heavy pressure to conform to custom and tradition, it is no wonder that she feels desolation and alienation. The only prospects awaiting her are those of marriage and motherhood—a fate, embodied by her mother, which she desperately wants to escape. The absence of any way out leads her to behave in a self-destructive manner, with disastrous consequences.

The first trauma that Fatima sustains in her adolescence involves an accident: she falls from a treetop and breaks her leg. The injury requires medical treatment and Fatima is entrusted to the care of Anne, a Western anthropologist with a passion for pure Arabian horses. In return for her help, Anne gets to use Fatima's filly for breeding, training, and racing purposes. Fatima develops an ambivalent relationship with Anne. As she admits: "I neither loved nor hated her, but I became attached to her because she was my only way out" (p. 44). With her father's permission, she leaves the confines of her house every afternoon and rides through the alleys of her village to Anne's place, accompanied by a guard and a slave. She is thrilled to explore the outside world and eager to learn, so that she will be fit to bear the title "princess" which her father has given her. However, her connection with Anne turns out to be a mixed blessing. Although Anne serves as her gateway to freedom, Fatima feels lonely and lost in her house. The caged animals that she finds there, especially a young gazelle, trigger sad memories and associations in her. Intuitively, Fatima sees the similarity between the animals' captivity and her own. On the one hand, the relationship with Anne exposes her to the outside world and stimulates her cognitive development. On the other hand, it increases her sense of alienation. Herein lies the seed of identity crisis that will later destroy her mental health. Before long, Anne loses interest in Fatima. To fill the resulting void, Fatima summons with greater frequency the visions

and voices of Musallam, Sigeema, and their little daughter Zahwa, who is her playmate and soul mate.

The second trauma that Fatima suffers in her adolescence is her mother's death. The tragic passing, the result of yet another miscarriage, disrupts Fatima's delicate equilibrium and deals a heavy blow to her fragile psyche. During the mourning period, as the women's wailing echoes in her ears, she hallucinates that she follows Zahwa down the empty well. A genie appears and scars her below the eye with a sharp stone, saying, "This is the key of life. Your hair will grow very long and hang over the clouds while your feet remain rooted in my well. I will protect you with the symbols of the Pharaoh. You will never die, and crows will never hover round your plaits" (p. 69). When Fatima wakes up from her sleep, her eye is bloody and wounded. This episode reveals that Fatima is torn between two conflicting wishes: a wish to live and a wish to die. The self-inflicted wound below the eye is an act of self-mutilation which signifies a death wish. The fact that it involves the eye, which is the site of perception and cognitive awareness, suggests that now she "knows" or "understands" enough to make her want to die. As her sister Safiya remarks, "It's the things your eyes have seen that have unbalanced your mind" (p. 75). On the other hand, the mother's death arouses in Fatima a fear of dying and the instinct of self-preservation, reflected in tattooing the magic symbol of life, the ankh, under her eyelid as a sort of protective spell or amulet. From this point on, the difference between fact and fantasy in Fatima's mind becomes ever more blurry as she gradually loses her grasp on reality.

The worst trauma that Fatima suffers in her adolescence is the amputation of her leg. The circumstances surrounding this catastrophe are connected with dramatic changes in her home environment: her married sisters move out of the family house, the first, mean-spirited stepmother arrives on the scene, and her unhappy father leaves on his hunting and shooting trips. Feeling lonely and abandoned, Fatima moves into the room in which her mother has bled and died, but the memories only make her more depressed. She cannot stand the house, which she feels is closing in on her. The only relief she finds is in climbing treetops, which she does day and night, sometimes even dozing off on one of the branches. Inevitably, she falls off and breaks her leg again. Unable to walk, she is derogatorily named "the cripple" by both her grandmother and her stepmother, who fear her eccentricity and abuse her verbally. Worse yet, they confine her to a secluded room

in the house and neglect to provide proper medical treatment for her leg. When Anne reappears on the scene, motivated by her interest in thoroughbred Arabian horses, Fatima's leg is infected by gangrene and cannot be saved. The father, who shows up briefly, gives Fatima permission to move into Anne's house, where the doctor amputates her leg. When Fatima recovers from the operation, she sadly remarks: "Now I really was 'the cripple' and there was nothing I could do to avoid the name" (p. 96). Her status as a cripple puts her even more outside the norms of society. With no one asking her to return home, she remains in Anne's house for several years.

Fatima's prolonged stay with Anne creates a profound identity crisis in her. While she is able to pursue her education and becomes literate in three languages, she is unable to adjust to Anne's alien cultural environment. The house is filled with artificial lighting, the walls are covered with mirrors, and the servants are all fair-skinned and blue-eyed. While Anne is well-meaning, she is driven by selfish motives: recording her observations on Bedouin life, with a focus on horses, hawks, hunting, and women. Anne's guests regard Fatima as an object of curiosity as she hobbles before them in her ethnic dress and long plaits. They expect her to entertain them by telling folk tales and singing folk songs. Feeling exploited and out of place, Fatima protests to Anne: "I am not a frog in a crystal jar for you to gaze upon. I am Fatim, ya-Anne, flesh and blood" (p. 107). Fatima sees the similarities between her narrowly circumscribed existence and that of her filly, Khayra. "Are you fed up, Khayra, like me?" she asks. "Books and writing paper, pregnancy and labor" (p. 108). Education sharpens Fatima's cognitive skills and gives her knowledge, but it fails to give her a coherent sense of identity or peace of mind; instead, it increases her confusion and alienation. As she says: "Fatim had split in two, one half jabbering away in foreign languages and the other singing traditional Bedouin folk songs" (p. 117). The more she feels alienated, the deeper she withdraws into her inner world of visions and voices, a world populated by imaginary figures whose personal tragedies mirror her own misfortunes. Eventually, Fatima cannot stand Anne's house anymore. She writes to her father and asks him to bring her home.

When Fatima returns to her father's house, she is a young adult, physically crippled and mentally drifting between reality and fantasy. Despite the fact that the house is almost empty—her three sisters have married and left, her grandmother is gone, and her mean stepmother has been replaced by a kind-hearted woman—she decides to occupy the

room in which her mother has bled and died, sleeping in her bed. But this does not comfort her, and she continues to suffer from overwhelming sadness and loneliness. Even reading fails to relieve her misery, and she wonders to herself: "What is Fatim doing with letters, with words, when the loneliness is excruciating?" (p. 116). Most importantly, the close bond she once shared with her father has dissolved and a barrier has risen between them. Although he still calls her "princess," deep in her heart she knows that as a cripple she no longer fits the title. Gradually, she becomes apathetic to her surroundings. Nothing matters to her anymore. She refuses to speak and maintains a self-imposed silence. Then she throws away her crutch and begins to crawl on the ground. Finally, she enters "the chamber of sobbing silence" (p. 124) and becomes exactly like her mother, with the same tearful, swollen eyes. As her external reality fades away, visions and voices take over, and she no longer distinguishes between the real and the imaginary. The father's reaction to his daughter's deteriorating condition is one of avoidance and abandonment. Unable to bear the sight of Fatima crawling on the ground with an amputated leg and a deranged mind, he turns to her younger half-sister Samawaat, who bears an uncanny resemblance to his deceased wife, and she becomes the object of his affection and closest companion. Impaired in body and mind, Fatima is left to be cared for by Sardoub, her old and faithful maid.

Fatima languishes in this demented state for many years. Despite her dimmed consciousness, she is able to register the changes that time has brought about: the main gate of her father's house, which used to be locked during her childhood, now stands open day and night, and her little nieces, with exercise books in their hands, are sent off to school every day. Her father has changed too. Old and frail, he supports himself against Samawaat's body and calls her "Father's princess" (p. 126). When Fatima hears this term of endearment, she weeps bitterly, knowing that she has ceased to exist in her father's heart. Time after time she crawls to the bottom of the well, hallucinating about the terrible death of Musallam, Sigeema, and Zahwa. She hears her little nieces making fun of her deformity, calling her "possessed," and whispering together, "The deranged woman's festering in the well" (p. 129). In the last stage of her psychosis, Fatima's paranoid delusions render her violent and homicidal. Locked up in her room, she hallucinates that she is chained by her long plaits to tent pegs and that a blind, deadly viper flies through the air and lands near her. Her final words are a plea for the viper to bite her: "You aren't afraid, are

you? Don't worry, I'm not going to kill you. Just jump up and pour your poison here, between my eyes" (p. 130).

*The Tent* is a compelling account of madness in a woman who begins her journey through life as a highly sensitive and free-spirited girl. Madness is not an affliction which Fatima was born with but rather a condition which she was driven into by her dysfunctional family and oppressive society. This conclusion is borne out by the fact that as an adolescent she shows keen powers of observation, intelligently perceiving everything around her and internalizing it. She has outstanding cognitive skills, as reflected in her learning to read and write in three languages. And she has normal human aspirations for love, intimacy, freedom, self-expression, and self-fulfillment.

Fatima's madness is precipitated by the strictures of her patriarchal culture. As her maid Sardoub remarks: "You've grown up, Fatim. You're aware of what's going on. You understand, and you carry your own troubles" (p. 84). What knowledge has Fatima gained that proved devastating to her psyche? Besides her mother's tragedy, Fatima learns about brutal customs and traditions, including female infanticide (p. 128), female circumcision (p. 76), and crimes of honor (p. 129). She is also exposed to sexism, displayed by her own grandmother, who regards a woman as a liability and "a piece of merchandise" (p. 60) whose only merit lies in bearing sons. Attempting to escape her mother's fate, Fatima looks for alternative definitions of her role as a woman through Anne, who represents modernity and the values of the West. On the one hand, she is unable to adjust to Anne's culture and lifestyle. On the other hand, she is unable to reconcile herself to her social reality or to transcend it. When all her coping mechanisms fail, her mind gives way. The fact that Fatima has a family history of mental illness—her mother—makes her all the more vulnerable to psychosis. However, it does not necessarily imply that she was born with this condition.

In her critical study *Madness in Literature*, Lillian Feder examines mad protagonists and personae of literature from various periods and cultures. She shows how literary explorations of madness, as well as the experience of madness, both reflect and challenge society's assumptions, values, and prohibitions. The madness of the protagonist or artist may serve as inspiration, self-revelation, or escape from a painful reality. Discussing scores of literary representations of madness from ancient to modern times, she enumerates the basic elements which they all have in common:

Certain motifs that occur in the literature of madness from the fifth century B.C. to the present—the identification of the mad with animals by society and by the mad themselves, the hunt as a symbol of their persecution, the concept of reason or insight in madness, the incorporation of an accusing or sustaining deity—are originally symbolic portrayals of adaptive psychic mechanisms in the development of the self in its relation to communal life.<sup>40</sup>

All the motifs which Feder mentions can be observed in Fatima's thoughts and actions. With regard to the identification of the mad with animals, Fatima identifies with the dog Asaf which repeatedly digs with its paws under the closed gate in an attempt to escape, with her stubborn filly Khayra which is fated for pregnancy and labor, with the little gazelle which her father chased down and which later died in captivity, and with the tethered female falcon, belonging to Zahwa's father, which has stitched eyelids and trussed up wings. In all these domesticated or caged animals, Fatima sees a reflection of her own powerless existence. The projection of her suffering self into an animated object gives Fatima some consolation and emotional relief. As for society's identification of the mad with animals, Grandmother Hakima views Fatima as a genie and a devil (both of them, according to popular Muslim belief, often assume the shape of animals) because of her bizarre habit of sleeping at night in the haunted well. The first stepmother, Dawwaba, is frightened by Fatima's odd behavior. She nervously tells her husband: "Your daughter is mentally unhinged. She talks to herself and climbs trees like a monkey in the middle of the night. She communicates with genies. If she stays near me, I'll lose the son in my womb. Your daughter is bad luck" (p. 83).

The hunt as a symbol of Fatima's persecution is dramatized by the little gazelle which her father chased in his armored car until it could no longer run and collapsed from sheer exhaustion. Fatima confides in Anne that her father does not hunt rabbits; he prefers gazelles, which are really "houris from paradise who had come to live on earth" (p. 49). In addition, her father is fond of shooting pigeons (p. 8). In both instances, the hunter is male and the hunted creature is female. The hunt as a symbol of Fatima's persecution is also signified by the blind, poisonous viper which is chasing after Zahwa—Fatima's alter ego or her *qarina*—doppelganger. According to popular Muslim belief,

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<sup>40</sup> Lillian Feder, *Madness in Literature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 279.

each human being has a familiar spirit or double which is born at the same time as the human counterpart and which is a constant companion throughout life. Fatima affirms that Zahwa and she are inseparable: "I told Anne that Zahwa never left my side. She lived underneath me wherever I went, and her netherworldly soul dwelled in the eyes of the little gazelle" (p. 98). People are fearful of this "double," whose fate is mysteriously linked to their own.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, Zahwa's violent death foreshadows Fatima's own death from a bite by the poisonous viper.

The incorporation of a sustaining deity into Fatima's struggle for survival is signified by the genie that she imagines to be living in the bottom of the well. Fatima believes that this genie has tattooed the ankh, the Pharaonic symbol of life, under her eye and promised to protect her so that she will not die (p. 69). Further, the genie has cast a magic spell on her hair, predicting that it will grow longer than the hair of Sitt al-Hosn ("Lady of Beauty"), "whose plaits hung down from the window of the tower" (p. 97). This reference to a fairy tale princess in Arab children's literature evokes the tale of Rapunzel by the Grimm's brothers.<sup>42</sup> However, the hair has both positive and negative symbolism: it can be a means of escape, or a form of entrapment. In addition to the genie's protection, when Fatima leaves her father's house and moves in with Anne, she puts on a necklace of bright blue beads and seven eyes as a charm against the evil eye (pp. 92–93), and she never removes it.

Fatima's struggle for self-affirmation is symbolically expressed through her frequent use of the number 7 in recounting her dreams, events, and experiences. This number occurs in many phrases throughout the narrative, for example: seven palm trees (pp. 1, 11, 39, 73); a girl has seven faces (p. 82); the sun is a girl and like all other girls it has seven faces (p. 6); seven daughters Na'sh had, seven girls (p. 13); seven moons in a black sky they were (p. 23); Na'sh daughters were dancing in the sky, with seven spirits (p. 77); seven nights passed (p. 53); it was seven days since the wedding (p. 64); she took off her necklace and

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<sup>41</sup> Dorothy Van Ess, *Fatima and Her Sisters* (New York: John Day, 1961), pp. 147–48.

<sup>42</sup> Folklorists have found that many motifs from European fairy tales are also part of Arab-Mediterranean folklore. See Hasan M. El-Shamy, *Tales Arab Women Tell and the Behavioral Patterns They Portray* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); see also Remke Kruk, in her introduction to *Abu Jmeel's Daughter and Other Stories: Arab Folk Tales from Palestine and Lebanon*, ed. Salma Khadra Jayyusi (New York: Interlink Books, 2007), p. xviii.

gave it to me. There were seven eyes on it, threaded with blue beads (p. 92); seven wounds (pp. 85, 105); and lastly, Fatima's mother bore seven children, four live girls and three stillborn boys (p. 10). Edward Westermarck points out that Islamic cultures attribute virtue to certain numbers. Because God is one, odd numbers are believed to have lucky significance. As a popular tradition states: "God is odd, He loves the odd." Hence the numbers 3 and 7 are important in magical practices, and 5 is a favorite charm against the evil eye. The number 7 is prominent in Muslim theology: there are seven heavens, seven earths, seven divisions of hell with seven gates, seven days of the week, etc. The mystic or sacred significance accorded to the number 7 is further related to the lunar phases, changing every seventh day, and to the observation of the seven planets and the constellations of the Great Bear, the Lesser Bear, and the Pleiades.<sup>43</sup> Fatima's constant use of this number, much like the act of tattooing the sign of life under her eye, serves as a protective shield or a sustaining deity.

Finally, the concept of reason or insight in madness is reflected in several of Fatima's actions. For example, her passion for climbing treetops signifies not only her quest for freedom but also her fascination with death as the solution to her problems. Hence her repeated accidents may well be attempts at suicide. Fatima's reaction to an old chest belonging to her tyrannical grandmother provides another illustration of insight in madness. Returning to her father's house after years of absence, she settles in the room where her mother has died and places her grandmother's chest there: "I moved Grandmother Hakima's chest into the room. I smiled. Time is the healer of all pains. I looked at the trunk and there were no bad memories, perhaps even some affection" (p. 114). This reaction shows that Fatima understands that in order to find a sense of equilibrium she must come to terms with both her mother and her grandmother. In order to construct a viable self, she must resolve old conflicts and reconcile her past with her present. It is this realization that has motivated her to return to her father's house. As the feminist scholar Marilyn Yalom observes: "The path away from madness, like the path into it, has a specifically female lane. The mad heroine in search of sanity is her mother's daughter—a reality she must grasp and accept if she is ever to come to terms with

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<sup>43</sup> Westermarck, *Pagan Survivals in Mohammedan Civilisation*, pp. 117–18.

herself."<sup>44</sup> Fatima's decision to return home and occupy her mother's room shows that she accepts her mother and identifies with her. However, in this case the process of reconciliation with the dead mother does not lead to the daughter's recovery but rather to her total descent into madness.

What is the meaning of Fatima's madness? Gilbert and Gubar suggest that madness is a form of rebellion. The mad heroine is the author's double who acts out "her own raging desire to escape male houses and male texts."<sup>45</sup> For Shoshana Felman, madness is not rebellion but rather "the impasse confronting those whom cultural conditioning has deprived of the very means of protest or self-affirmation."<sup>46</sup> The psychiatrist R. D. Laing argues that "madness need not be all breakdown. It may also be breakthrough. It is potentially liberation and renewal as well as enslavement and existential death."<sup>47</sup> In *The Tent*, madness signifies all three states: rebellion, impasse, and existential death. Fatima begins her journey through life by rebelling against the constraints of patriarchal culture. Her attempts to reconcile the irreconcilable, that is, to adjust to her alienating social reality, fail miserably. The resulting impasse plunges her into despair, depression, apathy, and withdrawal. As Fatima's personality begins to unravel, she can no longer control her behavior. With nothing to cling onto except a few memories, names, and objects, she retreats into a world inhabited by visions and voices, genies and ghosts. Her loss of sense of self, that is, alienation from self, precipitates her existential death. In the end, she is reduced to the level of an animal, living in filth, crawling on the ground, and covered in wild growing hair. In Laing's words, she becomes "an exile from the scene of being as we know it."<sup>48</sup>

*The Tent* is a successful novel both in content and form. Structurally, the text is organized in twelve chapters, each depicting an important event or stage in Fatima's life. The twelve chapters allude to the twelve months of the year, thus representing a complete cycle. Much like *The Thousand and One Nights*, the narrative consists of a frame story in which a series of short tales, created by Fatima's flights of fantasy, are embedded. These tales enhance the theme of the frame story

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<sup>44</sup> Yalom, *Maternity, Mortality, and the Literature of Madness*, p. 111.

