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**THE POLITICS OF LOCATION AND SEXUALITY  
IN LEILA AHMED’S AND NAWAL EL SAADAWI’S  
LIFE NARRATIVES**

**ABSTRACT:** This article explores Leila Ahmed’s *A Border Passage*, and Nawal El Saadawi’s *Memoirs from the Women’s Prison*, *A Daughter of Isis*, and *Walking Through Fire*. It contrasts their works and argues that location and gender-awareness play an important role in the writing of autobiographies. The focus is on showing how El Saadawi’s positioning as a feminist activist in Egypt and Ahmed’s location in the USA determine the texts’ themes and shape the construction of the autobiographical “I.”

**KEY WORDS:** Women’s life narratives, Middle East, female circumcision, gender, class, location, Islam.

*For in this class patriarchal world of ours, a mother’s name is of no consequence, a woman is without worth, on earth or in the heavens. In paradise a man is promised seventy-two virgins for his sexual pleasure, but a woman is promised no-one except her husband, that is if he has the time for her, and is not too busy with the virgins who surround him.*

Nawal El Saadawi, *A Daughter of Isis*

*To believe that segregated societies are by definition more oppressive to women, or that women secluded from the company of men are women deprived, is only to allow ourselves to be servilely obedient to the constructs of men.*

Leila Ahmed, “Western Ethnocentrism and Perceptions of the Harem”

Arab women writers have narrated their lives in different forms and shapes. Their narratives have been of interest to Western readers and scholars alike. *Memoirs of an Arabian*

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*Princess* (1888) was written by Emily Said-Ruete in German and translated into many European languages. Widely read and appreciated in the West, *Memoirs* is rarely mentioned or referred to in studies about Arab women's autobiographies in the West or in Arab countries for that matter.<sup>1</sup> The life-story of this exceptional Arabian princess fascinated people when published because it primarily catalogues in minute detail women's lives inside the harem of an Arabian Sheik. Yet, she was amongst the first Arab women, if not the first, whose construction of her past life inside the harem and among the wives and concubines of the ruler of Oman, her father, unsettled Western views on that space as *locus eroticus*. The space is empowering and disempowering, liberating and suffocating, and occupies a central place in Arab women's life-narratives, especially those who write for a primarily Western audience. Immigrant writers and critics from Arab origins seem to cultivate this Western obsession. In her influential "Western Ethnocentrism and Perceptions of the Harem," Leila Ahmed challenges Western views on segregated Arab and Muslim society by controversially stating that, as quoted above, secluded women are not necessary more deprived and oppressed than their sisters in the West (531). This claim is quite hard to sustain given the fact that she had to leave both Egypt and the United Arab Emirates to be able to live and write as an independent woman. Calling upon feminists in the West to rethink their theories and views on Arab and Muslim societies, whilst living in the USA, may prove to be incongruous and even controversial.

Women's writing, Gardner argues, is characterised by its "defiance of conventional generic boundaries" (359). The stakes are much higher for women from the "ex"-colonised world and the Middle East. Their life-narratives invite Western readers to view a "different world" and represent "a serious challenge" to both Western generic conventions and literary theories, as Barbara Harlow posits (*Resistance Literature* xvi).

In *De/Colonizing the Subject*, Smith and Watson state that the colonial subject's account "challenges us to recognise their experiments in subjectivity, and account for their exclusion from "high" culture" (xviii-xix). They predicate their argument on the differentiation between the postcolonial subject who lives and

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, Al-Hassan Golley's *Reading Arab Women's Autobiographies*; Arab Women's Lives Retold; Vinson's "Shahrazadian Gestures in Arab Women's Autobiographies"; Shaaban's *Both Right and Left Handed*; and Eber and Faqir's *In the House of Silence*.

writes in the West as exile and the neo-colonial subject who is based in the third world. Spivak crucially points to such a distinction in “The Political Economy of Women” by arguing for the importance of location for the speaking subject (226). I explore the role of location in Leila Ahmed’s *A Border Passage: A Woman’s Journey from Cairo to America* (1999), and Nawal El Saadawi’s *Memoirs from the Women’s Prison* (1981), *A Daughter of Isis* (1999), and *Walking Through Fire* (2002).