<sup>45</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 85.

<sup>46</sup> Felman, "Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy," p. 8.

<sup>47</sup> R.D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967), p. 133.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

while affording the heroine—and the reader—escape from the claustrophobic boundaries of her house.<sup>49</sup> However, unlike Scheherazade—the heroine and narrator of *The Thousand and One Nights*—Fatima’s act of narration does not lead to her salvation, though it does enable her to resist “marginalization of voice and space.”<sup>50</sup> By assuming the power of self-expression, Fatima “rejects the submissive silences of domesticity” and “revises the self-definitions” imposed on her by the patriarchal system.<sup>51</sup>

The novel’s title is rich in meanings. As a symbol of nomadic dwelling and lifestyle, the title locates the novel squarely in Bedouin culture and society. Significantly, only the father uses the tent, which is pitched in the courtyard of the house, the reason being that he can sleep soundly only outside, in the open air (p. 115). All the other members of the household sleep in closed-up rooms inside the house. The presence or absence of the tent in the courtyard signifies the arrival or departure of the father—the head of the family. These details give the tent a phallic connotation. There are additional references to the tent which reinforce this idea. For example, when Grandmother Hakima advises her son to remarry, she says, “A house without a man is like an oasis without a well, a wasteland. Only a tent peg keeps a tent up, and a tent peg needs ground to hold it. A good woman will provide you fertile pasture, my son” (pp. 77–78). In this colorful imagery, the land is a metaphor for the woman and the tent (or tent peg) for the man.

*The Tent* is heavily populated by female characters—Bedouin, peasant, and gypsy—who display varying degrees of freedom of movement. Upper class Bedouin women are kept veiled and cloistered; peasant women show their hair, wear low-neck gallabiyas, and work in the fields or in the houses of the rich; gypsy women can come and go as they please. Anne, the Western woman, who is free and independent, serves as a counterpoint to all these characters. In this female world, there are very few male characters: Fatima’s father, her sisters’ husbands, and the fictional character of Musallam—Zahwa’s father. The predominance of female characters who are controlled by a single patriarch reflects the reality of harem life.

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<sup>49</sup> Nur Elmessiri, “Out of the Tent and into the Harem Quarters,” in *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, issue no. 389 (6–12 August, 1998). Available from <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg>. Accessed 6/26/2003.

<sup>50</sup> Manisty, “Madness as Textual Strategy,” p. 155.

<sup>51</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 79.

The novel abounds in poetic images and metaphors, most of which are drawn from desert life. Some vivid examples are: "I was bored. Musallam keeps me imprisoned like a genie in a coffeepot" (p. 63); "The croaking of the frogs became a drum beating to my grief" (p. 71); "My heart was a lake of dried salt, shimmering in the distance, without waves or life" (p. 114); "I was a crow hopping about in the wilderness, and life was lonely and miserable" (p. 117); "Life has turned into a dusty wind and I am crucified like the she-falcon on the tent peg" (p. 118). These compelling images dramatize Fatima's states of mind. Fatima's predicament as a woman is represented by the hunted gazelle, the breeding filly, and the wingless falcon—all creatures of the wild which are held in captivity.

The well, which is a dominant symbol in the novel, alludes to Fatima's troubled relationship with her mother. The well is described as "round like the edge of the full moon, and wide; the steps carved in the rock wound down into total blackness. A few drops of water sparkled in the bottom" (p. 39). In psychoanalytic theory, the mother archetype is often associated with a deep well. Jung writes that the key characteristic of this archetype is its ambivalent nature, comprising both positive and negative aspects. The mother archetype can imply "all that is benign, all that cherishes and sustains, that fosters growth and fertility. The place of magic transformation and rebirth, together with the underworld and its inhabitants, are presided over by the mother. On the negative side, the mother archetype may connote anything secret, hidden, dark; the abyss, the world of the dead, anything that devours, seduces, and poisons, that is terrifying and inescapable like fate."<sup>52</sup> Jung sums up the dual nature of this archetype as "the loving and terrible mother."<sup>53</sup> Fatima's habit of sleeping in the well signifies her desire to return to the womb, to unite with her mother, and to be reborn. It also expresses her yearning to recreate the warmth and protection of her mother's womb. According to popular Muslim belief, wells and watery places are the abodes of the jinn. Water has the power of *baraka*—"blessing"—and is the great means of purification. It cures illnesses and infertility caused by the jinn and sometimes is used as a means

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<sup>52</sup> C.G. Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, 2nd. ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 82.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

to keep them at a distance.<sup>54</sup> Altogether, the well symbolizes both the source of Fatima's illness and the path to her salvation.

The long hair which Fatima grows represents her femininity and sexuality. At the same time, the hair also signifies her bondage because its excessive length, which reaches down to her ankles, entraps her. As she describes her hair: "It was like a tree trunk bending my neck backwards, holding it in a grip from which I could not escape" (p. 125). In the last scene, Fatima hallucinates that she is hanging by her plaits. This description carries distinct religious connotations. According to Muslim belief, women who sin by showing their attractiveness to men are doomed to hang by their hair in hell. The feminist scholar Fedwa Malti-Douglas, analyzing gender and discourse in Arabo-Islamic writing, observes that "woman's hair (that should not be uncovered) and woman's voice (that should not be heard) come together under the heading of 'awra, a notion embodying shame and imperfection."<sup>55</sup> This observation highlights the connection between Fatima's sexuality (or femininity) and her tragic fate.

The symbol whose presence looms above all else in the narrative is the desert: scorching, desolate, foreboding. An insurmountable barrier, it represents the ultimate isolation of the harem women: "All around us was desert which the sun had transformed into a blazing furnace" (p. 63). When Fatima looks around her, she sees "nothing but emptiness, and silence, and the sad mutterings of the wind as it whirled about on itself and made holes in the sand" (p. 121). Although the desert is fraught with danger, she is irresistibly attracted to it: "I said to Zahwa: 'Come on, let's run away, into the burning, open desert, where the shifting sands will obliterate every trace'" (121). This suicidal attraction is consistent with the progression of her madness. Besides its association with death and oblivion, the desert symbolizes a rugged existence, the mysteries of nature, and the infinity of time and space.

### *Andrée Chedid's From Sleep Unbound*

A leading poet and prose writer, Andrée Chedid was born into a family of Lebanese origins in Cairo in 1920. Educated mostly in French boarding schools in Cairo and Paris, she graduated with a degree in

<sup>54</sup> Westermarck, *Pagan Survivals in Mohammedan Civilisation*, p. 99.

<sup>55</sup> Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word*, pp. 89–90.

journalism from the American University in Cairo in 1942. She has lived most of her adult life in Paris, where she settled in 1946. Like other francophone writers, such as her contemporary Etel Adnan, Chedid's medium of expression is French but her native Middle East provides the setting for her stories. Her poetry deals with universal needs and feelings, as well as individual longings, but her fictional works center on the realities of life of ordinary people in traditional Arab society. A prolific writer, she is the author of twenty-two volumes of poetry, sixteen novels, seven plays, and numerous short stories.

*From Sleep Unbound* is Chedid's first novel.<sup>56</sup> It tells the story of Samya, a motherless Egyptian girl who is taken at age fifteen from her Catholic boarding school and forced into a loveless marriage with Boutros, a tyrannical 45-year-old man. After a decade and a half of married life, during which time she bears one daughter who dies of typhoid, Samya lapses into a severe depression which is accompanied by paralysis in her legs. For two years she languishes in this debilitating state, until one day she awakens to action, takes her husband's revolver out of the drawer, and shoots him to death.

The novel opens with a crisis: the assassination of Boutros by Samya. As Boutros's sister, who discovers the body of her slain brother, utters hysterical screams for help, Samya sees her whole life flash before her eyes. Her past recollections during these brief but intense moments, traveling back in time from her childhood through her adolescence and adulthood to the explosive event of the present, weave the fabric of the narrative. These recollections paint a gloomy picture of a lonely life lived under constant oppression and exposed to many misfortunes and deprivations. Denied human intimacy and any avenue of self-expression or self-fulfillment, Samya's identity and personality crumble. Gradually, she slides into a state of disorientation and fragmentation which culminates in an act of homicide. Told through the filter of Samya's consciousness, the narrative has the force of a personal testimony. By assuming the narrative voice, Samya breaks the silence imposed on her by the men in her family—husband, father, brothers—gives expression to her innermost feelings and thoughts, and lays bare the harsh condition of women in her society.

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<sup>56</sup> Andrée Chedid, *Le Sommeil délivré* (Paris: Stock, 1952); English translation: *From Sleep Unbound*, trans. Sharon Spencer (Athens, OH: Swallow Press/Ohio University Press, 1983). All quotations are from this translation.

The first part of the novel portrays Samya's life as an adolescent. Samya comes from an urban, middle-class, Christian Arab family. The youngest of five siblings, all of whom are boys, she suffered a great loss at the age of five when her mother died. Little is known about her mother except that she, too, was married off at age fifteen to a 45-year-old man—Samya's father. The death of her mother was extremely traumatic for Samya: not only was she separated from the sole source of love, protection, and support in her life, but she was also removed from her home environment, for shortly after her mother's death her father sent her to a Catholic boarding school run by nuns. The father's lack of concern and sympathy for Samya remains unchanged throughout her life. Regarding her as a burden, he is not interested in her education beyond the essentials and is eager to marry her off. His indifference is reflected in matters crucial for her happiness: arranged marriage, wife beating, and childlessness. The brothers display the same uncaring attitude toward Samya. Possibly, Samya's stay in a boarding school has distanced her brothers from her, but it is more likely that they follow the example set by the father, who is their role model.

As a result, Samya feels lonely and estranged from her family. The brief visits they pay her at school are dull and dreary: "Thursday was a visiting day. My brother Antoun always came to see me; he was a man with a sense of duty... Antoun and I would look at each other; we had nothing to say... We looked at each other, we looked at the others... They watched the clock with anguish. My brother also watched the clock; he always found reason for leaving before visiting hours ended" (p. 27). On Sundays, when she goes home, the family dog treats her as an intruder and always barks at her, making her feel that she is a stranger and an unwelcome guest in her own home. On each visit, she wonders what she is doing there, unable to relate to any member of her family, who all ignore her at the dinner table, discussing business, women, and cars in the same breath. The thought that she is made of the same clay disturbs Samya, for she fails to find any human qualities in the personalities or actions of her family members.

A sensitive girl with a gentle disposition, Samya misses her mother terribly and longs for a warm and affectionate human contact. The cold and strict environment of the Catholic boarding school increases her feelings of loneliness, confinement, and alienation. The nuns enforce silence, discipline, and conformity on the students, who are shut off from the outside world by a locked gate and barred windows.

Samya's only social interaction at school is with her classmates, and at home with her old nanny, Zariffa. Both the school and the home are strongly associated with a prison in her mind, and she yearns to break away from them. She finds escape in flights of fantasy, possessing what her math teacher and her father derogatorily describe as "an over-active imagination" (p. 28). At times she dreams of her own funeral procession, where she imagines her bereaved family tearfully confessing their love for her, and at other times she dreams of marriage based on true love.

Samya's adolescence ends abruptly when her father, facing bankruptcy, decides to get rid of her by marrying her off. The prospective husband, Boutros, comes from one of the villages where he works as a supervisor of a large cotton farm belonging to a wealthy landowner who lives in the city. The arranged marriage is concluded without consulting Samya, who is bluntly told by her father: "I have chosen you a wealthy man. You'll marry him. Otherwise, I swear to you, I'll see to it that you do!" (p. 50). Frightened and helpless, Samya withdraws into herself: "I was sheltered behind another me, one who had come without my calling for her. She was another person and yet myself. When things became too heavy to bear and inside me everything seemed to disintegrate, she came to help me. My own vitality seemed to ebb away from my arms, my legs and my voice" (p. 54). This coping mechanism, to which Samya repeatedly resorts and which eventually culminates in a psychosomatic form of paralysis, allows her to distance herself from her painful reality: "I was absent and yet I observed things" (p. 55).

A little before the marriage, Boutros comes with his sister Rachida to take his bride for a ride in a horse-drawn carriage. The bumpy ride foreshadows critical events in Samya's life. Seated tightly between Boutros and Rachida, an uncomfortable position which alludes to the symbiotic relationship between the brother and the sister, Samya is continuously questioned by them about her father's financial affairs and her expected wedding gifts. Meanwhile, she observes the horse's movements: "The driver fidgeted with the reins even though the horse obeyed even the slightest motion of his wrist. Left, right, forward, slowly, more slowly still. One could make him do anything, no matter what" (p. 56). Samya sees the similarity between the horse's condition and her own situation: both of them lack control over their actions and destinies and must obey the arbitrary will of their masters. As the carriage ride continues, they run into a disturbance in the street, where a desperate man commits suicide by setting fire to himself. Forced to

get off the carriage, the three passengers lose sight of each other for a while, during which time Samya witnesses the man's tragic end. The sight of the dying man makes Samya realize that her arranged marriage has sealed her fate: "We were both dead, we two suicides, that man and I" (p. 60). When Boutros and his sister find her and take her back to the carriage, they see that the driver's hand is bandaged: "He started to complain that the horse had bitten him. He didn't understand what sudden rage had come over the animal. Such a docile horse!" (p. 60). This incident foreshadows Samya's own act of rebellion after years of marital abuse, when she finally snaps out of her passivity and attacks her husband violently, killing him with a gun.

The second part of the novel depicts Samya's married life. Samya leaves the city and moves into her new home in the village, only to discover that except for the change of setting, the pattern of her existence has remained the same. She has been transferred from the authority of her father to that of her husband, on whom she is now totally dependent. But she receives no affection from her husband, has no right to express her individuality, and her freedom of movement is restricted. Boutros's appearance and mannerisms are repulsive to her. He has sweaty hands, puffy face, and a pot belly. His heavy body rests on absurdly small feet, and his small eyes, darting like a rat's eyes, have a harsh gaze. He smacks his lips when he eats and snores when he sleeps. Aloof, inconsiderate, and authoritarian, Boutros forbids Samya to change anything in his house, to go unaccompanied to the village, or to mix with the village women. He categorically tells her: "The wife of a Nazer [manager] does not hang around the village. It is no place for a respectable woman!" (p. 85). Samya must maintain "her position" and keep "her distance" just like Boutros's sister—the yardstick against which she is constantly measured.

Samya finds herself cut off from any human company. With a male servant who also functions as a driver and a cook, she has no work with which to occupy her time. Lonely and forsaken, she feels that the house is like a prison, closing in on her. Her only comfort is the thought of future children: "Pregnancies would come, one after another, to prevent me from worrying about myself. I was dreaming of this as a refuge and yet, at the same time, I shuddered to think of a child born of these nights when I desired only death" (p. 66). This revealing reference to sex is all she says about this sensitive topic, but her young age (fifteen) at marriage and the big age gap between her and her husband, who is thirty years her senior, leave little to guess at.

Samya candidly admits that she loathes her husband: "I hated Boutros. Hatred made my disgust swell. I saw him and all the Boutros's in the world in their rigid authoritarianism. They ruled over destinies; they crushed plants, songs, colors, they crushed life itself. And they reduced everything to the shriveled proportions of their own hearts" (p. 73). Recognizing that she is powerless and incapable of action, she pins her hopes on the next generation of women to shake off the chains that keep them in bondage: "A day would come, perhaps, when our daughters would no longer be like moss growing around the trunks of dead trees. Our daughters would be different. They would throw off this torpor, the sleepwalker's state that engulfed me whenever I heard the voice of this man" (pp. 73-74). Hence the title of the novel.

Despite Samya's hopes, the years pass without her being able to conceive. In addition to her sense of desolation, she now suffers from feelings of shame, inadequacy, and unworthiness. In the patriarchal culture to which she belongs, bearing children is not only the main avenue of self-fulfillment open to a woman but also the key to her social standing. In Samya's case, a child is also the answer to her life-long craving for love, intimacy, and friendship. Her grief at failing to conceive is aggravated by her husband's accusation that she is barren and that her affliction causes his own entrapment and victimization. Boutros tells her self-righteously: "'Amin, the head of the village, has just repudiated his wife. After two years of marriage she has given him no children. As for me, my religion forbids me to do so!' And he crossed himself" (p. 88). He tortures Samya with expressions of pain and misery: "He struck his chest and proclaimed that he was suffering purgatory on earth. He crossed himself, saying: 'My faith fortifies me!'... He pursed his lips: 'No dowry! No children! If I were not a Christian, I'd throw you out on the street!'" (p. 102). His spiteful question, "What good are you if you are not capable of bearing a child?" (p. 103), crushes Samya's spirit and shatters her fragile sense of self. The verbal abuse escalates to physical abuse when she dares to suggest that perhaps the fault for not having children lies with him. At this affront to his manliness, Boutros slaps his wife cruelly across the face, yelling: "You owe me respect... and you will be dutiful! Do you hear?" (p. 104). Then he adds in a threatening tone: "One can't stand a madwoman all of one's life! Be careful! I will have you locked up!" (p. 104).

This is the first time that Samya is called a "madwoman." The crime for which she is labeled "mad" is her daring to question her husband's

virility and to answer him back. Samya's appeals for help to her father fall on deaf ears. Wife beating, her father informs her, is not illegal in their country. Bitterly, Samya acknowledges that she cannot defend herself against her husband: "Hadn't he married me without a dowry? Hadn't he been faithful? I was well fed. This is what people saw. The rest was imaginary, they would say, the result of my hysteria!" (p. 103). In the eyes of her society, her husband has fulfilled his obligations toward her whereas she has not. This society deems her emotional and psychological needs irrelevant, and her personality and humanity insignificant.

The villagers' attitude toward childlessness intensifies Samya's desperation. The village women do not like a childless woman and do not trust her; they view her as bad luck and her tragedy as a punishment from God. The only sympathy Samya receives is from Om el Kher, the servant who brings her eggs and vegetables every day. Om el Kher takes her to see the local fortune teller, Sheikha Raghia. Believed to have miraculous healing powers, this highly revered character, who is in fact a man disguised as a woman, represents the forces of ignorance and superstition that perpetuate the villagers' poverty and backwardness. Samya, whose education allows her to see the exploitation underlying the relationship of the Sheikha with the illiterate village women, discards the powders that this charlatan gives her to cure her womb.

The stress of her unhappy life takes its toll on Samya. Oppressed by her husband, forgotten by her family, and shunned by the people of the village, she is starved for human affection. "A friendly face would have banished this nightmare. I believed in the unlimited powers of a friendly face, but it was impossible for me to recover one from the depths of my sluggish mind" (p. 91). Her depression is reflected in her outward appearance. Only twenty-four, she has lost her vitality and beauty: her figure has become heavy, her features dull, and her expression rigid and troubled. Samya hates her own image, aware that it is not her real self: "Inside of me there was another me, whom I held prisoner and who rebelled against this slow death toward which I was leading her" (p. 86). She bemoans the way she lives her life, but at the same time she is unable to change it.

Two characters come to play an important role in Samya's emotional life. The first is a little girl named Ammal who tends the sheep with her uncle and brings cheese to Samya's house. Ammal, whose name means "hope" and who is about five years old—the same age as

Samya was when she became motherless—arouses Samya's maternal feelings. The two of them forge a surrogate mother-daughter relationship which gives Samya rare moments of happiness. Samya says of Ammal: "I called her 'my bird,' and she came to rub her wings against me, leaving some of her warmth" (p. 102). When Samya discovers that Ammal has a talent for making figures out of clay, she joyfully declares: "You will be saved, Ammal!" (p. 102). She realizes that Ammal's creativity gives her "an answer to life" (p. 102), namely, an outlet for self-expression. This realization reinforces her commitment to stay by Ammal's side and help her fulfill her potential. The first obstacle that Ammal encounters is when she is twelve years old. Her uncle finds her statues, angrily smashes them, and forbids her to make any new ones, saying that she is copying the works of Allah and will be cursed. Relating the incident to Samya, Ammal vows that she will not stop: "I will make more. Nobody can take away those I have in my head" (p. 118). In many ways, Ammal becomes Samya's alter ego, representing creativity, defiance, action, and resolve. As Samya admits: "She was what I needed to be if I wanted to undermine the false walls hour after hour, without despondency, until they crumbled" (p. 119). Even after she is stricken with paralysis, she continues to encourage and support Ammal, telling herself that "if only Ammal were saved, my life would not have been entirely meaningless" (p. 137). Samya's efforts bear fruit. In the final scene, when Ammal sees the police carrying her away and hears the crowd demanding to trample the murderess to death, she flees from the village. She is determined to "go away, far away from the suffocation and decay that come from fear" (p. 141).

The second character to exert a positive influence on Samya's psyche is a mysterious blind man who roams the paths of the village and expresses his anger at an act of injustice by beating the ground furiously with his stick. Samya feels an instinctive affinity with this man, who elicits both awe and peace in her, and yearns to speak with him, certain that he will understand her. Boutros tells her: "The blind man knows everything. Women tell him their secrets" (p. 73). And Om el Kher informs her: "It is such a long time since he saw anything. He lives in another world" (p. 81). As a result, Samya comes to regard him as a supernatural being, "some sort of silent divinity who reigned over the village when the men were away" (p. 81). On her first encounter with him, Samya stumbles in confusion and drops the loaves of bread she carries in her arms. The blind man helps her to pick them up and greets her with a smile. "His smile was so brilliant it took the place

of his eyes" (p. 84). After that, Samya keeps thinking about him: "I associated him with the earth, dark and wise... I imagined him going forth with slow deliberate footsteps as though he were bearing the fate of the village. With his large white turban which shone like a jewel, a crown of linen, and his smooth face, he seemed like a king" (p. 84). These details suggest that the blind man is a symbol of Jesus, or a saint, or a father figure, representing justice and humanity. The blind man knows of Samya's fondness for Ammal and of Ammal's secret talent, for he praises Samya: "You have shed light on Ammal. Her happiness is your doing" (p. 116). Significantly, at the end of the novel, when the police come to take Samya into custody for slaying her husband, only the blind man "sees" the injustice done to her, and he begins to pound the ground furiously with his stick.

Ten years into her marriage, Samya conceives. The long-awaited pregnancy is not enough for her to gain social standing; she must produce a male offspring. And so begins the battle for the child's sex. Boutros, of course, wants a son. To assure that his wish will be granted, he hangs a large portrait of St. Theresa on the wall, places beneath it a lamp that burns day and night, and prays before the saint's picture every day. Samya, however, is startled by the thought of another little Boutros walking at his father's side, with the self-same character, corpulent body, and ridiculously small feet. She passionately prays for a daughter: "She would look like me! Or rather, like what I wished to be!" (p. 106). A few days before the baby is born, Boutros's sister, Rachida, arrives and settles in for a long stay. "She will bring up my son," Boutros bluntly informs his wife. "We have the same principles, my sister and I" (p. 107). When the newborn baby turns out to be a girl, Rachida is frustrated: "How can I tell Boutros, poor man, that it is not a son?" She prepares to leave at once, saying, "I could not stand Boutros's disappointment very long. His unhappiness! As it's only a girl, you don't need me" (p. 108). Samya's reaction to the birth of her daughter is one of infinite joy: "I was no longer alone. It was as if I had been unbound. All the knots had come loose. I was going to love and there was now someone to love me all the time every hour of the night or day" (p. 108). As for Boutros, when he hears that his wife bore him a daughter, he leaves the house in a fit of rage, banging his cane furiously against the railing of the staircase.

The third and final part of the novel depicts Samya's short-lived happiness with her daughter, Mia, whose birth transforms her. Both her spirit and her body are rejuvenated: she feels alive and vital, and looks

slim and youthful again. Mia's birth is tantamount to her own rebirth: she rediscovers the world. As she admits, "I thought I was opening Mia's eyes, but I was opening my own as well" (p. 114). The bond with her daughter makes up for all the deprivations and tribulations that she has suffered. "I lived in this love in which I repeated myself. My family's indifference, Rachida's hatred, and Boutros's oppression no longer had any power over me" (p. 119). The spontaneous friendship that develops between Ammal, her surrogate daughter, and Mia, her biological daughter, delights Samya, and she asks for nothing more but to preserve this happiness.

In a dream that foreshadows the death of her daughter, Samya sees herself and Mia walking hand in hand in a green clearing in a forest when suddenly a man dressed all in white appears and beckons to Mia to join him. Before she can stop her, Mia slips from her grasp and walks over to the man. When their hands touch, they both disappear behind the curtain of trees. As it happens, Mia is six years old when she contracts typhoid on a train trip to town with her mother. Because Boutros fails to call a doctor promptly, Mia develops a severe case of the disease and perishes.

With the death of her daughter, Samya loses her reason to live. Her entire frame of existence collapses. Scarcely thirty, she has already known the double tragedy of losing her mother and her daughter. Her heartless husband constantly accuses her of being responsible for Mia's death. The villagers call it God's will. Samya fails to find any comfort for her loss in her social environment or her religious faith. At one point, her grief drives her to contemplate suicide by drowning. Lonely, aimless, and hopeless, she falls into a severe depression. "Between my pain and the shame I felt at not ever having accomplished anything, I was slowly poisoning myself" (p. 132). Her feelings of guilt and incompetence are mingled with rage and hatred toward Boutros—her jailor and tormentor—who assumes monstrous dimensions: "He had become the bogeyman of children's dreams. I loaded upon him my own sorrows as well as those of the whole world" (p. 133). In Samya's mind, Boutros's image becomes confused with the image of her father, "who had never known how to extend himself except to himself," and with the images of her brothers, "who respected nothing but money" (p. 133). These dark and compulsive thoughts signal Samya's gradual descent into psychosis.

In the absence of an outlet for her grief and anger, Samya's mental state continues to deteriorate. First, she withdraws into herself and

refuses to see anyone, seeking nothing but emptiness and silence. Then she loses all feeling in her legs, becoming paralyzed from the waist down. This condition, known as conversion paralysis, is characterized by the substitution of a physical symptom—paralysis—for mental stress. It is an unconscious defense mechanism by which the anxiety caused by a psychological crisis is converted into a physical manifestation. On the one hand, Samya's paralysis reflects her inability to cope with her painful and alienating reality. On the other hand, it symbolizes her refusal to submit to the will of others—her husband, father, and brothers—who dictate to her how she must live her life. This form of noncompliance is tantamount to a passive rebellion. Confined to a dark room, where she is shielded from external stimuli, Samya dwells in her own inner world of unresolved feelings and conflicts, obsessed with the thought that only some sort of dramatic action can set her free.

Exasperated by his wife's condition, Boutros wastes no time in calling for Rachida's help, and she does not tarry in responding. Her arrival worsens the suffering of Samya, who finds herself even more isolated in the face of the symbiotic bond between her husband and his sister. The brother-sister relationship in this narrative conforms to the traditional pattern observed in Arab family life and, like the powerful mother-son relationship, has detrimental effects on the wife. Boutros thinks highly of his sister, who shares his conservative views and values, and relies on her to run his household. Rachida, an old spinster, is deeply devoted to her brother. Rigid, narrow-minded, and domineering, she resents Samya, who has taken her place in the household, and has no sympathy for her misfortunes. Now that she is back in her brother's house, she feels vindicated and rejuvenated, "as if the past sixteen years had not occurred at all, for she was once again sharing her brother's life" (p. 136). She orders the servants around, reorganizes the furniture, and makes herself entirely at home, granting Samya "no more importance than one would give to a cumbersome object that was in the way" (p. 137).

Rachida's shadow, her footsteps, and her voice now dominate the three rooms that make up this family's living quarters. Every evening, Samya hears her repeat the same complaints, followed by the ritual of serving dinner:

I really go to too much trouble! No one helps me. At my age, to have to wait on a woman who could be my daughter! I do it all for Boutros, may God bless him! What would become of him without me?

As soon as Boutros arrived, she made a fuss over him. After dinner they would pull their chairs close together and they would whisper:

“We’re talking quietly so we won’t wear you out.”

“In your condition,” they said (p. 16).

On Fridays, Rachida and Boutros treat themselves to an exclusive dinner outdoors under the willow trees. Expressing delight in each other’s company, they look cozy and content:

Boutros would be unusually talkative. Rachida would nod in agreement. Then Rachida would talk and Boutros would say:

“You are an excellent woman!”

“You are a saint!”

“It is good that I brought you here.”

“What would have become of me?”

How well they suited one another, the two of them! The cripple never came outdoors with them. A wheelchair would have been a waste of money. What for? They were happier this way, without her (pp. 8–9).

Thus Boutros and Rachida develop a pattern of life in which Samya is treated as an outsider and a nonentity. They talk about her as if she is not there. Rachida does not hide her contempt for Samya: she calls her “the cripple” and dismisses her requests to replace the thick velvet draperies with thin cotton curtains as “the eccentricities of a hysteric” (p. 9). Mean-spirited and superstitious, she attributes Samya’s misfortunes to heavenly retribution: “This Samya attracted disasters. Her two legs immobilized. For what sin was God punishing her?” (p. 4). As for Boutros, he develops the self-gratifying ritual of placing a kiss on his wife’s forehead every evening.

Two years pass during which Samya sees her life eroding and her existence consigned to oblivion. Stuck in a chair in a closed, dark room, it is as if she is buried alive in a mausoleum or sentenced to solitary confinement in a prison cell. The rage and hatred that build up inside her are focused on Boutros—the agent of her oppression. The contact of his lips with her skin is loathsome to her, and she cannot bear it any longer. Stripped of her humanity and dignity, with a decrepit body and shattered identity, she decides to end everything. She takes Boutros’s revolver from the drawer, and when he comes to give her the dreaded kiss, she shoots him to death. At that moment she feels that “a weight had fallen from her chest” (p. 15) and that she might be able to stand up; her legs will obey her. She has finally awakened from the sleep of avoidance that has rendered her passive, and revolted. “For the first time she had performed, accomplished, completed an action, and

now it was necessary to separate herself from it" (p. 15). Samya hears Rachida's cries for help, then loud voices, and then hurried footsteps approaching. Confused by the noise, she withdraws into herself and no longer hears or sees anything. The final thought that runs through her head is: "I am dead to this story, and everything within me is silent" (p. 138). Samya retreats from the present and the crime scene into the past and her childhood memories. Thus begins the narration of her life story.

*From Sleep Unbound* depicts the psyche of an Arab woman who crumbles under the yoke of patriarchal oppression. Subjected to continuous abuse by the men who control her life—first her father and then her husband—and having lost both her mother and her daughter, Samya's personality disintegrates. Her madness is the outcome of relentless deprivation, degradation, and victimization. Paradoxically, madness is not only the source of her demise but also the only avenue left for her to reclaim her freedom and humanity.

In her imagination, Samya hears Boutros telling the judge: "She had everything! A husband, a home, good food! What more could a woman want? I have known for a long time that she would come to a bad end. My religion prevented me from denouncing her. Now I can do nothing more for her! Take her! Do whatever you want with her!" (p. 12). Significantly, the words "love," "intimacy," "friendship," "respect," and "freedom" are lacking from the husband's statement. Boutros is blind to his wife's emotional and mental needs, as well as to her isolation and confinement. For him, the institution of marriage entails a man providing a woman with food and shelter in exchange for domestic and sexual services. That marriage is not about trading commodities but about sharing each other's lives is obviously beyond his ability to comprehend.

### *Conclusion*

In both *The Tent* and *From Sleep Unbound*, the process of growing up female does not lead to self-affirmation but to alienation of self. Fatima and Samya face a choice between a life of confinement and passive domesticity or madness and death. For both, the journey toward womanhood brings the individual self into conflict with the family and the wider society. Unable to adjust to the reality of their lives and unsuccessful in their efforts to transcend it, their psyches snap.

Madness drives Fatima to commit suicide; it drives Samya to commit homicide—which assures her own death. Madness is not a condition either protagonist was born with, but rather a condition she was driven into by her oppressive social environment.

There are additional similarities in the plot patterns of these two novels. In both texts, the heroines' mothers are conspicuously absent. In her study of Euro-American women's fiction, the feminist scholar Marianne Hirsch argues that "women writers' attempts to imagine lives for their heroines which will be different from their mothers' make it imperative that mothers be silent or absent in their texts, that they remain in the prehistory of plot, fixed both as objects of desire and as examples not to be emulated."<sup>57</sup> Hirsch observes that the mother's repression—her absence, silence, and negativity—facilitates the daughter's separation from her and from her complicity in her own oppression. The applicability of this observation to the fiction of Arab women writers is pointed out by Miriam Cooke, who states that "the mother's body must be erased because it reifies the persistence of tradition and of a patriarchal system."<sup>58</sup> This interpretation explains why the heroines are not survived by a biological daughter: Samya's daughter dies in early childhood, and Fatima never marries. As Cooke remarks: "These women have no positive models; hence, they cannot themselves provide good examples."<sup>59</sup> She notes that by rejecting biological motherhood, the heroines escape what Hirsch describes as the "debilitating dichotomies of the maternal and the sexual, the maternal and the creative. By not being a mother, she can avoid being eliminated in the service of her son's or her daughter's plot; by not having a daughter she need not herself perpetuate the repetitive cycle in which, in spite of her will to difference, she remains caught."<sup>60</sup> The repetitive cycle is most obvious in *From Sleep Unbound*, where Samya, like her mother before her, is married off at age fifteen to a 45-year-old man.

Significantly, in each of these novels the heroine's rebellion takes the form of self-mutilation: Fatima maims her leg and becomes a cripple, Samya becomes paralyzed from the waist down. The choice of the legs

<sup>57</sup> Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, p. 34.

<sup>58</sup> Miriam Cooke, "Mothers, Rebels, and Textual Exchanges: Women Writing in French and Arabic," in Mary Jean Green et al., *Postcolonial Subjects: Francophone Women Writers* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 152.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, citing Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, p. 64.

as the site of self-mutilation signifies repressive control, a desperate bid for self-determination. In maiming her leg, Fatima renders herself unmarriageable and thus can escape the fate of her mother. In becoming paralyzed, Samya can free herself from all her duties—sexual and domestic—to her hateful husband. For these heroines, impaired mobility not only offers a way out of their predicament but also serves as an act of protest and resistance. At the same time, the heroines' crippled bodies symbolize their utter powerlessness and inability to cope with their oppressive and alienating reality.

Fatima's family is Muslim, Samya's Christian. Yet both women face similar gender-role expectations, family constraints, and social norms. In general, the core values of Arab culture prevail in all segments of Arab society, regardless of religious denomination or sectarian affiliation.<sup>61</sup> Some pertinent examples are the preference for male offspring, the powerful mother-son relationship, the strong brother-sister bond, the concept of virginity, the practice of circumcision, and the custom of arranged marriage. However, the issue of divorce is extremely difficult for Christian Arabs because neither the Coptic nor Maronite Church allows it.

Taken together, these novels offer a wealth of information on Arab family life in three settings: Bedouin in *The Tent* versus rural and urban in *From Sleep Unbound*. Generally speaking, Bedouin society is the most conservative, urban society is the most modernized, and peasant society is somewhere in between the two contrasting poles. The difference in lifestyle is reflected in the degree of freedom accorded to the female characters: in the Bedouin setting, Fatima grows up veiled and cloistered and receives no formal education, whereas in the urban setting, Samya goes to a girls' school. When she marries and moves to the village, she has more freedom of movement than Fatima, for she can go for a walk by herself and without wearing a veil. Class also influences the level of seclusion and freedom of movement of the female characters. Fatima, who belongs to the upper class, is more confined than Samya, who belongs to the middle class. The family structure, composition, and interactional dynamics play a critical role in these heroines' struggles for autonomous and authentic selfhood. In each narrative, gender is a determining factor in the heroine's efforts to achieve self-definition, self-development, and self-fulfillment.

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<sup>61</sup> See Joseph, *Intimate Selving in Arab Families*, pp. 187–88.

As far as endings are concerned, both texts offer a ray of hope. In *The Tent*, the gate of Fatima's house, which used to be locked when she was a little girl, stands open a generation later, and her nieces go to school every day. In *From Sleep Unbound*, Ammal, the young girl who becomes Samya's surrogate daughter, flees from the village. However, here the winds of change are not yet in sight. It is perhaps only Samya's testimony—the story she tells—that can teach a lesson to the next generation. As Samya thinks to herself after she pulls the trigger, "This story was no longer her story" (p. 15).

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### CONCLUSION: THE ARAB FAMILY DEMYSTIFIED

What is a feminist novel in Arabic? First of all, it is a voice—here, a voice ‘in hell’ of a woman called Paradise—a night murmur, a lament across the hurdles of twilight that finds birth in a suddenly lit private interior of heaven. An ancient wound finally and gradually opened up to assume its song. The revolt evolves as it searches for new words: the revolt develops here in the circular, repetitive rhythm of its speech.

Assia Djebar<sup>1</sup>

#### *Transforming the Silence into Words*

In her compelling novel, *The Story of Zahra*, the Lebanese writer Hanan al-Shaykh depicts the internal dynamics of an Arab Muslim family in Beirut before and during the civil war. The content of the novel was so disturbing to Lebanese publishers that they were unwilling to print her work. Al-Shaykh published it herself. When the book came out in 1980 it caused such an uproar that it was banned in several Arab countries. Not only did the author violate the code of silence surrounding family life, but she also dealt with other sensitive matters—female sexuality and war. Despite its being banned, the book enjoyed a wide circulation and was translated into many languages. Al-Shaykh won critical acclaim and went on to write *Women of Sand and Myrrh* and other provocative novels, all characterized by the same boldness and outspokenness.