In “The Politics of Experience,” Gunn compares the autobiography of Leila Khaled, *My People Shall Live*, with that of Annie Dillard. She concludes her essay with two general remarks on third-world women’s autobiography: “First, it involves an unmasking of what I have called a denostalgizing of the past; second, it orients itself towards a liberated society in the future. In the first respect it is a form of resistance literature, in the second, it is a form of utopian literature” (77). Her thesis, albeit holding some truth, cannot be extended to the works I will be considering. This article will explore the differences between Ahmed’s and El Saadawi’s works, and argue the importance of location in writing autobiographies.

El Saadawi’s three compositions pertain to what critics call third world autobiography. Harlow, Gunn, and Kaplan, amongst others, use the term to refer to works of women from third world countries who live under different forms of oppression in their homeland, and their writings are informed and shaped by resistance and political activism. This definition cannot be extended to *A Border Passage* because its author lives in the USA and is not a political activist. El Saadawi’s powerful account on her prison-experience, on the other hand, is a case of third world autobiography. It shows how a writer, a feminist and political activist can suffer because of her writing. In contrast, Ahmed’s *Memoirs* is the work of a postcolonial subject who lives in the West and whose construction of the self bears on her privileged class and current location. Location and political awareness determine, in part, the narrative’s tone, thematic concerns and aspirations. Harlow argues that the speaker may fashion and authorise new ways of knowing “conditions of observations” or what Hartsock calls a “standpoint epistemology,” meaning “an account of the world as seen from the margins, an account which can expose the falseness of the view from the top and can transform the margin as well as the centre . . . an account which

treats our perspectives not as subjugated or disruptive knowledges, but as primary and constitutive of a different world” (171).

El Saadawi’s own theories about writing can be of great significance in this respect. Writing is a political affirmation of both the self and the community. Creative writing is intrinsically dissident and emanates resistance to counter hegemony and oppression. Her theories on creative writing are disseminated in many of her books and are shaped by her belief in the power of words to initiate changes by exposing all forms of injustice. Language is a weapon that should be claimed in the struggle against poverty. In “Gender and Islam,” El Saadawi sees creative writing as resistance and dissidence. Her theories are based on the importance of political activism and writing as an integral part of the author’s personal responsibility towards her people and their concerns. She writes: “I believe there is no dissidence without struggle. We cannot understand dissidence except in a situation of struggle and its location in place and time. Without this, dissidence becomes a word void of responsibility, devoid of meaning” (2). Her search for a female culture does not start in the harem, as I will show in Ahmed’s memoirs, but in the agricultural fields where peasant women toil from sunrise to sunset. Location in time and space is central and shapes literary production, as she explains. Her existence in Egypt, her country, authenticates her writing about Arab women and the poor. When she was in the USA, she was yearning for Egypt. In *Walking Through Fire*, her homeland is the only enduring presence in her life in the USA. She uses the dream-pattern to cater for her virtual travel to Egypt in order to survive her exile (4-5). Writing is empowering when it is lived as a continuous struggle against oppression: “You have to start from yourself, from your ground, not to be in the air. That’s why struggle starts locally, and it expands, and it connects globally. You have to start locally from your soil, from your village, from your country, from your state to liberate yourself (“Gender and Islam” 3).

Leila Ahmed’s memoir *A Border Passage* spans the life of its author from childhood to adulthood. It follows—in a *bildungsroman* pattern—the itinerary of the protagonist’s growth in colonial Egypt and ends on her return to Egypt from the US as a celebrated scholar. What happens in between is a long journey that takes her to important points of stasis, namely Cambridge, where she studies and graduates with a Ph.D., and UAE where she works and earns money to finance her trip to the US, her final

destination. In the USA, she becomes an academic authority on Islam and gender, and makes a seminal intervention in a domain of knowledge that still grips scholars' attention in the West. Her book, *Gender and Islam*, and the issues related to "Western Perceptions of the Harem" are seen as a significant contribution. The "inbetweenness" of her identity is a major trait she focuses on in constructing the autobiographical "I." Identity is a process of self-construction whereby subjectivity is formed. Subjectivity is articulated through written language in the narrative text and is shaped by experience as an internal and external process of self-identification with one's history, geography, culture, and heritage. Agency, on the other hand, is the result of one's transnational experience. In *Reading Autobiography*, Mason and Watson define the process of constructing one's autobiographical subjectivity. They identify the dimensions of autobiographical subjectivity separately and insist that they are enmeshed with each other and should be seen as an organic unity in the literary production of the "I" in the autobiographical text: "the psychic (memory), the temporal (experience), the spatial (identity), the material (embodiment), and the transformative (agency)" (49). "Situateness" is a term related to location and historical and cultural specificities of the interaction of the narrative self with her environment (49-50). The construction of an autobiographical subjectivity is a complex narrative process where experience plays a defining role.