This example, one out of many, shows that Arab women writers are breaking the silence surrounding the personal aspects of women’s lives in Arab societies. Undeterred by censorship and male monopoly of publishing houses, they probe taboo subjects, ask critical questions, tell their stories, and reveal the truth about the female experience.

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<sup>1</sup> Assia Djebar, “Introduction to Nawal al-Saadawi’s *Ferdaous*,” in Badran and Cooke, *Opening the Gates*, p. 387.

Needless to say, the tools they use to express themselves—writing and analysis—are, in the words of the Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi, “exclusively male in our culture.”<sup>2</sup> By appropriating these tools, Arab women writers have abolished what Mernissi calls “symbolic castration”—the tradition that confined their mothers to “silence as the essence of femaleness and a key criterion of beauty.”<sup>3</sup>

It is not easy being a woman writer in Arab societies. The Egyptian novelist Salwa Bakr describes the problems facing her: “It is a heavy tax on many levels, especially in a society in which most individuals are illiterate, a society which is conservative by nature, whose values are static and which does not respect women in the first place. All this makes writing seem like the task of Sisyphus, particularly if the writer stops to wonder for whom she is writing.”<sup>4</sup> Despite these problems, Bakr declares that she has chosen writing “as a path to knowledge, liberation, and discovery of the world and myself.”<sup>5</sup> She acknowledges that initially writing was just a form of escape for her, a way to relieve her pent-up frustrations, but eventually it became a means of resistance and self-preservation: “At the start, writing was my true savior, through which I was able to express my repressed feelings, my anger and my views on the life which I had lived and was living. But with time, I found that writing was my real existence, that it was far from being merely a way to vent my repressed feelings. It was the real impulse that protected me from either madness or suicide.”<sup>6</sup> Writing also allows Bakr to engage in self-creation: “Within the space of the white page, I could construct my chosen religion, my own morality, my desired politics, my better world. Here I am really free, away from the illusory past and the nightmare present.”<sup>7</sup> The freedom which comes with creative writing explains the popularity of fiction and poetry among Arab women writers. Novels, short stories, and poems can be powerful vehicles for feminist thought, especially when invisibility and

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<sup>2</sup> Fatima Mernissi, *Doing Daily Battle: Interviews with Moroccan Women*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1989), p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15. For a discussion of how Arab women writers transform the “male tools” of language and writing, see Caroline Seymour-Jorn, “A New Language: Salwa Bakr on Depicting Egyptian Women’s Worlds,” *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 11, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 151–76.

<sup>4</sup> Bakr, “Writing as a Way Out,” p. 39.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

non-accountability are sought.<sup>8</sup> As Latifa al-Zayyat affirms: “Writing, in the many senses of the word, has always been for me an act of freedom. It has always been one of the ways in which I can reinvent my self and my society even if, within the same framework, I have exercised the freedom which writing gives in many different ways.”<sup>9</sup>

For many women authors, then, writing is intimately connected with the quest for freedom. This quest, which is shaped by a social system that opposes female autonomy, is a prevailing theme in their works of prose and poetry. As a repressed minority, the struggle to find their individual voices and articulate them stems from the need to establish their personal identities. Exploring the inner territory of self is therefore central to their writing and a common thread running through their texts. The Lebanese poet Thérèse Awwad speaks of a constant preoccupation with the self:

I revolve around my  
self around  
a nail its  
head is my  
head  
In my circuit  
my eyes roll  
in a wheel  
of lights  
that shroud me.<sup>10</sup>

Awwad confesses that all her thoughts are focused on herself and her private world. Some Arab male critics view all women’s writing as self-centered and thus dismiss it as having no literary merit. Arguing to the contrary, the novelist Fawziya Rashid not only justifies women’s attention to the experience of the self in all its nuances but also regards this focus as a sign of excellence: “The idea that women’s writing is self-centered must be an expression of distinctiveness, not of weakness or inadequacy, for this bridled self has the right to soar high in

<sup>8</sup> Badran and Cooke, *Opening the Gates*, p. xl.

<sup>9</sup> Latifa al-Zayyat, “My Experience with Writing,” in al-Zayyat, *The Owner of the House*, trans. Sophie Bennett (London: Quartet Books, 1997), p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Thérèse Awwad, “I Revolve Around,” in Kamal Boullata, ed. and trans. *Women of the Fertile Crescent: An Anthology of Modern Poetry by Arab Women* (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1978), p. 97.

the first place and to expose the nature of the oppression practiced against her.”<sup>11</sup>

Some feminist poetry expresses confusion, even doubt, about the self. In a melancholy poem entitled “I Am,” the Iraqi poet Nazik al-Mala’ika attempts to define who she is—without success. She acknowledges her awareness of the female collective self, but laments the elusiveness of her individual self:

The night asks me who I am  
 Its impenetrable black, its unquiet secret I am  
 Its lull rebellious.  
 I veil myself with silence  
 Wrapping my heart with doubt  
 Solemnly, I gaze  
 While ages ask me  
     who I am.

The wind asks me who I am  
 Its bedevilled spirit I am  
 Denied by Time, going nowhere  
 I journey on and on  
 Passing without a pause  
 And when reaching an edge  
 I think it may be the end  
 Of suffering, but then:  
     the void.

Time asks me who I am  
 A giant enfolding centuries I am  
 Later to give new births  
 I have created the dim past  
 From the bliss of unbound hope  
 I push it back into its grave  
 To make a new yesterday, its tomorrow  
 is ice.

The self asks me who I am  
 Battled, I stare into the dark  
 Nothing brings me peace  
 I ask, but the answer  
 Remains hooded in mirage  
 I keep thinking it is near  
 Upon reaching it, it dissolves.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Fawziya Rashid, “Writing and the Pursuit of Female Identity,” in Faqir, *In the House of Silence*, p. 128.

<sup>12</sup> Nazik al-Mala’ika, “I Am,” in Boullata, *Women of the Fertile Crescent*, p. 17.

In this poem, the self is perceived as embattled, conflicted, and alienated. An obscure identity is the cause of depression for the poet, who is weighed down by a vision of centuries-long female suffering and silence.

Increasingly, feminist poetry is about finding the self and, in articulating it, giving voice to the collective condition of women. The Palestinian poet Fadwa Tuqan asserts that her poems express the longings and sorrows of all Arab women who live in bondage:

My poetry has been a mirror  
Reflecting for every young girl  
Her frustrated, cruelly smothered soul.<sup>13</sup>

In a joyous poem entitled "I Found It," Tuqan declares that she has found her real self. She has rejected traditional notions of female fulfillment, stubbornly seeking her path to authentic selfhood. After a "long wandering" and a "tedious search," she has finally discovered her inner, poetic voice. Her poetry has not only liberated her but also empowered her, and now she can face the oppressive world with fortitude:

I found it!  
And now when the storms wail  
and the face of the sun is masked in clouds,  
when my shining fate revolves to dark,  
my light will never be extinguished!  
Everything that shadowed my life  
wrapping it with night after night  
has disappeared, laid down  
in memory's grave,  
since the day  
my soul found  
my soul.<sup>14</sup>

Since the path toward self-discovery is invariably arduous and fraught with dangers, it is only natural that women writers should capture it in images of labor pains and childbirth. This is illustrated by Andrée Chedid's poem "The Ever-Patient Woman":

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<sup>13</sup> Fadwa Tuqan, *Diwan Fadwa Tuqan* (Beirut: Dar al-'awda, 1978), p. 299; cited in Evelyne Accad and Rose Ghurayyib, *Contemporary Arab Women Writers and Poets* (Beirut: Beirut University College, 1985), p. 123.

<sup>14</sup> Fadwa Tuqan, "I Found It," in Salma Khadra Jayyusi, ed., *Modern Arabic Poetry: An Anthology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), pp. 461–62.

In the flowing sap  
 In her growing fever  
 Parting her veils  
 Cracking out her shells  
 Sliding out of her skins

The ever-patient woman  
 Slowly  
 gives herself  
 life

In her volcanoes  
 In her orchards  
 Seeking solidity and measure  
 Claspng her most tender flesh  
 Straining every fine-honed fiber

The ever-patient woman  
 Slowly  
 gives herself  
 light.<sup>15</sup>

In this poem, the process of becoming is likened to the process of giving birth to self. The woman gives herself “life” and “light” in an act of self-creation. The concepts of biological and creative birthing are thus fused through the unique female cycle of regeneration.

Finally, the importance of naming to self-definition is depicted by the poet Nadia Tueni, who alludes to the connection between one’s name and one’s place in the world:

It is a question of enduring  
 for in naming you I create you  
 each raindrop imprisons a sun  
 and the corrugated sky projects your face on the white  
 of the earth.<sup>16</sup>

This poem can be read as a mother addressing her daughter and naming her in an effort to enhance her individuality and envision her destiny. The act of naming is tantamount to an act of creation and can help change the possibilities for a future generation.

A recent anthology of autobiographical essays by contemporary Arab women writers, symbolically entitled *In the House of Silence*, presents a

<sup>15</sup> Andrée Chedid, “The Ever-Patient Woman,” in *Selected Poems of Andrée Chedid*, trans. Judy Cochran (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1995), p. 115.

<sup>16</sup> Nadia Tueni, “It’s a Question of Enduring,” in Boullata, *Women of the Fertile Crescent*, p. 110.

myriad of voices and testimonies that attempt to “write away” the fear, the prison, and the silence. The Iraqi novelist Alia Mamdouh speaks of her creative impulse: “I fought in a metaphorical sense to defend my freedom and independence, and I used an intangible weapon—writing—in order to hold in my hand something different, something tender—my own book.”<sup>17</sup> Mamdouh urges her fellow women authors to keep on writing: “We must be brave and accept that which turned our fear into a friend, and turned simplicity into creativity. Let us stand at the threshold of writing, which is also the threshold of all possibilities, allowing us to gain access to both the reader and that secret self who perhaps still crouches in the back row.”<sup>18</sup> Nawal El Saadawi, one of the most outspoken Arab feminists, exemplifies this attitude in her public as well as private life. Refusing to be silent, she divorced two husbands who were opposed to her literary pursuits. As she candidly remarks: “My pen was more important to me than my husband since by way of the pen I was able to express myself and realize my humanity.”<sup>19</sup>

The healing power of writing and the sense of reconciliation with others that it imparts are equally important for Arab women authors. Radwa Ashour states that writing helps her overcome her feeling of alienation. “I am an Arab woman and a citizen of the Third World,” she says, “and my heritage in both cases is stifled. I know this truth right down to the marrow of my bones, and I fear it to the extent that I write in self-defense and in defense of countless others with whom I identify or who are like me. I want to write because reality fills me with a sense of alienation. Silence only increases my alienation, while confession opens me up so that I may head out toward the others or they may come to me themselves.”<sup>20</sup> Most revealing is Ashour’s remark that the desire to bequeath to her daughter a positive legacy is part of what motivates her to write. “When I left childhood and untied the handkerchief that my mother and my aunt had left for me, I found in it its defeat,” she notes.<sup>21</sup> Attempting to answer the question, “What would I leave in *my* knotted handkerchief,” fuels her creative impulse and helps her persevere in the face of great difficulties. The fact that in

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<sup>17</sup> Mamdouh, “Creatures of Arab Fear,” p. 66.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>19</sup> Nawal El Saadawi, “Alone with Pen and Paper,” in Faqir, *In the House of Silence*, p. 117.

<sup>20</sup> Radwa Ashour, “My experience with Writing,” in Ghazoul and Harlow, *The View from Within*, p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

reality Ashour does not have a daughter and is speaking figuratively makes her remark all the more compelling.<sup>22</sup>

Crucially, transforming the silence into words requires the assumption of a new attitude to language and speech by women writers who want to get their message across. In "Love Song for Words," Nazik al-Mala'ika addresses this critical issue. Her poem depicts the dual potential of words to cause fear and pain as well as to bring hope and joy. Despite the wounding potential of words, resorting to silence is tantamount to death. Only through a courageous use of words can people weave their dreams and find a purpose and meaning in life:

Why do we fear words?  
 They can be rose-petal hands,  
 Cool, fragrant hands stroking our faces,  
 And sometimes cups of refreshing drink  
 Sipped in summer by thirsty lips.

Why do we fear words?  
 Some words are secret bells, the echoes  
 of their tone announces the start of a magic  
 And abundant time  
 Steeped in feeling and life,  
 So why should we fear words?

We took to silence  
 We did not want our secrets to pass our lips  
 We thought that words amassed an unseen monster  
 Pent up inside the letters, hiding from the ear of time  
 So we battened down the words  
 And did not let them spread the night for us  
 With a pillow of music, fragrance, hopes,  
 And warm cups.

Why do we fear words?  
 They are a back door of love through which  
 Tomorrows come, uncertain  
 Let us raise from words the drape of silence  
 They are a window of light in which appears  
 All that we have hidden and kept covered in our depths.  
 When will this tedious silence ever find  
 That now we love the words again?

And why do we fear words?  
 They are the friends that come to us

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<sup>22</sup> I am indebted to one of my anonymous reviewers for informing me of this fact.

From distant spaces in the soul  
 They surprise us, catch us unaware,  
 And sing for us, and a thousand ideas are born  
 Ideas that were dormant in us, never before expressed  
 But the friendly words, the words  
 Offer them as gifts:  
 Why should we love words?

\* \* \* \*

Why do we fear words?  
 Yesterday their thorns may have wounded us  
 But often they have taken us up in their arms  
 Perfuming with their sweetness our desire  
 If they stung us  
 If they left us cold  
 How many times did they touch us with a promise  
 Tomorrow they will lavish on us life and roses  
 Ah! Let them brim, our cups, with words!

One day we will build a nest of dreams with words  
 High up, a trellis for the ivies  
 For with poetry  
 Watered with words  
 We will build a balcony for modest roses  
 Its pillars made of words  
 And a pathway floating in the deep shade  
 Shielded by words.

Our life in innocence we dedicated  
 A prayer  
 To no one but to words.<sup>23</sup>

This poem, written by an innovative poet who popularized free verse in modern Arabic poetry, highlights the creative and liberating power of words, which can inspire people to take actions that change their destinies and transform their social realities.

### *Painting Critical Portraits of Mothers*

In removing the veil of silence that shrouds the most traditional social institution in Arab life—the family—Arab women writers venture into a forbidden territory: the private, sexual, political, and religious.

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<sup>23</sup> Nazik al-Mala'ika, "Love Song for Words," in Jayyusi, *Modern Arabic Poetry: An Anthology*, pp. 334–36.

Focusing on the experience of growing up female, they offer intimate accounts of child rearing practices, gender role socialization, family relationships, and family interaction. Many of these accounts depict the Arab family as a dysfunctional unit fraught with conflicts and as a central site of female oppression. They show how prevailing cultural values weave their way into the fabric of family life and influence every aspect of it, including the mother-daughter relationship. Frequently, this key family relationship is not only unnurturing but downright abusive. In narrative after narrative, the mother appears as a hostile figure, unloving, unkind, and unsympathetic to her daughter. Worse yet, she is an obstacle to her daughter's self-development, objecting to her education, condemning her quest for freedom and independence, and demanding conformity to custom and convention. The daughter cannot help but feel contempt, pity, and rage toward her submissive and subservient mother. She rejects the mother's legacy of victimization and refuses to be the vessel of her self-denial and frustration. In some instances, such as Fadwa Tuqan's *A Mountainous Journey* and Leila Ahmed's *A Border Passage*, she hates the mother to the point of matrophobia.

Matrophobia, as Adrienne Rich emphasizes, "is the fear not of one's mother or of motherhood but of *becoming one's mother*."<sup>24</sup> This fear stems from the daughter's recognition of traits of the mother in herself. To preserve her sense of identity, the daughter distances herself from her mother: "Matrophobia can be seen as a womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mothers' bondage, to become individuated and free. The mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr. Our personalities seem dangerously to blur and overlap with our mothers'; and, in a desperate attempt to know where mother ends and daughter begins, we perform radical surgery."<sup>25</sup> Such daughters rebel against their mothers and seek a lifestyle which is entirely different from that of their mothers.<sup>26</sup>

Layla Ba'labakki's first novel, *Ana ahya* (I Am Alive),<sup>27</sup> provides an example of personal rebellion which is fueled by matrophobia.

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<sup>24</sup> Rich, *Of Woman Born*, p. 235; emphasis in the original. Rich draws on the observations of the poet Lynn Sukenick.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 236.

<sup>26</sup> For further discussion of matrophobia, see Lawler, *Mothering the Self*, pp. 100–24.

<sup>27</sup> Layla Ba'labakki, *Ana ahya* (Beirut, 1958); French translation: *Je Vis!* (Paris, 1961). All quotations from this novel are my translation.

The heroine, Lina Fayyad, is alienated from every member of her family—her corrupt father, her powerless mother, her empty-headed siblings. Fighting to assert her individuality, she rejects everything her mother stands for: “Poor mother! she knows nothing of life except sharing a man’s bed, cooking his food, and raising his children” (pp. 112–13). Lina despises her mother for accepting the father’s tyranny and infidelity, viewing her submissive behavior as cowardice. She repeatedly exclaims, “I feel pity and loathing for my mother” (p. 20); “The sight of flesh, of my mother’s flesh, fills me with disgust” (p. 113). The mother’s efforts to supervise her activities arouse contempt in her. She openly declares: “I don’t care about my mother. I don’t love her. I have no respect for her. I’m just accustomed to having her in the house” (p. 259). Lina’s attempts to assert herself as a free and independent woman include getting a job, enrolling at the university, and conducting a love affair with a communist fellow student—all of which end in failure. In desperation, she tries to commit suicide by throwing herself in front of a car, only to fail again. In the end, she has no choice but to go back home: “I must always return home, to sleep in this home, to eat in this home, and to have my fate determined in this home” (p. 340).

Notably, it is not only the *powerless* mother who can cause a rebellion in her daughter. The *powerful* mother who is self-centered and consumed with bending her family members to her will is just as likely to cause her daughter to rebel. Such a mother does not transmit to her daughter the ability to be “unalterably herself,”<sup>28</sup> but rather a sense of deprivation, rivalry, and resentment. Radwa Ashour’s novel, *Khadija wa-Sawsan* (Khadija and Sawsan), illustrates this situation.<sup>29</sup> In this narrative, the mother, Khadija, is married to a wealthy physician and has a son and two daughters. She is free to come and go as she pleases and even develops a successful career as a hospital administrator. Despite her many blessings, she is arrogant, self-absorbed, and domineering. Instead of living in harmony with her family, she lords over her husband and constantly meddles in her children’s affairs, dictating what they should study, whom they should marry, and how they should live their lives. As a result, she alienates all of them, especially her son Sa‘ad and her younger daughter Sawsan. Even the mother-son relationship, traditionally close and strong in Arab families, is in this

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<sup>28</sup> Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966–1978* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979), p. 91.