In *Keywords* (126-28), Raymond Williams outlines the historical development of the concept of experience in Western thinking. He notes that the experiences of a subjective witness "are offered not only as truths, but as the most authentic kind of truths" which are presented as "the ground for all (subsequent) reasoning and analysis." William also highlights experience as "the product of social conditions or of systems of belief or of fundamental systems of perception." The concept of experience with its material and collective implications has come to denote the relativity of truth and its fragmentation. In *Alice Doesn't*, Teresa de Lauretis defines experience as a process by which the individual becomes subject. Her definition closely ties the notion experience to ideology:

Experience is the process by which, for all social beings, subjectivity is constructed. Through that process one places oneself or is placed in social reality and so perceives and comprehends as subjective (referring to,

originating in oneself) those relations—material, economic, and interpersonal—which are in fact social and, in a larger perspective, historical (159).

The “I” in *A Border Passage*, is constructed as polyvalent and mobile in between different cultures. The transnational nature of experience is defining for the self. *A Border Passage* explores issues of cultural differences, and counters stereotypical images of the harem and Arab women. In this respect, she depicts the harem in Egypt and what she calls “the Harem Perfected” in Cambridge as similar and empowering female spaces. Postcolonial writers and theorists who are living in the West write about a third world that they appropriate to themselves. This attempt to construct it for Western readers is replete with inconsistencies, namely the negation of the material realities of women in third world countries. In her essay “The Feminist Standpoint,” Nancy Hartsock expounds how “Feminist theorists must demand that feminist theorizing be grounded in women’s material activity and must be part of the political struggle” (304). Ahmed’s discourse on women’s domestic lives is sustained by cultural identity claims, and its veracity is cemented by her belonging to Egypt. Elleke Boehmer states that the “social position of immigrant writers” makes “not only the work, but also the biographies of post-colonial writers, many of whom are émigrés or exiles, appear to enact [hybrid] minglings. Their lives are distinguished by cultural clash, linguistic collision, and transnational movement.” They, therefore, deny or gloss over class oppression and poverty, and accentuate claims to identity (241-242). Leila Ahmed’s strange comparison between the harem in her Grandfather’s estate and Girton in Cambridge is a case to point. The harem is where she lived, learned about Islam, met women from different classes and heard stories. Her self-awareness and progress in the world is informed by the bond she has with the harem’s women, including the maids. They are happy and pleased with their mistresses’ help and charity; the mistresses even talk to the maids, and treat them as equal. Ahmed then argues that she is not romanticising the “slave-master relationship,” which, of course, she is, throughout her depiction of the harem (183).

The harem in *A Border Passage* is rich with women’s stories about themselves and their world. Their views about their societies and their lives will inspire Leila Ahmed as a scholar in the West to carve out a place in Western academia. The suffering of women in their homes is discussed inside those female

gatherings, but their powerlessness remains quite frustrating. “The Harem Perfected” is when Ahmed leaves for the UK and enters Girton College in Cambridge. She seems at pains to convince her readers of in-existent similarities between two opposing worlds. The harem seems to be empowering for her and her sister because they left to study and live in the West, and encaging for those who remain in the country. In *A Border Passage*, Ahmed is reminiscent of colonial Egypt, of the rich harem of her grandfather and of the happiness of maids there. She writes long theoretical passages concerning how Western feminists’ views and theories about Arab and Muslim women are fraught with prejudices (182-183).

In “Shahrazadian Gestures in Arab Women’s Autobiographies,” Vinson compares Ahmed’s memoirs with the autobiographies of El Saadawi, and shows how their works converge. She argues that Ahmed writes “counternarratives” that resist oppressive narratives about Muslim women. In this part of the article, I will focus on the differences between the two authors by arguing that Ahmed’s countering of Western narratives about Muslim women resulted in romanticising the harem and negating its segregated nature. This emphasis on the positive impact of the harem on her and on the other women, including the maids, testifies to her privileged class position. Studying in colonial English schools in Egypt, graduating from Cambridge and then settling in the USA makes the culturally oriented theories on Muslim and Arab women that stress cultural difference central to her researches. Moreover, the challenging of essentialist representations of Arab and Muslim women reifies new images that are themselves controversial and unrepresentative. This, according to Chow, is a process of self-subalternisation in academic cultural studies that entails the following, “What these intellectuals are doing is robbing the terms of oppression of their critical and oppositional import, and thus depriving the oppressed of even the vocabulary of protest and rightful demand” (13). The postcolonial trait that characterises many exiled writers consists of dismissing class oppression and global capitalism, and emphasising the role of culture. This creates the condition of possibility for them to position themselves in Western academia and make issues pertaining to differences of cultural identity a platform for theorising about third world countries. In the *Afterword* to the second edition of his book, *Literary Theory*, Terry Eagleton