<sup>29</sup> Radwa Ashour, *Khadija wa-Sawsan* (Cairo, 1989).

case irreparably strained by Khadija's tyrannical behavior. Ultimately, the mother is punished for her actions: her unhappy husband secretly takes another, more compassionate wife, her frustrated son commits suicide, and her rebellious daughter Sawsan finally breaks away from her. Although the mother is clearly the product of her patriarchal environment, her hunger for power has disastrous consequences for her family.

Matrophobic feelings wax and wane in the life course of the daughter; at times they are sublimated, and at other times they are resolved. Leila Ahmed's memoir, *A Border Passage*, illustrates how hard it is for a daughter to rid herself of matrophobic feelings and come to terms with her mother. Ahmed recounts that as a young girl she had a great admiration for her father, an accomplished engineer, but little appreciation for her mother, an upper-class woman of no profession who delegated her domestic duties to servants and did "nothing" with her life. The young Leila did not bond with her mother, who was reserved, remote, and strict. She also felt resentment toward her for wanting to abort her when she was pregnant with her. By contrast, she was deeply attached to her nanny, who looked after her all needs and was her closest companion in childhood and adolescence. Ahmed recalls a conversation with her mother in which she mentioned that she wanted to be a writer, to which her mother replied that she would like to tell her the story of her life so that she could write it. Anxious to distance herself from her mother's desires and convinced that the two of them had nothing in common, the teenage Leila was not enthused by the idea. "I was fifteen. Like many other girls that age, I was sure of one thing: I did not want to be like my mother. I was sure that I wasn't like her and would never grow up to be like her. I didn't want to think we were alike in anything, let alone in our deepest hearts' desires, and didn't at all want to think that I might indeed be her daughter" (p. 74). After Leila completed her college education in England she came home for a visit, only to discover that she could not return to England to pursue graduate studies, as she had hoped, because the Nasser government refused to grant her a passport. During the long period of time that she waited in her parents' apartment in Cairo for an exit visa, she suffered from a deep dread: "It was the dread that I, like my mother, would never have a professional life" (p. 21). This dread intensified as month after month passed without her getting the necessary papers.

“My mother’s life, a life in which (in my eyes in those days) she had ‘done’ nothing, pursued no profession, focused for me all those fears about my own future” (p. 21).

In retrospect, Ahmed regrets all those matrophobic thoughts and feelings. She acknowledges that her mother was the product of her particular times and upbringing; she had no choice in being strict with her, especially in sexual matters, given the rigid moral code of Egyptian society (pp. 81–82). Besides, her mother was not doing “nothing”: she was nursing the father, who became ill with chronic pneumonia, and coping with their impoverished economic circumstances. Looking back, Ahmed feels that she was unfair in judging her mother to be stupid and driven by meaningless beliefs. She particularly regrets not having recorded her mother’s life story, declaring: “What wouldn’t I give now for the gift of my mother’s passing on to me, in her own voice, her own and her people’s story” (p. 75). Even so, when she recalls how her father admired her mother’s voice and always said that she could have been a professional singer, she cannot help reverting to her stereotypical images: “‘But Mother was not a professional anything!’ I find myself involuntarily thinking, in a thought that is really only an echo or ghost of an old thought that I once harbored intensely and angrily as an adolescent. Such thoughts live on and shape how we see our past, even when we know them to be products of false perceptions and old, unexamined prejudices—prejudices even against our own kind and the most cherished people in our lives” (p. 24). The adult Leila, who has become a distinguished feminist scholar, is clearly more understanding of, and sympathetic to, her mother. As is often the case, the process of reconciliation between mother and daughter occurs only after the mother’s death.

The overwhelmingly negative images of mothers in Arab women’s literature call for some explanation. Joseph Zeidan attributes this phenomenon in part to the semi-autobiographical nature of many of the novels by Arab women. The writers’ association of their own mothers with traditional, oppressive ways, and the fact that many of these writers are neither wives nor mothers explain why their heroines reject and vilify the mother figure.<sup>30</sup> He also suggests that the “bad mother” theme is part of the psychological process of declaring independence

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<sup>30</sup> Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelist*, p. 233.

in the “feminist” stage of Arab women’s literature of the 1960s.<sup>31</sup> In his view, much of the hostility between Arab mothers and daughters stems from a cultural obsession with the notion of family honor which is tied to a girl’s chastity before marriage and fidelity after marriage. The mother’s responsibility for guarding her daughter’s morality compels her to keep her under strict supervision.<sup>32</sup> The Algerian woman writer Zhor Ounissi puts it in blunt terms: “Whoever has a daughter has a time bomb and to prevent the bomb exploding, you must hasten to place it in a safe place. To hide it and reduce it minimizes risk and preserves honor until that daughter may become a wife.”<sup>33</sup> This powerful metaphor shows the paramount importance of the cultural context for understanding Arab mothers’ behavior. Zeidan explains their situation as follows:

Like women in many patriarchal societies they are sometimes in the very difficult position of having to negotiate power for themselves at the expense of other women’s power and of wanting to find validation for their own lives, based on old ways, in the lives of daughters who want to destroy the old order. The threat of invalidation of life experience, combined with the intense pressure on women and mothers to protect the family honor even from things beyond their control is more than enough to create a “bad mother” from a daughter’s point of view—especially if the daughter is rebelling against tradition. A mother may be “portrayed” by the daughter as an evil and willing tool of patriarchy, but such a mother is entangled in a complex web of power struggles and is not simply “the enemy.”<sup>34</sup>

This explanation echoes Fatima Mernissi’s observation about the tyrannical figure of the mother-in-law. Mernissi writes that the anti-privacy structure of Moroccan society facilitates and almost requires the mother-in-law’s intervention in her son’s relationship with his wife: “It is the structure that determines everyone’s roles and leaves specific outlets for the individual’s cravings and wishes. It is the structure that is cruel, not the mother-in-law.”<sup>35</sup>

Indeed, many feminist writers consider “mother-blaming” unfair and a form of prejudice. As Adrienne Rich critically remarks: “Easier by far to hate and reject a mother outright rather than to see beyond

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp. 143–44.

<sup>33</sup> Zhor Ounissi, “Birth of a Writer,” in Faqir, *In the House of Silence*, p. 153.

<sup>34</sup> Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists*, pp. 144–45.

<sup>35</sup> Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, p. 135.

her to the forces acting upon her.”<sup>36</sup> These feminists put the blame for the conflict between mothers and daughters on patriarchal culture. Other feminists take issue with this position, arguing that an emphasis on patriarchal oppression removes personal responsibility from women, thereby implying a lack of agency and total victimization.<sup>37</sup> As the novels discussed in this study show, not all the female characters, be they mothers or daughters, are helpless victims or mere spectators with respect to their lives. In Alia Mamdouh’s *Mothballs*, the grandmother is the real power in the household and the moral authority to whom all the family members look for love and approval. The young granddaughter, Huda, allies herself with her grandmother, seeking compensation for the loss of her mother and protection from her ruthless father. Through the grandmother’s strength, wisdom, and courage, Huda’s family is able to survive successive crises, move to a new neighborhood, and open a new chapter in their lives.

In Fatima Mernissi’s *Dreams of Trespass*, there is a legacy of nurturance, empowerment, and solidarity extending over three generations of women, from Grandmother Yasmina to her daughter Khadija to her granddaughter Fatima. Both mother and grandmother instill in Fatima ideas of freedom and equality, teaching her to rebel against injustice and to create her own happiness. Although Grandmother Yasmina lives in a harem with eight other co-wives, she is not powerless but extraordinarily resourceful. She is able to carve out her own living space, obtain a measure of freedom, and “get away with murder” (p. 152) thanks to her wits and daring. Fatima’s mother, too, is credited with many small but revolutionary acts: she replaces the traditional thick cotton veil with the small sheer chiffon *litham*, and the long and heavy *haik* (wrap) with the tight and colorful *djellaba* (men’s cloak); she embroiders modern designs of birds and wings rather than traditional patterns; she has occasional private dinners with her husband and children on the roof terrace and regular late morning breakfasts by herself instead of the obligatory communal meals. These bold violations of the “sacred frontiers” or prescribed rules of conduct show that even in a harem women can display agency, free will, and personal responsibility.

<sup>36</sup> Rich, *Of Woman Born*, p. 235; see also Phillips, *Beyond the Myths*, pp. 196–98.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Walters, *Lives Together, Worlds Apart*, pp. 160–61, 235.

Similarly, in Hanan al-Shaykh's novel *The Story of Zahra*, which depicts a dysfunctional Arab family life, Zahra's mother is neither passive nor silent. She acts out her fantasies and satisfies her erotic desires by conducting extramarital love affairs under her husband's nose. Her freedom of choice extends to her reproductive function: in retaliation against her tyrannical husband, she refuses to bear him any more children and resorts to a self-induced abortion when she gets pregnant. In her relentless pursuit of sexual fulfillment, she is abusive toward her daughter to the point of inducing in her bouts of madness.

These examples demonstrate that far from being victims or captives in the hands of fathers or husbands, these heroines are largely agents of their own actions, weaving the narratives of their lives. As Gerda Lerner, in her insightful study *The Creation of Patriarchy*, observes: "While all women have been victimized in certain aspects of their lives and some, at certain times, more than others, women are structured into society in such a way that they are both subjects and agents."<sup>38</sup> Her analysis of the origins of the collective subordination of women by men shows that "the 'dialectic of women's history,' the complex pull of contradictory forces upon women, makes them simultaneously marginal and central to historical events."<sup>39</sup> It is therefore misleading and ahistorical to conceptualize women as a group primarily as victims. Such an approach is counterproductive to consciousness-raising in women and to their empowerment, both of which are crucial for improving the mother-daughter relationship.<sup>40</sup>

Critical portraits of mother-daughter relationships are common to feminist writing the world over.<sup>41</sup> However, the relationship between mothers and daughters in Arab families is affected by a number of age-old customs and traditions that have no parallel in the West. The main culture-specific factors that impact this relationship in Arab families have been discussed in detail at the outset of this work (see chapter 2). Nevertheless, it is useful to recapitulate some of the practices that are singled out for special criticism by Arab women writers. The most controversial and pernicious among these practices is female circumcision.

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<sup>38</sup> Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 234.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> See also Phillips, *Beyond the Myths*, p. 150.

<sup>41</sup> Hirsch's study, *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, presents many examples to this effect.

The devastating effects of this ritual on the psyche of the daughter are documented by Nawal El Saadawi in her seminal book, *The Hidden Face of Eve*. El Saadawi recounts her own experience of being circumcised at the age of six, candidly describing her fear, pain, and mutilation. She writes that what traumatized her the most was to see her own mother participate in the ritual: "I did not know what they had cut off from my body, and I did not try to find out. I just wept, and called out to my mother for help. But the worst shock of all was when I looked around and found her standing by my side. Yes, it was her, I could not be mistaken, in flesh and blood, right in the midst of these strangers, talking to them and smiling at them, as though they had not participated in slaughtering her daughter a few moments ago."<sup>42</sup> El Saadawi emphasizes that the memory of her circumcision has continued to haunt her like a nightmare throughout her life: "Even when I had grown up and graduated as a doctor in 1955, I could not forget the painful incident that had made me lose my childhood once and for all, and that deprived me during my youth and for many years of married life from enjoying the fullness of my sexuality and the completeness of life that can only come from all round psychological equilibrium."<sup>43</sup> The feelings of anger and rebellion that overwhelm her when she recalls this "barbaric procedure" are exacerbated by her inability to understand why girls are subjected to it: "Time and again I asked myself the question: 'Why? Why?' But I could never get an answer to this question."<sup>44</sup>

The custom of arranged marriage is another source of conflict between mothers and daughters in Arab families. Many girls regard arranged marriage as a threat to their future happiness. Their apprehension stems from the fact that they have no say in choosing their prospective husbands, who may be complete strangers to them. The central role that mothers play in this custom can strain their relationships with their daughters. Often negotiated in secrecy and presented as a woman's destiny, arranged marriage is a lifelong trap for women whose well-being is totally dependent on their husbands. A girl is

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<sup>42</sup> El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, p. 8.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* Two other women writers who have courageously addressed the issue of female circumcision are Evelyne Accad, in her novel *L'Excisée*, and Alifa Rifaat, in her short story "Who Will be the Man?" See the bibliography for the publication data of these texts.

expected to waive her right to refuse it and obey her parents' wishes. The tragedy of a girl who is forced to marry a man she does not love is a recurrent theme in Arab women's literature. Samira Azzam's short story, "Fate," which is set in a Christian Arab family, illustrates a girl's inability to extricate herself from an arranged marriage that she knows full well is doomed to failure.<sup>45</sup> The heroine finds no understanding in her mother, who is motivated by a different set of priorities: "Her mother had always had the same outlook on life and the same standards. Now in her fifties, all that concerned her was the chance to be the one to choose a husband for her daughter—a husband to whom she could entrust her. Her first aim was that he should be well-off, for to her money meant a comfortable life and a social status which must be secured."<sup>46</sup> The daughter, however, has a different image of her future husband: kind, romantic, and educated, he would also be her soul mate. Under constant pressure from her mother and female relatives, she finds herself surrendering her ideals, dreams, and ambitions. Her belated attempt to rebel during the marriage ceremony fails, for her cry of refusal is drowned by the voices of all the guests who are singing the wedding hymn and sealing her fate.

"Every culture invents its special version of the mother-son relationship," writes Adrienne Rich.<sup>47</sup> In Arab culture the mother-son relationship is traditionally close and strong. As this attachment is commonly expressed in the mother's preferential treatment of her son, it inevitably creates tensions in her relationship with her daughter. Arab women's literature abounds in narratives of daughters who accuse their mothers of discriminating between them and their brothers. In Huda Shaarawi's memoirs, *Harem Years*, the unlimited love and attention that the mother bestowed on her son made her daughter, Huda, ill with jealousy. In Samar Attar's *Lina: A Portrait of a Damascene Girl*, Lina resents her mother for showing blind adulation toward the son. She relates that after he left home to serve in the army, the mother would read his letters to her visitors several times, repeating his boring comments about the rainy weather and evenings spent in playing cards and smoking "as if she were a pupil in the

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<sup>45</sup> Samira Azzam, "Fate," trans. Yasir Suleiman, in Cohen-Mor, *A Matter of Fate*, pp. 148–57.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>47</sup> Rich, *Of Woman Born*, p. 202.

second grade, trying to memorize verses from the Qur'an."<sup>48</sup> Similarly, in Hanan al-Shaykh's novel *The Story of Zahra*, Zahra painfully registers the many acts of favoritism displayed toward her brother, Ahmad, by her mother: "Meat continued to be for Ahmad. Eggs were for Ahmad. So were the fattest olives. If Ahmad was late arriving home, my mother would rumple his bed and push a pillow down under the bedclothes. If my father asked, she would mumble, 'Ahmad is sleeping.' She lied for her son, even when he tried to steal her gold bracelets as she slept."<sup>49</sup> In an autobiographical essay entitled "Alone with Pen and Paper," Nawal El Saadawi asks in exasperation: "Is it a flaw in the system or in the whole universe? For my mother said that it was God who favored my brother over me even though my brother failed [his final exams] every year!"<sup>50</sup>

Still, the absence of favoritism toward the son does not guarantee intimate bonding between mother and daughter, as demonstrated by Leila Ahmed's *A Border Passage*. Nor does the absence of a son in the family guarantee adequate mothering for the daughter, as demonstrated by Miral al-Tahawy's *The Tent*. In this novel, the mother is so grief-stricken over her failure to produce a son that she becomes emotionally and physically unavailable to her daughters. The tragedy of the sonless mother takes the heaviest toll on her youngest daughter, Fatima, who is haunted by memories of her sick mother lying in bed and sobbing uncontrollably. After the mother's death from complications arising from her last miscarriage, Fatima is raised by her paternal grandmother, Hakima, a hard-hearted woman with sexist attitudes. Notably, the relationship of the father with Hakima, that is, the mother-son relationship, is more stable and affectionate than the father's relationship with any of his three successive wives.

The preceding examples illustrate some of the culture-specific factors that can spoil the relationship between mothers and daughters in Arab families. Notwithstanding these obstacles, many mothers and daughters succeed in developing close and loving ties that enrich their lives, enhance their well-being, and sustain them in times of need.

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<sup>48</sup> Attar, *Lina*, p. 66.

<sup>49</sup> Hanan al-Shaykh, *The Story of Zahra*, trans. Peter Ford (London: Quartet Books, 1986), p. 20.

<sup>50</sup> El Saadawi, "Alone with Pen and Paper," p. 114.

*Dispelling Popular Images and Myths*

In breaking the silence surrounding the private domain of family life, Arab women writers dismantle the ideology that glorifies the family and expose the raw nerve of this sacred institution. They show that the Arab family is in a crisis that is affecting many of its basic premises and goals. The family is not a source of nurturance, solidarity, and blissful harmony but rather a site of oppression and discrimination. In particular, the home is not the right place for a woman to reach her full psychological and intellectual development. In highlighting the flaws in the fabric of family life and their effects on family members and family dynamics, especially the mother-daughter bond, these writers dispel popular myths about mothers and daughters. Three of these myths, which are central to women's relationships, are discussed below.

I. *The Orange and Its Navel*

The image of the orange and its navel predominates in Hanan al-Shaykh's novel, *The Story of Zahra*.<sup>51</sup> The heroine, Zahra, repeatedly uses this image to express her desire for closeness with her mother while acknowledging that the emotional distance between them is growing bigger all the time. The mother, who was forced into an arranged marriage with her husband and then prevented from getting a divorce, takes Zahra along with her to her secret meetings with her lovers. When she was a little girl, Zahra thought this meant that she and her mother were inseparable, "like the orange and its navel." But as she grew older, she realized that her mother always took her along because she needed protection from the ever-watchful eyes of her jealous and brutal husband.

The image of the orange and its navel suggests two contradictory ideas: closeness (intimacy) and suffocation. On the one hand, the navel is enveloped by the orange just as the embryo is enclosed in the womb

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<sup>51</sup> This novel, which is considered groundbreaking in its treatment of female sexuality and female madness, has enjoyed numerous critical reviews. See, for example, Evelyne Accad, *Sexuality and War: Literary Masks of the Middle East* (New York: New York University Press, 1990), pp. 43–63; Roger Allen, *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995), pp. 231–43; and Sabah Ghandour, "Hanan al-Shaykh's *Hikayat Zahra*: A Counter-Narrative and a Counter-History," in Majaj et al., *Intersections*, pp. 231–52.

of its mother, a state which denotes warmth, safety, and harmony. On the other hand, the navel is a nonviable fruit. It is trapped within the orange without the possibility of separation or having an independent existence. The double-edged quality of this image captures the problematic nature of the mother-daughter relationship in this novel. Zahra yearns for a symbiotic bond with her mother, an emotional and physical closeness that will nurture her and provide her with love, security, and support. However, fusion with the mother entails a regression to an infantile state, a condition which is detrimental to her process of individuation and development into a mature adult who can function independently. The dilemma of fusion/separation is not resolved, and Zahra continues to oscillate between her need to escape the unhealthy ties that bind her to her mother, so she can establish her own identity, and her desire to recreate the umbilical cord that connects mother and child, a desire expressed by assuming the fetal position whenever she locks herself in the bedroom or the bathroom. This ambivalence, which is a source of anxiety and confusion for Zahra, contributes to her unstable mental state and nervous breakdowns.

Despite the repeated references to the orange-navel image throughout the narrative, the idea of intimacy is subverted at every turn.<sup>52</sup> The type of mothering that Zahra receives is not marked by care, tenderness, and compassion but by neglect, deprivation, and victimization. The mother manipulates her daughter as a human shield, and the father uses her as a punching bag, beating her savagely in an attempt to extract a confession from her about her mother's infidelity. Despite Zahra's loyalty to her mother, she is not rewarded with any act of kindness: the mother rejects her and favors the son Ahmad. Worse yet, she ridicules Zahra about her pimpled, pock-marked face and bow-shaped legs, calls her "unhinged" and an "old maid," and regards her as a laughing stock. She even doubts her daughter's sexuality. On hearing that Zahra's husband slept with her during their short-lived marriage, she exclaims: "Dear God, I don't believe it! If I saw it with my own eyes, I couldn't believe it."<sup>53</sup> She shatters Zahra's self-image and self-esteem, instilling in her doubts about her worth and pessimism about her future. No wonder that the daughter's feelings of inadequacy and self-hatred find expression in neurotic and psychotic behavior.

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<sup>52</sup> Allen, *The Arabic Novel*, p. 236.

<sup>53</sup> Al-Shaykh, *The Story of Zahra*, p. 173.

The abusive relationship between mother and daughter is the outcome of a dysfunctional family life fraught with tremendous conflict and tension. The father is a tyrannical figure who terrorizes the household with his violent temper and leather belt. The son is pampered and corrupt and has no regard for law or morality. The mother is an adulterous woman who practices deception and trickery. Zahra feels alienated and isolated from all her family members, who are united only in their fear and hatred of the brutal father. Characteristically, this dysfunctional family fails to provide its members with the basic modeling and interpersonal skills necessary for forging close ties with significant others. Zahra is unable to develop a clear sense of self and has no capacity to engage in a mature, meaningful, and lasting relationship with any of her lovers. As a result, she drifts from one man to another, from Malek to Majed to the sniper, all of whom exploit her sexually and push her closer to the brink of self-annihilation.

Twice Zahra attempts to escape the intolerable atmosphere of her family by visiting her uncle in Africa, where she accepts the marriage proposal of his friend, Majed, only to discover that her marriage collapses over the issue of her virginity. When she returns to her parents' home in Beirut, the civil war is raging and the city is ravaged by explosions, shootings, and random killings. Curiously, Zahra's mental condition improves dramatically amid the chaos of war. Her partial recovery is due to a combination of facts: that she has to focus all her skills on survival, that her parents are not at home, having fled to the mountains, and that the moral values of her society are shaken and suspended. Zahra finds sexual fulfillment in the arms of a brutal sniper on the rooftop of an apartment building. She fantasizes that her affair is a mission to save lives from the bullets of the sniper. When the sniper learns that she is pregnant and abortion is no longer possible, he kills her.

Zahra's dysfunctional family is symbolic of her society as a whole. As a microcosm of society, the family reveals the structure, values, and inner dynamics of the wider community. The reciprocal relationship between the family and the society implies that the ills of the one are mirrored in the other, and vice versa. Although the mother's behavior has to be understood in the context of a patriarchal culture that forced her into a loveless marriage, she is not merely a passive victim. Her abusive behavior toward her daughter is a voluntary expression of her own will. After all, when she wants to meet her lover, she does not hesitate to violate the rules of patriarchal society. And after becoming

a *hajja* (i.e., making the pilgrimage to Mecca), she again asserts her own will: she severs her links with her past and begins to wear a black veil, a black coat, and heavy stockings. Belatedly, she even begins to show some interest in her daughter, acting as “a worrying mother, concerned for her daughter’s future after giving up hope of ever making a future for her son Ahmad.”<sup>54</sup> Despite her apparent repentance, the mother fails to mend her relationship with her daughter. Thus in this novel the notion of the orange and its navel as signifying intimacy between mother and daughter is a fallacy, a myth far removed from reality. Instead, what remains of this metaphor is the opposite, negative idea of entrapment and suffocation.

Arab women’s literature abounds in narratives that lament the lack of intimacy between mothers and daughters. This complaint is common to Fadwa Tuqan’s *A Mountainous Journey*, Latifa al-Zayyat’s *The Open Door*, Hanan al-Shaykh’s *Women of sand and Myrrh*, Leila Ahmed’s *A Border Passage*, and Samar Attar’s *Lina: A Portrait of a Damascene Girl*. Alifa Rifaat’s short story, “Thursday Lunch,”<sup>55</sup> provides yet another example of a distant mother-daughter relationship. The story is intriguing because it is told from the perspective of a woman who feels doubly estranged, first from her mother and then from her daughter. The heroine is a middle-aged Cairene housewife whose marriage is on the rocks. Depressed, she wishes to unburden her heart to someone but discovers that she has no friend she can go to in time of need. Her daughter is busy raising her young family, her older son is self-centered, and her younger son is preoccupied with his studies. To excuse her children’s lack of attention to her, she tells herself: “Anyway, a mother did not discuss such things with her children” (p. 18). Every Thursday, she dutifully visits her old, widowed mother, who lives by herself in an apartment of her own, and has lunch with her. As she walks to her mother’s place, her thoughts are gloomy: “The prospect of spending three or more hours with her appalled me. How closed in and self-contained she was! With the years I had felt that the gap between our ages had narrowed and that we had become no more than two old ladies. Was it not therefore strange that a closer and less rigid relationship had not developed between us? Yet, in her presence, I was still that little girl who didn’t dare tell her when she

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>55</sup> In Rifaat, *Distant View of a Minaret*, pp. 17–22.

had had her first period and instead confided in her elder sister, with whom I had remained so close until her recent death. Who, though, was to blame? I who didn't find the courage or my mother who made me feel that courage was needed to face her? Perhaps the reason for the gulf that separated us was that she was the product of a different upbringing and had lived in times that were easier" (p. 19). The visit unsettles the daughter, whose conversation with her mother remains limited to trite sentences about the rising prices of food and the congested traffic in the city. She cannot help feeling lonely and estranged: "I thought how distant and separated we were, each one of us in her own world. I wished that it were possible, just for once, for us to make contact and for me to talk openly to her about my bewilderment as I faced a problem whose dimensions I couldn't define. I knew, though, that this was out of the question, and the wish was suddenly replaced by a pressing desire to escape" (pp. 21-22). As the daughter prepares to leave, her mother reproachfully reminds her that she forgot it was the anniversary of her father's death: "Today is twenty-four years since he died, and not a day has passed without my thinking of him," she says (p. 22). Meeting her mother's gaze, the daughter notices that her eyes are filled with tears. It then dawns on her that her mother's tender feelings are reserved solely for her father, even so many years after his death.

## II. *Paradise Lies at the Feet of Mothers*

This much-quoted saying, attributed by tradition to the prophet Muhammad, reflects the lofty position of motherhood in Islam. The primary meaning of this saying is that paradise awaits those who cherish, obey, and serve their mothers.<sup>56</sup> Although the Koran and the Hadith enjoin on believers to treat both parents well, the mother is given primacy on account of her tireless efforts for the sake of her family. Complying with this injunction confers upon believers the greatest reward: a place in paradise, whereas neglecting it is a grave sin that will bar them from attaining eternal bliss.<sup>57</sup>

The immense importance of motherhood in Islam is further reflected in traditions that equate it with the concept of martyrdom. According to a famous tradition, "during pregnancy and nursing, the believing

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<sup>56</sup> Schleifer, *Motherhood in Islam*, pp. 7, 10-12.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 7, 9, 27.

mother is like the soldier on active duty. If she dies, she gets the reward reserved for a martyr.<sup>58</sup> The idea that domestic responsibilities are the all-important task of the Muslim woman is expressed in another famous tradition which says to women: "Take care of the home. That is your jihad."<sup>59</sup> An Islamist commentator explains: "Jihad is the epitome of Islamic life. Declaring homemaking as jihad for women is giving it the highest possible status in an Islamic society."<sup>60</sup>

Rebelling against this ideology, many heroines in Arab women's literature reject the institution of motherhood and question the traditions that sanction it. A most revealing incident is woven into *The Story of Zahra* by Hanan al-Shaykh. Although Zahra is a good student in school and gets high grades, when asked to write a composition on the topic of "Paradise lies at the feet of mothers," she hands in a blank page, claims that she is sick, and asks to be excused.<sup>61</sup> Given the type of mothering that Zahra received as a child, it is not surprising that she rejects the notion that her mother deserves to be treated with respect and gratitude. As for the mother, her rebellion against the ideal of motherhood is violently expressed in self-induced abortions to avoid having more children by her hated husband. She even puts on display the tiny aborted embryos of a set of twins, letting them float in a porcelain soup dish for visitors to see. Zahra recalls the suspicious reactions of the neighbors, one of whom asked her mother: "Why abortion after abortion?"<sup>62</sup> She also recalls the triumphant expression on her mother's face: "My mother would lean on a neighbor to visit the bathroom. Then she would return to bed, pale, yet with happiness almost jumping from her glistening eyes."<sup>63</sup> For Zahra's mother, abortion is an act of self-assertion in the face of male domination. It signifies her right to self-determination and her control over her own body. As such, it amounts to a subversive activity against patriarchal society.

The subversion of motherhood through attempted abortion also features in Fadwa Tuqan's autobiography, *A Mountainous Journey*. At the very outset of this self-narrative, Tuqan declares: "I emerged from the darkness of the womb into a world unprepared to accept me.

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<sup>58</sup> Baig, *First Things First*, p. 260; see also Schleifer, *Motherhood in Islam*, pp. 1–3, 51–58.

<sup>59</sup> Musnad Ahmad, hadith 23257; cited in Baig, *First Things First*, p. 260.

<sup>60</sup> Baig, *First Things First*, p. 272.

<sup>61</sup> Al-Shaykh, *The Story of Zahra*, p. 168.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

My mother had tried to get rid of me during the first months of her pregnancy. Despite repeated attempts, she failed.”<sup>64</sup> As the feminist scholar Fedwa Malti-Douglas observes, this “aborted abortion” undermines the “romantic myths of biological maternity” and calls into question the ideal of motherhood. “Motherhood, a quasi-sacred activity and the life dream of virtually all Middle Eastern women—and, among the uneducated,<sup>65</sup> their only access to status—is demystified and subverted,” she writes. “The repeated unsuccessful attempts to eliminate the fetus add failure and impotence to the rejection of motherhood. In the process, not only is the ideal of motherhood itself subverted, but so also are the mother herself, her power, and the idea of patriarchy.”<sup>66</sup> Malti-Douglas defines Tuqan’s autobiography as a matrophobic text, a term which, as previously noted, implies hatred stemming from the fear of becoming one’s mother. This subliminal fear explains why Tuqan provides a detailed account of her mother’s burden of successive pregnancies, births, and nursing. Married at eleven, the mother was not yet fifteen when she bore her first son. Because her husband believed that “wealth and sons were life’s status symbols” (p. 13), she went on to produce ten children. To some extent, this detailed account reflects an attempt on Tuqan’s part to rationalize her mother’s desire to abort her. However, it does not alter the negative portrayal of her mother as the main agent of oppression in her childhood. In fact, Tuqan’s denunciation of the mother figure and motherhood extends to all the women in her family, who, in her view, were reduced to a rudimentary level of existence centered solely around the fulfillment of their reproductive function: “The house was like a large coop filled with domesticated birds, content to peck the feed thrown to them, without argument. That was their be-all and end-all. The vocation of those tame birds was limited to hatching the chicks and wasting the days of their lives moving between the large brass cooking pots and firewood burning constantly in the stoves, winter and summer.”<sup>67</sup> Tuqan makes it clear that the female company in her family home offered her nothing by way of intellectual stimulation and only increased her alienation.

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<sup>64</sup> Tuqan, *A Mountainous Journey*, p. 12.

<sup>65</sup> The phrase “among the uneducated” appears in Malti-Douglas’s introduction to *A Mountainous Journey*, p. 3, but not in her discussion of Tuqan’s autobiography in *Woman’s Body, Woman’s Word*, p. 165.

<sup>66</sup> Malti-Douglas, *Woman’s Body, Woman’s Word*, p. 165.

<sup>67</sup> Tuqan, *A Mountainous Journey*, p. 110.

In an essay entitled “Creative Women in Changing Societies,” Nawal El Saadawi writes that motherhood in Arab societies has become a tool of oppression rather than a creative activity for women: “The patriarchal class system has robbed the woman of her most precious possession, namely her mind, and has replaced it with the hymen (an Arab proverb says that a girl’s virginity is her most precious possession). The woman has been deprived of her capacity for mental, psychological and even physical creativity. Her capacity for child-bearing and her creative human motherhood have been transformed into bonds, burdens and agony, all of which exhaust and weaken her, rather than strengthen or develop her abilities.”<sup>68</sup> El Saadawi believes that this is why the number of creative women in the Arab world is small. The overwhelming majority of Arab women expend all their energies in the never-ending household work and the struggle to make a living.

Although Arab women writers constitute a small minority, their voices resonate loud and clear. “The words are being spoken now, are being written down; the taboos are being broken, the masks of motherhood are cracking through,” says Adrienne Rich of women under patriarchy.<sup>69</sup> No longer are old ways and values accepted as self-evident truths. The search for authentic selfhood propels Arab heroines to explore alternative careers and lifestyles. In Samar Attar’s *Lina: A portrait of a Damascene Girl*, the youngest daughter rejects a life of passive domesticity and seeks other avenues of self-fulfillment than marriage and motherhood. Unable to reconcile the words of her religion teacher, “If you obey your parents, then you’ll go to heaven” (p. 12), with her quest for freedom, she decides to leave her family, society, and country and emigrate to the West.

Ulfat al-Idilbi’s novel, *Sabriya, Damascus Bitter Sweet*, criticizes the traditional virtue of filial obedience and shows the pitfalls embedded in the saying “Paradise lies at the feet of mothers.” Although it is incumbent on both son and daughter to serve their parents and look after them in sickness and in old age, the duty usually falls on the daughter’s shoulders. This filial duty may require total self-denial and self-sacrifice from the daughter, resulting in her entrapment in a seemingly noble service that deprives her of a chance to have a life of her own. In this novel, the heroine, Sabriya, is forbidden to marry

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<sup>68</sup> El Saadawi, *The Nawal El Saadawi Reader*, p. 222.

<sup>69</sup> Rich, *Of Woman Born*, pp. 24–25.

the man she loves, to complete her education, and to participate in the national revolt against the French colonial regime. Instead, she is burdened with the care of her elderly parents while her two married brothers selfishly attend to their own affairs. Sabriya devotes the prime years of her life to nursing first her sick mother and then her invalid father, feeling trapped and enslaved. After both of her parents die, she learns that her greedy brothers scheme to evict her from the family home. Betrayed and forsaken, the middle-aged Sabriya chooses to hang herself rather than suffer the disgrace of becoming homeless. The heroine's tragedy shows the flip side of the saying "Paradise lies at the feet of mothers" and how easily it can become a tool of exploitation and oppression of daughters. Her suicide is a desperate protest against her society whose norms and values have kept her in bondage and stifled all her hopes and ambitions.

### III. *A Sister to Scheherazade*

This literary reference to the famous storyteller of *The Thousand and One Nights*, who, with the help of her sister, Dunyazad, escapes death and saves the female species from extinction, is the title of a novel by the acclaimed Algerian writer Assia Djebar.<sup>70</sup> The novel, true to the spirit of sisterhood demonstrated by these heroines from Arab folklore, portrays the bond of solidarity forged between two co-wives, Isma and Hajila. Isma, older and emancipated, is the complete opposite of the traditional, cloistered Hajila. It is Isma who guides Hajila on a journey out of the harem and offers her the key to her own freedom.<sup>71</sup> In depicting the co-wives as allies rather than as rivals, Djebar calls on women to support and protect one another in the struggle against male domination. The commitment of one woman to another will result in the empowerment of both. At the same time, Djebar denounces Hajila's mother for sacrificing her daughter: "The matriarchs swaddle their little girls in their own insidious anguish, before they even reach puberty. Mother and daughter, O harem restored!"<sup>72</sup> By constantly reminding the reader that Scheherazade needed the complicity of her

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<sup>70</sup> Assia Djebar, *A Sister to Scheherazade*, trans. Dorothy S. Blair (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1993).

<sup>71</sup> For an analysis of this novel, see Mildred Mortimer, *Journeys through the French African Novel* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1990), pp. 157–64.

<sup>72</sup> Djebar, *A Sister to Scheherazade*, p. 145.

sister Dunyazad to save her life, Djebbar “makes a fervent appeal for an end to the rivalry that defeats women by keeping them apart, unaware of their potential strength through female bonding.”<sup>73</sup>

The issue of solidarity between women in general and mothers and daughters in particular is central to Arab feminist writing. While many authors emphasize the crucial importance of female solidarity for women’s liberation, they acknowledge that it is sorely lacking among women. Many literary texts depict the relationships between women as poor and fraught with conflict, tension, and hostility. They thus dispel the romantic notion that because women as a group are oppressed in Arab societies they are inevitably united by a strong sense of solidarity. The absence of solidarity is largely blamed on the patriarchal structure and values of society, which pit women against women.

For the Egyptian author Salwa Bakr, the ideal of female solidarity is removed from reality. When asked in an interview whether her characters, once overcome by the miseries of their lives, can count on their mothers or sisters to provide help, she gave a negative reply: “The social concept of a woman is to be a wife and mother. To do her duty and to help her daughter get married. This is the important thing. And if her daughter suffers, never will the mother [want] her to be divorced! Mothering is a mission here—it’s not a real feeling. And women here don’t have time to be friends. It’s men who have this. Just look around you.”<sup>74</sup> Only in prison do the women in her novel, *The Golden Chariot*, forge friendships that give them some mutual support and protection.