critiques US based postcolonial scholars and shows convincingly how they are cashing in on the issue of cultural difference. By “over-emphasizing the cultural dimension,” they simplify serious economic issues related to transnational flow of capital, labour-market, and relations between poor and rich nations. The exaggerated significance of the theme of cultural otherness and self-identity at the expense of “vital material conditions” has resulted in the “romantic idealization of the ‘other’” and the quasi-total negation of neo-colonialism and its economic determination (205-206). In an interview, El Saadawi makes the same point by emphasising the reasons for playing down or neglecting the economic. She criticises those “professors in academia” who “are fond of the term ‘postcolonial’” and states that the term “speaks partial truth in order to hide a more important truth, to hide the fact that we live in a new or neo-colonial era where colonialism is transnational” (Smith 147-148). Contrary to Ahmed, poverty and class-division are central to Nawel El Saadawi’s feminism. Her books thematise the intersections between poverty, oppression, class struggle and gender issues. Unlike Ahmed, whose relation with written Arabic is problematic and antagonistic, El Saadawi uses the language subversively and in so doing charges it with her anger and other emotions. Her Arabic is empowering and powerful, alive and awakening, and daring and liberating. Her use of language revolutionised our understanding of and relation with the written text. The translation into English of her texts does not always fully render El Saadawi’s work to her readers in the West and across the world. El Saadawi is aware of the absence of women’s tradition in Arabic literature and redresses it in her writing by evoking the glories of female queens, priests and poets from the pre-Islamic era and ancient Egypt. Feminism for El Sadawi is activism, a way of life and a life devoted to fighting oppression. The depiction of poverty and ignorance, and debates on religion, sex and politics made El Saadawi’s works revolutionary and disturbing to the ruling class and fundamentalists. The theories she develops in her fiction as well as life narratives are extensions of her meditations, thinking and interaction with people in their environs.

*Memoirs from the Women’s Prison, A Daughter of Isis, and Walking Through Fire* were written at turning points in El Saadawi’s life. Prison and exile inform and shape the narrative fabric of the works. But *Walking Through Fire* ends with her



return to Egypt. In her autobiographies, El Saadawi sees her writing as more real than life. It is the force that keeps her alive and fighting: "Writing has been the antithesis of death and yet, paradoxically, the reason why in June 1992 I was put on a death-list" (16). In a marked contrast, Ahmed goes to Egypt as a celebrated American scholar, and writes about issues that are more relevant to and easily decoded by Western critics, while El Saadawi is forced to leave her country when she is almost sixty because of Islamist threats. El Saadawi's fight for freedom is articulated through her writing as a lived reality. The autobiographical act is rooted in the political and economic realities of Egypt; it spans over sixty years of her life and her country's history. Linda Anderson raises the complex question of "the subject's discursive position and material and historical location" in life narratives. The representational dimensions of the self are the result of the materiality of its location and the historical discourse it produces (Anderson 97-98). Nancy K Miller's *Getting Personal* studies the relation of the female subject to theory and politics (21) and affirms the performativity of the autobiographical act as it "matters to others" and in this sense "engaged" (24). In the production of knowledge, discourses determine the process and define our identities as discursive constructs. In "Discourse on Language," Foucault reminds us that "we are not free to say just anything" and that "we cannot simply speak of anything" (340). Statements on the same issue at the same time may be different from one autobiographer to another and their truth value depends on who speaks and with what authority.