In Leila Abouzeid’s autobiographical novel, *The Last Chapter*,<sup>75</sup> the notion of female solidarity is thoroughly discredited. The heroine, Aisha, an educated and liberated Moroccan woman, has no trust in women and what she calls the “trap of friendship” (p. 7). Recounting the breakup of her engagement to her fiancé owing to interference by his sister, who was strongly opposed to their marriage, she tells her American interviewer: “That woman hated me before she’d even met me. I could have been anyone; she’d have felt just the same way. I’d like

<sup>73</sup> Mortimer, *Journeys through the French African Novel*, p. 162.

<sup>74</sup> Diana Digges, “Salwa Bakr and the Gentle Art of Confrontation,” *Cairo Times* 1, no. 8 (12 June, 1997). Available from [www.cairotimes.com](http://www.cairotimes.com). Accessed 4/1/2003.

<sup>75</sup> Leila Abouzeid, *The Last Chapter*, trans. by the author and John Liechety (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2000).

to know what your feminists, with all their prattle about 'sisterhood,' would make of it. You know, the most insidious plot I've encountered in my life was carried out against me by a girlfriend at school, the only other girl in the class. She did her best to see that I failed the final exams. If woman has an enemy, it's other women. Even a husband who betrays his wife uses another woman to do it. Some even use their wives' sisters to do it. Is that the sisterhood you talk about?" (p. 59). Aisha acknowledges that women are powerless in her society; thus, to survive patriarchal conditions, they resort to the ancient practice of magic: "The only power women have is through witchcraft. It is their only trump card" (p. 19). Aisha's relationship with her mother, though not conflicted, fails to provide her with meaningful guidance or support. The mother is depicted as illiterate and "helpless as a slave," a woman who believes in witchcraft and fortune-tellers. Her only advice to her unhappily married daughter who, after a series of failed relationships with men, traded her modern lifestyle for a traditional one when she became the wife of a *faqih*, is to accept her fate. "It's your lot. It's what was in store for you and you must stay with it, if only for the sake of your children. The olive tree is battered for its fruit" (p. 131). Aisha's oppression at the hands of her mother-in-law is portrayed as the inevitable outcome of the structure of Moroccan society, which is flawed and crippled by corruption. The mother-in-law constantly meddles in her son's marriage and turns Aisha's home into "a devil's workshop run by an old witch who puts spells on her son, who in turn makes his living by putting spells on other people" (p. 137). As happens with the heroine of Abouzeid's first work of fiction, *Year of the Elephant*, Aisha too, in her despair, turns to religion as her only source of hope and comfort.

In many of Nawal El Saadawi's novels, the heroines feel no sense of solidarity with other women, viewing them with contempt and loathing. In *Memoirs of A Woman Doctor*, *Searching*, and *Two Women in One*, the heroines—a physician, a chemist, and a medical student respectively—are in conflict with their mothers, whom they reject to the point of matrophobia. They also reject other women, avoid socializing with women, and have no female friends. They see themselves as "special" and "different" from all the women they encounter daily on the street, at school, or in the workplace. In *Two Women in One*, the heroine, Bahiah Shaheen, refers to other female students in her college in disparaging terms: "They walked like reptiles, legs together, and if their thighs happened to separate briefly, they would quickly snap

together again. The girls pressed their legs together as if something valuable might fall if they separated... They always went in groups, like gaggles of geese."<sup>76</sup> Such negative images and depictions led the Syrian scholar Georges Tarabishi to critique Nawal El Saadawi's work in a book provocatively entitled *Woman Against Her Sex*.<sup>77</sup> Accusing El Saadawi's heroines of elitism, Tarabishi argues that these doctors, lawyers, and university students shun the world of ordinary women and show a distinct lack of solidarity with their sex. They do not rebel against society and social injustice but rather, having internalized sexism, rebel against their femininity and identity as women. In her reply, El Saadawi counters that Tarabishi's critique is based on a rigid and outmoded Freudian analysis and that he confuses her heroines' statements and confessions with her own views and life history—a common tendency on the part of Arab male critics.<sup>78</sup> Her novels are not meant to propagate sexism but rather to expose the deep scars of oppression on women's minds in Arab society.<sup>79</sup>

In Fatima Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass*, the split among the women of the harem is unbridgeable. As a group, they display no sense of cohesion. Mernissi recounts that staging the life of Princess Budur from *The Thousand and One Nights* would often trigger a bitter argument about female solidarity: "Women's solidarity was actually a highly sensitive issue in the courtyard, since the women rarely sided all together against men. Some of the women, like Grandmother Lalla Mani and Lalla Radia, who were in favor of harems, always went along with the men's decisions, while women like Mother did not. In fact, Mother accused women who allied themselves with men as being largely responsible for women's suffering. 'These women are more dangerous than men,' she would explain, 'because physically, they look just like us. But they are really wolves posing as sheep. If women's solidarity existed, we would not be stuck on this terrace. We would be traveling around Morocco or even sailing to the City of Ebony if we want to.'"<sup>80</sup> The drama of Princess Budur, who "dared to do the impossible," that is, transcend gender boundaries, highlights

<sup>76</sup> El Saadawi, *Two Women in One*, p. 77.

<sup>77</sup> Georges Tarabishi, *A Critique of Nawal el-Saadawi: Woman against Her Sex, with a Reply by Nawal el-Saadawi*, trans. Basil Hatim and Elisabeth Orsini (London: Saqi Books, 1988).

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>79</sup> See also Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists*, pp. 135–38.

<sup>80</sup> Mernissi, *Dreams of Trespass*, p. 141.

the necessity for female solidarity, which saved the life of this princess and enabled her to rule a kingdom. Mernissi writes that after the play was over, the women would engage in a heated and lengthy discussion about “fate and happiness, and how to escape the first and pursue the second. Women’s solidarity, many agreed, was the key to both.”<sup>81</sup>

Princess Budur’s tale is not the only literary evidence that women are capable of “grand and noble sentiments toward one another.”<sup>82</sup> The life-saving solidarity between Scheherazade and her sister Dunyazad in the frame story of *The Thousand and One Nights* has already been mentioned, as has the spirit of sisterhood between the two co-wives in Assia Djébar’s novel, *A Sister to Scheherazade*. Alifa Rifaat’s short story “An Incident in the Ghobashi Household” dramatizes the tremendous loyalty of a mother to her daughter.<sup>83</sup> In this narrative, an Egyptian village woman devises a plan to save the life of her teenage daughter who got pregnant outside the bonds of marriage. Availing herself of her husband’s departure to Libya, where he has found work for a year, she gives her daughter all her savings and instructs her to go to Cairo and stay there until the baby is born. Then she wraps old rags around her waist under her wide robe so that people would think that she is pregnant, saying to her daughter: “Isn’t it better, when he returns, for your father to find himself with a legitimate son than an illegitimate grandson?”<sup>84</sup> In this way, the mother tries to prevent the tragedy of honor crime from befalling her family.

Fadhma A. M. Amrouche’s autobiography, *My Life Story*,<sup>85</sup> portrays her mother’s heroic efforts to save her life as an infant. Born in 1882 in Kabilya, a mountainous region in eastern Algeria, Fadhma was the illegitimate child of a widow. The code of honor among the men of her Berber village was often brutally enforced, and children born outside the bonds of marriage were persecuted. The young mother, refusing to give her daughter up for adoption, entrusted her to the care of a French orphanage, where Fadhma stayed throughout her childhood. In doing so, the mother saved her daughter not only from persecution and possibly death at the hands of her village people, but also from the

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 143.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>83</sup> In Rifaat, *Distant View of a Minaret*, pp. 23–27.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>85</sup> Fadhma A. M. Amrouche, *My Life Story: The Autobiography of a Berber Woman* (first published in French: Paris, 1968); trans. Dorothy S. Blair (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1989).

chains of illiteracy. At the orphanage, later taken over by the State and made into a boarding school, Fadhma received an education, which was quite unusual for Berber girls at that time. Fadhma describes her mother as courageous and resourceful, “a stout-hearted woman” who was in the habit of saying, “The tattooing on my chin is worth more than a man’s beard!”<sup>86</sup> The mother defied both the norms of her village and the men of her family, fighting stubbornly for her inheritance rights and for her daughter’s life. Fadhma recounts that she saw her mother weep only twice: once when she heard of her own mother’s death, and again when a vicious village boy pushed her little daughter into a hedge of prickly pears. Fadhma married at sixteen, then moved to Tunis and later to Paris, where she became famous as a poet and singer of the folksongs of her native Kabilya. She passed her creative gifts to her daughter, the writer Marguerite Taos Amrouche, and her son, the poet Jean Amrouche. In the epilogue to her autobiography, which is dedicated to her daughter, Fadhma writes about her unbearable grief over the loss of five of her sons, confessing that she wanted to put an end to her life. But the thought of her daughter kept her going: “I tell myself that I can still be of use to my daughter, and I try to console her a little. I would like to bequeath to her as many poems as possible, as many proverbs, and sayings.”<sup>87</sup>

May Telmissany’s autobiographical work, *Dunyazad*,<sup>88</sup> tells the sad story of a young Egyptian mother whose daughter, Dunyazad, is still-born. The novel’s title is yet another allusion to the famous heroine of *The Thousand and One Nights*, that loyal sister who wakes Scheherazade every day before dawn so that she can resume her storytelling to the bloodthirsty sultan and save her life and the lives of other virgins. As Roger Allen notes, Telmissany’s *Dunyazad* also “serves as a catalyst, the instigator of the story-telling function,” but in a different context.<sup>89</sup> The mother’s account is one of bereavement, grief, depression, withdrawal, and a slow recovery from her personal tragedy. Putting pen to paper helps the mother come to terms with the loss of her daughter: “I am writing *Dunyazad*, invoking the letters of her name to

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 172.

<sup>88</sup> May Telmissany, *Dunyazad* (Cairo: Dar sharqiyat, 1997); trans. Roger Allen (London: Saqi Books, 2000).

<sup>89</sup> In the postface to *Dunyazad*, p. 89.

help me forget.”<sup>90</sup> Thus the act of writing becomes part of the healing process. The mother’s pain is exacerbated by the fact that her daughter’s death occurred inside the womb during delivery. The womb, which is a symbol of life, turned into a death trap. This awful turn of events makes the mother feel terribly guilty. She is overwhelmed by tormenting thoughts: “So she had never lived outside her womb-grave. They had all lied to me. I had believed them because I wanted her to have lived for at least a single day; in my own memory I could turn that short space of time into years. She had emerged from my womb-grave to be placed into her own grave.”<sup>91</sup> The mother’s wish that her daughter had lived for a little while stems from the need to alleviate her sense of guilt. The strong emotional connection she feels toward the daughter she has never known shows the intensity of her maternal instincts and the mysterious power of this primal bond.

While the complex realities of Arab women’s lives do not always promote a sense of female solidarity, striving for it remains the lofty ideal of Arab women writers. Their literary works demonstrate that divided women are vulnerable to male oppression and that only when women—mothers and daughters—are united they can survive patriarchal conditions and win their struggle for liberation.

### *Changing the Family and the Fabric of Society*

In his famous poem “The Girls’ School in Port Said,” recited upon his visit to the school on May 29, 1910, the Egyptian neoclassical poet Hafiz Ibrahim (1872–1932) paid homage to the mother’s crucial role in raising the nation’s future generation:

The mother is a school; if you prepare her, you prepare a nation with a strong foundation.

The mother is a garden; if nurtured by the rain, it blossoms, and how splendid is its bloom!

The mother is the teacher of all teachers; her outstanding work can be seen in the farthest corners of the world.<sup>92</sup>

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>92</sup> Hafiz Ibrahim, *Diwan Hafiz Ibrahim* (Cairo: Dar al-kutub al-misriyya, 1937), vol. 2, p. 282. Translation mine.

A century later, these popular verses are still recited by Arab intellectuals who see the education and liberation of the Arab woman as the most potent force of social change. Ibrahim's poem, much like the two provocative books of his compatriot Qasim Amin (1863–1908), *The Liberation of Women* (1899) and *The New Woman* (1900), links the issue of national progress with the emancipation of women.

Undoubtedly, education is the key to changes in all other areas of life in Arab societies. In particular, education is essential for improving the quality and experience of mothering. As noted earlier, in the Arab world, to a greater extent than in the West, the burden of socializing children rests mainly with the mother. During the first seven to nine years of their lives, children are entrusted entirely to the care of their mothers (and other female relatives). Given this situation, it is only natural that any change that occurs in the position of Arab women and in the opportunities given them to develop their mental faculties will have an immediate impact on the mind of the next generation that is under their supervision. Conversely, as long as the mental faculties of the mother are stunted by the illiteracy, ignorance, and superstition in which she is kept by the male-centered values of Arab culture, she will transmit a legacy of deprivations to her children, thus impeding their development.<sup>93</sup>

Despite the spread of free public education, the vast majority of women in the Arab world are illiterate.<sup>94</sup> Needless to say, in the new age of global media saturation and advanced information technologies, a style of parenting which is based merely on knowledge of customs and traditions is inadequate for rearing children and preparing them for the complexities and challenges of modern life. Literacy and schooling not only equip the mother with the basic tools necessary to cope with the arduous task of raising a family but also strengthen her position in the family. In addition, knowledge empowers the mother and enhances her self-esteem and self-perception, ultimately leading to changes in her attitudes and expectations. Such changes are bound to improve the mother's relationship with her children, especially her daughters, and generate new role models and patterns of interaction.

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<sup>93</sup> Patai, *The Arab Mind*, pp. 327, 333.

<sup>94</sup> For statistics on female illiteracy in the Arab world, see chapter 2, notes 45 and 46.

The position of women in the family and the wider society is perhaps the most sensitive and problematic area in Arab life. Many Arab intellectuals have argued that the traditional Arab family is a site of oppression. Fatima Mernissi, in her study of gender inequality in the Muslim system, writes that “modern Muslim societies have to face the fact that the traditional family mutilates women by depriving them of their humanity.”<sup>95</sup> Hisham Sharabi describes women and children as the most repressed elements of Arab society.<sup>96</sup> And Nawal El Saadawi, in her compelling account of what it means to grow up female in Arab society, observes that the “education of female children is...transformed into a slow process of annihilation, a gradual throttling of her personality and mind.”<sup>97</sup> These statements highlight the formidable obstacles that Arab women have to overcome on the road to emancipation.

The myriad literary texts presented in this study show that the traditional Arab family is currently the focus of rapid social change. Most of the fictional daughters are educated, free, and independent; they have jobs and earn salaries, drive cars and travel abroad. Self-assertive and outspoken, they insist on marrying someone of their own choice. At times, the desire for greater individual freedom leads them to reject marriage and motherhood altogether. As for the fictional mothers, a good number of them are illiterate, veiled, and cloistered. Restricted to domestic activities, they are economically dependent on their husbands. Nevertheless, they too exercise some control over their lives by raising smaller families and by setting up separate households with their nuclear families. Since modernization is more advanced in the cities than in the villages, such changes are more noticeable among urban middle-class families. Nevertheless, these trends are slowly making inroads into all sectors of Arab society. Even al-Tahawy’s disturbing novel, *The Tent*, ends with the hopeful image of the main gate of the heroine’s parental house, which was kept locked most of her life, now left open day and night so that her little nieces, with exercise books in their hands, can go to school every day.

The traditional structure of the Arab family is changing, and with it the fabric of family life is changing too. This ongoing transformation, the underlying causes of which are industrialization, urbanization,

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<sup>95</sup> Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, p. 175.

<sup>96</sup> Hisham Sharabi, *Muqaddimat li-dirasat al-mujtama’ al-‘arabi* (Acre, 1987), p. 112.

<sup>97</sup> El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, p. 13.

public education, legal reforms, foreign influences, as well as war and revolution, has profound effects on the position of women. Most conspicuously, the old pattern of woman at home and man in the workplace is breaking up. Although this is primarily due to economic necessity rather than to progressive ideology, it nevertheless has far-reaching consequences. Working mothers and daughters are redefining gender roles and male-female relations as they establish their presence at school, on the street, and in the workplace. Their contribution to the family income undermines the supremacy of the male head of the family as the sole provider, thus facilitating the breakdown of patriarchal control and the evolution of more egalitarian family relationships.

Arab women have thus far gained many rights previously denied them, especially the right to education, to employment, and to use public spaces. However, viewed from the perspective of Arab feminists, the pace of change has been slow, its scope limited, and its spread uneven throughout the Arab world.<sup>98</sup> Fatima Mernissi criticizes the current state of Arab women's liberation: "An important characteristic of this nascent 'liberation' is that it is not the outcome of a careful plan of controlled nation-wide development. Neither is it the outcome of the massive involvement of women in labor markets, coupled with organized women's movements. The partial, fragmented acquisition of rights by women in Arab Muslim countries is a random, non-planned, non-systematic phenomenon, due mainly to the disintegration of the traditional system under pressures from within and without."<sup>99</sup> As a result, there is a gap between reality and ideology, between women's newly acquired rights and the traditional ideology which opposes them, or, as Mernissi puts it, "between the shifting infrastructure and the rigid ideological superstructure."<sup>100</sup> This gap is reflected in the absence of coherent models for behavior, a condition she defines as anomie, which creates conflict and tension between the sexes. In Mernissi's view, the lack of correspondence between "real life" and the ideas and patterns that are supposed to express it is a sign of the absence of a genuine modern moral system in contemporary Arab Muslim societies.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> See the conclusions of *UN Arab Human Development Report 2005*, pp. 219–31.

<sup>99</sup> Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, pp. 168–69.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

Hisham Sharabi, in his provocative book, *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society*, arrives at a similar conclusion. Sharabi argues that the Arab renaissance of the nineteenth century not only failed to break down the inner relations and forms of patriarchy, but also prepared the ground for a new, hybrid sort of society/culture: the neopatriarchal society/culture, or “modernized” patriarchy. As he puts it: “Material modernization, the first (surface) manifestation of social change, only served to remodel and reorganize patriarchal structures and relations and to reinforce them by giving them ‘modern’ forms and appearances.”<sup>102</sup> Sharabi uses the concept of neopatriarchy to refer to macrostructures (society, the state, the economy) as well as to microstructures (the family, the individual personality), and also applies the term to describe discourses, relations, and institutions in the Arab world. Typically, neopatriarchal society possesses all the external trappings of modernity but lacks the inner force, organization, and consciousness which characterize truly modern formations. It is therefore not a coherent or integrated social order. Whatever the outward “modern” forms of the contemporary neopatriarchal society or family, their internal structures remain rooted in the patriarchal values and social relations of kinship, religious, and ethnic groups.<sup>103</sup> Sharabi believes that the future of Arab society, namely, the dismantling of the neopatriarchal status quo, depends largely on the struggle between Islamic fundamentalism and secular modernism. In this regard, he considers the women’s movement “potentially the most revolutionary” force: “If this phase of struggle were to open up to radical democratic change, women’s liberation would necessarily be its spearhead. Even in the short term, the women’s movement is the detonator which will explode neopatriarchal society from within. If allowed to grow and come into its own, it will become the permanent shield against patriarchal regression, the cornerstone of future modernity.”<sup>104</sup> Sharabi’s view is shared by many Arab intellectuals who maintain that women’s

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<sup>102</sup> Sharabi, *Neopatriarchy*, p. 4.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154. However, it is more accurate to speak of “feminist movements” rather than of the “women’s movement,” as there have been feminist movements in a number of Arab countries. These movements, which started in Egypt early last century then spread to Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Iraq and subsequently to the Maghreb countries, soon crossed generations, seeking to reform family laws, obtain political rights, and alter relations of power.

aspirations, demands, and successes can transform Arab society profoundly and permanently.<sup>105</sup>

“The mother/daughter, daughter/mother relation constitutes an extremely explosive core in our societies. To think it, to change it, leads to shaking up the patriarchal order,” writes the feminist theorist Luce Irigaray.<sup>106</sup> That mothers and daughters can subvert the patriarchal order and facilitate the transition to modernity is a widely held belief. As long as mothers are the primary nurturers, responsible for socializing children into society’s normative system of values, they can be a powerful instrument of change. “The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world,” runs a popular English saying,<sup>107</sup> encapsulating the idea that mothers have a great influence on the upbringing of their children and thus on shaping the future of the wider society. (cf. the verses by the aforementioned Egyptian poet Hafiz Ibrahim, “The mother is a school; if you prepare her, you prepare a nation with a strong foundation.”) This type of power, known as “female influence,” has become part of the ideology of motherhood in many patriarchal societies, Western as well as non-Western.<sup>108</sup> Feminist critics fault this ideology for manipulating women into accepting their narrowly circumscribed domestic role under the illusion that they share in power. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that mothers can influence the overall direction of society through the values, beliefs, and ideals that they inculcate in their children.

Sufi Abdallah’s short story, “Eight Eyes,” dramatizes this crucial message.<sup>109</sup> The story tells of a village woman whose husband was killed in a blood feud. After the tragic event, she moves from the village to the city, where she teaches her son to reject the ancient custom of blood revenge. When the son grows up, he is approached by his paternal uncles, who demand that he avenge his father’s death. They present him with a plan and a chosen victim. The fact that the son

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<sup>105</sup> For further discussion of feminist movements in the Arab world, see Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation* and *Feminism in Islam*.

<sup>106</sup> Luce Irigaray, “Le corps à corps avec la mere” (Montreal: Les éditions de la pleine lune, 1981), p. 86; cited in Eleanor H. Kuykendall, “Toward an Ethic of Nurture: Luce Irigaray on Mothering and Power,” in Joyce Treblicot, ed., *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Allanheld, 1984), p. 265.

<sup>107</sup> This saying is attributed to William Ross Wallace (1819–1881), an American poet and songwriter.

<sup>108</sup> Phillips, *Beyond the Myths*, p. 317.

<sup>109</sup> Sufi Abdallah, “Eight Eyes,” in Badran and Cooke, *Opening the Gates*, pp. 332–36.

cannot bring himself to commit murder and does not cooperate with them shows the influence of the mother's teaching, which is subversive of the male-centered ethos of Arab culture.

The poem "Mother's Inheritance," by the Saudi poet Fawziya Abu Khalid, provides another illustration of a mother's subversive teaching. In this poem, the mother does not bequeath to her daughter any of the traditional wedding gifts, such as jewelry, an embroidered veil, or a plot of land. Instead, she leaves her the eyes of a falcon (which stand for keen observation), a womb to produce an army of rebels, and a sheathless sword engraved with the name of an unknown child. Altogether, this legacy contains the basic weapons necessary for a feminist revolt.

Mother,  
 You did not leave me an inheritance of  
     necklaces for a wedding  
 but a neck  
     that towers above the guillotine  
 Not an embroidered veil for my face  
 but the eyes of a falcon  
     that glitter like the daggers  
     in the belts of our men.  
 Not a piece of land large enough  
     to plant a single date palm  
     but the primal fruit of The Fertile Crescent:  
 My womb.

You let me sleep with all the children  
     of our neighborhood  
 that my agony may give birth  
     to new rebels

In the bundle of your will  
 I thought I could find  
     a seed from The Garden of Eden  
     that I may plant in my heart  
     forsaken by the seasons  
 Instead  
 You left me with a sheathless sword  
     the name of an obscure child carved on its blade  
 Every pore in me  
     every crack  
     opened up:  
 A sheath.

I plunged the sword into my heart  
     but the wall could not contain it

I thrust it into my lungs  
     but the window could not box it  
 I dipped it into my waist  
     but the house was too small for it  
 It lengthened into the streets  
     defoliating the decorations  
     of official holidays  
 Tilling asphalt  
 Announcing the season of  
 The Coming Feast  
  
 Mother,  
 Today, they came to confiscate the inheritance  
     you left me.  
 They could not decipher the children's fingerprints  
 They could not walk the road that stretches  
     between the arteries of my heart  
     and the cord that feeds the babe  
     in every mother's womb.  
 They seized the children of the neighborhood  
     for interrogation  
 They could not convict the innocence in their eyes.  
 They searched my pockets  
     took off my clothes  
     peeled my skin  
 But they failed to reach  
     the glistening silk that nestles  
     the twin doves  
     in my breast.<sup>110</sup>

This poem demonstrates the mother's enormous influence in transforming her daughter from a submissive girl into a fearless warrior for the cause of women's liberation. The daughter's readiness to use violent action to achieve this goal is evidenced by the way she handles the sheathless sword. The absence of sheathing reflects not only her militant attitude but also a high degree of self-sacrifice bordering on self-destruction.

Arab women writers are aware that women's liberation is not possible without a fundamental change in the prevailing outlook on woman and her place in society. Daisy al-Amir's story, "The Eyes in

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<sup>110</sup> Fawziya Abu Khalid, "Mother's Inheritance," in Boullata, *Women of the Fertile Crescent*, pp. 162–63.

the Mirror,”<sup>111</sup> illustrates this point. The story tells of a professional woman who stays in a hotel in connection with her work. Her problem begins when she is told she cannot have dinner sent up to her room and must eat in the hotel restaurant. This information unsettles her: “Whenever I am alone in a restaurant, I eat breakfast early and in a hurry and never feel relaxed. How would I feel at dinner?” (p. 116). Hunger pangs override her hesitation and she goes to the dining hall. She finds it packed with men without a single woman among them. Although she sits at a remote table in a dark corner, all eyes begin to stare at her. The unfriendly eyes gaze at her with strange doubts, accusing her, stabbing her, speculating about “this strange bird” (p. 116). The longer the staring lasts, the more enraged and agitated she becomes. “What is my sin? To be the only woman in a hotel restaurant teeming with men?” (p. 117). Unable to withstand the social pressure, she eventually forgoes her dinner and escapes to her room, where she allays her hunger with cups of water. Ironically, the heroine’s job is to give advice and guidance to women: “Yes, I deal with women’s problems, take care of their circumstances and help them overcome their obstacles. So who will solve my problem of eating dinner in a hotel restaurant whose walls are filled with eyes?” (p. 118). Obviously, Arab women cannot enjoy their hard-won right to use public spaces unless traditional male attitudes become more progressive.

“Women are at the center of change and discourse about change in the Middle East,” writes Valentine M. Moghadam.<sup>112</sup> Needless to say, all women are daughters; most women become mothers. Whether they are modernists or Islamists, Arab women have the potential of transforming the political, social, and cultural landscape of the Arab world. The link between women, the family, and social change is not only intimate but pivotal. As long as mothering is predominantly a female activity, mothers and daughters are key players in any challenge to patriarchal ideologies, structures, and institutions. As Suzanna Walters observes, mothers and daughters are the “bridge” of family life, ultimately responsible for the reproduction and maintenance of family growth and development. It is therefore vital to strengthen the relationship between them: “It is precisely this bridge that will need to be rebuilt so both mother and daughter can walk over it in the search

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<sup>111</sup> Daisy al-Amir, “The Eyes in the Mirror,” in Badran and Cooke, *Opening the Gates*, pp. 116–18.

<sup>112</sup> Moghadam, *Modernizing Women*, p. 278.

for new, nonoppressive family forms.”<sup>113</sup> Without bonding, empowerment, and solidarity between mothers and daughters, the dismantling of the patriarchal family cannot be achieved. As Adrienne Rich puts it: “Until a strong line of love, confirmation, and example stretches from mother to daughter, from woman to woman across the generations, women will still be wandering in the wilderness.”<sup>114</sup>

The preceding comments show that the topic of mothers and daughters provides Arab women writers with a platform from which they can address many feminist concerns. As a literary theme, the mother-daughter relationship lends itself to several interpretations. At a symbolic level, the conflict between mothers and daughters represents the struggle between polarities in Arab societies: tradition and modernity, village and city, past and future, Islamism and secularism, East and West, to mention just a few examples. At a feminist level, the daughter’s rebellion against her mother embodies the female quest for autonomous and authentic selfhood. For the rebelling daughter, working through her relationship with her mother is an essential voyage of self-discovery and self-development.

The portrait of mothers and daughters that emerges from the work of Arab women writers is complex and cannot be summed up in a single statement, positive or negative. There is a wide spectrum of mother-daughter relationships in Arab families and great variability in the nature and quality of this bond. It is fair to say that some culture-specific factors promote friendship and intimacy between Arab mothers and daughters, while others cause conflict and alienation between them. The assumption that patriarchal oppression would necessarily strengthen the sense of solidarity between Arab mothers and daughters is not borne out by the majority of texts examined in this work. On the contrary, patriarchal oppression frequently exacerbates the rivalry, hostility, and tension between female family members by pitting one against another. In addition to the influence of class, education, and setting (bedouin, rural, or urban), a critical factor in the dynamics between mothers and daughters is the personality of each individual, or the “goodness of fit” between the daughter’s traits and those of the mother.<sup>115</sup> This can be seen in the contrast between the mother-daughter dyad and the brother-sister dyad in Fadwa Tuqan’s

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<sup>113</sup> Walters, *Lives Together, Worlds Apart*, p. 8.

<sup>114</sup> Rich, *Of Woman Born*, p. 246.

<sup>115</sup> Anderson and Sabatelli, *Family Interaction*, p. 208.

*A Mountainous Journey*. The fact that the young Fadwa did not bond with her mother but developed a strong emotional attachment first to her maternal aunt and then to her older brother Ibrahim (and after his death to her younger brother Nimr), who nurtured her, shows how the cultural definition of the role of a particular family member is affected by the accident of the personalities involved.

In sum, it is impossible to formulate one master narrative of mothers and daughters. “No single narrative, no unified discourse, can possibly flesh out the complexities and contradictions in mother/daughter relationships,” says Suzanna Walters.<sup>116</sup> Not only is the relationship treated differently by different writers, but even the same writer sometimes produces radically different versions of this relationship. Nawal El Saadawi is a case in point. In many of her fictional works, she paints critical portraits of mothers, highlighting their faults and their complicity in the oppression of their daughters. The fact that she uses first-person narration and that her heroines are often doctors and medical students has led readers and critics to assume that these works are autobiographical, invariably depicting her poor relationship with her own mother. El Saadawi has protested against this interpretation of her texts: “This is one of the problems facing women writers. I have published a large numbers of stories about the lives of women, whether from the countryside or the city, and for every story there has been a critic who holds that the heroine is the authoress [*sic*] herself disguised in another persona.”<sup>117</sup> As mentioned earlier, she was accused of displaying feelings of hostility toward women and a lack of solidarity with members of her sex because her heroines utter statements of loathing toward other women. El Saadawi’s denials of all these accusations fell on deaf ears, until her two-part autobiography, *A Daughter of Isis* and *Walking through Fire* came out.<sup>118</sup> The positive portrayal of her mother and the loving ties they shared is in sharp contrast to the negative depictions of mothers and their antagonistic relationships with their daughters in her novels, notably *Searching*, *Two Women in One*, and *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*.

Throughout her autobiography, El Saadawi speaks of her mother with deep respect and admiration as the person who had the greatest

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<sup>116</sup> Walters, *Lives Together, Worlds Apart*, p. 234.

<sup>117</sup> In Tarabishi, *Woman against Her Sex*, p. 190.

<sup>118</sup> Nawal El Saadawi, *A Daughter of Isis*, trans. Sherif Hetata (London: Zed Books, 1999), and *Walking through Fire*, trans. Sherif Hetata (London: Zed Books, 2002).

influence on her life. “The spinal column that has held me up was built on what my mother said when I was young: ‘Throw Nawal in the fire and she will come out unhurt.’ After hearing that, I could walk into danger with a brave heart. Maybe that is why I was able to escape death more than once” (1:2). El Saadawi recounts that it was thanks to her mother that she escaped an arranged marriage and was able to continue her education: “At the age of ten I could have been trapped in a marriage were it not for her . . . If it were not for her I would never have continued my education and become a medical student” (1:2). In many ways, her mother served as a role model for her, showing her the necessity of rebellion by refusing to accept the severe authority of her own father and revolting against her husband if he raised his voice at home. El Saadawi admits that she had disagreements with her mother as well and sometimes had to struggle against her. Also, there were things that made her suffer and caused her pain, notably her circumcision. But overall they had a close and affectionate relationship. Time after time she declares: “I loved my mother more than my father” (1:1); “My mother made my childhood very happy” (1:4). The mother’s untimely death from cancer at the age of forty-five was a traumatic experience for El Saadawi, who watched her suffer and wither away without being able to help, despite her medical training. She writes that to this day she still misses her: “The more the years go by the greater my yearning for my mother becomes” (1:47). In her warm and moving homage to her mother, El Saadawi acknowledges her ongoing influence: “The smell of my mother’s body is a part of me, of my body, of its spirit, of the hidden strength I carry within me. She is the voice that speaks to me if something’s wrong, rescues me just in time, encourages me in moments of despair” (1:4).

The poet Fawziya Abu Khalid speaks of her mother in equally tender terms. In a charming poem entitled “Two Children” and bearing the dedication, “For my mother Noor, poet, whose verses I borrow,” she writes:

I cling to her dress  
 as a child clings to a kite string  
 I climb up her plait  
 as a squirrel climbs a hazelnut tree  
 Afternoons, we hop from one world to another  
 delighting in the air  
 like birds that have opened their cage door  
 We go from one game to the next  
 She teaches me

names of flowers  
 the seasons of rain  
 love of my country  
 I teach her  
     stubbornness and mischief  
 We share one apple and countless dreams  
 We make the desert into a paradise of questions  
 We splash each other with the water of mirages  
     and befriend a stray gazelle  
 Dusk overtakes us  
     In the obscure twilight  
     who can resolve  
 this riddle:  
 Which is the mother  
 and which the child?<sup>119</sup>

Abu Khalid's close bond with her mother is depicted in another poem, revealingly entitled "Umbilical Cord":

My mother drew from the desert  
 a string of sand  
 and knotted it to my navel.  
 No matter how far I go  
 I'm like a bucket  
 trying in vain  
 to scoop up the moon  
 reflected in the mirror of water  
 deep in a well.<sup>120</sup>

In a tender poem entitled "My Mother," the Tunisian poet Amel Moussa acknowledges that she discovered the meaning of motherhood with the birth of her daughter. The sense of identification she feels with her mother is so deep that the image of her infant daughter becomes fused with that of her mother:

I wrap her in cotton.  
 I plant her in my bosom,  
 my suckling first born,  
 my mother.  
 She wraps me in a foliage  
 of nakedness.  
 She pats away my shivers.  
 In her hands yesterday's scars are healed.<sup>121</sup>

<sup>119</sup> Fawziya Abu Khalid, "Two Children," trans. Seema Atalla, in Margaret Obank and Samuel Shimon, eds., *A Crack in the Wall: New Arab Poetry* (London: Saqi Books, 2001), p. 22.

<sup>120</sup> Fawziya Abu Khalid, "Umbilical Cord," trans. Seema Atalla, in *ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>121</sup> Amel Moussa, "My Mother," trans. Khaled Mattawa, in *ibid.*, pp. 180–81.

In conclusion, the contribution of Arab women writers to the demystification of the Arab family is monumental, considering the intense privacy surrounding this revered institution in Arab societies. Their poems, stories, novels, essays, memoirs, and autobiographies are not only literary products to be appreciated in their own right but also important social documents. These works open a window onto the forbidden domain of Arab family life, unlock the mysteries of family dynamics, and explore the inner territory of self. The wealth of information and profound insights which these works offer not only demystify motherhood and daughterhood but also set the stage for a new, constructive dialogue between mothers and daughters, with the goal of enhancing their relationship and expanding their sense of possibilities, thus promoting the cause of women and accelerating the process of their liberation.

In a memorable poem entitled "A Pearl," Fawziya Abu Khalid connects the motherline across several generations. In linking the past to the future, she celebrates the continuum of women. The pearl is a metaphor for the precious gift of motherhood transmitted from mother to daughter:

This pearl  
 Was a gift of my grandmother—that great lady—  
     to my mother  
     and my mother gave it to me  
 And now I hand it on to you  
 The three of you and this pearl  
 Have one thing in common  
     simplicity and truth  
 I give it with my love  
 and with the fullness of heart  
     you excel in  
 The girls of Arabia will soon grow  
     to full stature  
 They will look about and say:  
 "She has passed by this road"  
 and point to the place of sunrise  
 and the heart's direction.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Fawziya Abu Khalid, "A Pearl," trans. Salwa Jabsheh and John Heath-Stubbs, in Salma Khadra Jayyusi, ed., *The Literature of Modern Arabia: An Anthology* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1988), pp. 135–36.

In this poem, the mother reassures her daughter of the ultimate liberation of Arab women, who will rise to power and influence. She pays tribute to the early feminists who fought for the cause of women, declaring that the younger generation will always remember them with gratitude and admiration.

Mother and daughter—two women bonded forever by blood and love. The magnitude of this love is vividly portrayed in a poem entitled “To My Daughter” by Andrée Chedid:

My moor my child my heather  
 My real my snowflake my sage  
 I gaze at you tomorrow takes you  
 Where I could never go

My blue my April my falling star  
 My life withdraws to the starting point  
 For you the birds and the lamp  
 For you the torch and the wind

My swan my almond my silver one  
 For you the impossible I loved  
 For you this life, salt and sun  
 For you brief guest.<sup>123</sup>

In this poem, as the mother gazes at her little girl, she has a fleeting vision of her as a blossoming young woman ready to leave home and embark on her own journey through life. The inevitable separation from her daughter arouses in the mother mixed feelings of pain and joy. She has high expectations for her daughter and absolute confidence in her ability to shape her own destiny. Her parting words to her daughter, “tomorrow takes you where I could never go,” reveal the dramatic increase in opportunities now available to the daughter.

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<sup>123</sup> Andrée Chedid, “To My Daughter,” in *Fugitive Suns: Selected Poetry*, trans. Lynne Goodhart and Jon Wagner (Los Angeles: Green Integer, 1999), p. 51.

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