Ahmed and Saadawi speak in their narratives about female circumcision or genital mutilation. Ahmed's tone is evasive and even dismissive of the whole affair. The reader gets the impression that it is of no consequence since she is not exposed to it and her mother makes it clear to the woman who comes offering her service that it is not wanted. Ahmed even claims that it is not as common as it is thought to be in the West (97). In my understanding, she wants her Western readers to know about and distinguish between women in Egypt. Her mother—because she belongs to the rich Turku–Circassian aristocracy—spared her daughters such trauma. Indeed, her endeavour to challenge what she calls "Eurocentric images of Arab and Muslim women" goes as far as to avoid mentioning her father's family in *A Border Passage*. Being Egyptian may undermine her discourse about

female genital mutilation. She emphatically underlines the fact that all her female relatives on her mother's side are not circumcised, and, in so doing, she undermines those who claim the contrary. This is far from being the case in El Saadawi's works, in which she writes her life in the text by incorporating her experience and the experiences of other females living and dead. The state of *malaise* and alienation, as lived and experienced by Ahmed when she is searching for her roots and identity, is a bourgeois privilege third world women activists and the poor won't know much about. Identity is a continuous struggle against all forms of oppression for El Saadawi. Her account of her circumcision is charged with pain and humiliation, with anger and rebellion, and with determination. The description of her circumcision is graphic, and disturbingly detailed, which indicates its present impact on the author's psyche and sexual life. The memories of the incident whenever recalled regenerate feelings of pain and agony as well as the helplessness and frailty of the then-child that the Daya,<sup>2</sup> and the group of female relatives who came to help, left coiled in a pool of blood. The series of images that cross her mind about that particular event ignites rebellion and erupts into uncontained anger. The description of the event is very short and extremely powerful because it is hard to forget, and even harder to remember and narrate. Some critics in the West argue that despite El Saadawi's self-assertion, her accounts about her sexuality are brief because of social and cultural inhibition. Albeit true, this can be better explained by the painful act of remembering and writing about what she calls "The Forgotten Things in Life" (*A Daughter of Isis* 11-13). Consequently, those powerful and defining moments are rendered by the briefness of the passages and the recourse to dream-anchored depictions where many female stories merge into one in her memories. The piercing pain of those who underwent such experiences, be it the author or the host of women whose stories are woven into the narrative, remains present in their lives and testifies to their sufferings as female in a society that comes "to a standstill" when a female child is born. "The sorrow might conceal a latent desire to bury the female infant" is better than

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<sup>2</sup> Village midwife in rural Egypt, she is responsible for the cutting. In El Saadawi's memoirs and her works, the Daya is a recurrent archetypal figure. Her presence in women's lives is accompanied by fear and shame; she is a continuous reminder of their cursed existence and helplessness.

infanticide (19).<sup>3</sup> The passage that describes her genital mutilation is short but revealing and shows that the “I” is an extension of the poor, the peasants, and the working class women in Egypt. She is not speaking for them, but acknowledging their pain as part of hers. In my view, when relating her grandmother’s genital mutilation, she underlines the continuity of an ancient and painful female suffering that is passed on from one generation to the other as a legacy of shame and humiliation (36). While Ahmed claims that it is not a widespread phenomenon, El Saadawi describes her genital mutilation, works on the subject as a researcher, writer, medical doctor, activist, and director of public health. In her capacity as a highly ranked official in the Ministry of Health and the UN, she affirms that “Not a single girl . . . escaped” (73). She is the first Arab writer to speak openly about sex and sexuality and expose such crimes against women.

The biographical and autobiographical merge as one in El Saadawi’s life narratives. Sexual relations between married couples, child-marriage, incest, rape, and paedophilia are explored within her own life stories. Her knowledge stems from her own plight and is authenticated by the trauma and suffering of women around her. It bears witness to her commitment that could have cost her life had she stayed in Egypt. She stages in her life narrative her political commitment, making of the oft-quoted “the private is political” a lived reality. Saadawi’s own experiences are interwoven with those of other women, and articulate feminism as a way of living, struggling and writing. In *Resistance Literature*, Harlow points to a new form: a relation between character/writer that emerges in writing about women in prison. El Saadawi’s “Writing . . . no longer distinguishes her from other women in the society, but rather links her to them in their respective opposition to the reprisals of authoritarian structures” (140). The self is constructed and even dissolved in the other; women writers who are jailed because of their writing see their texts as resistance and extensions of their people’s aspirations for freedom and democracy. Not in the sense of speaking for them, but in opening the narrative space to their stories and lives. They enter her life-narrative as subjects, where they assume the “I” position by fashioning dialogues where they speak directly to

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<sup>3</sup> El Saadawi quotes the Koran and refers to the pre-Islamic tradition of burying infant girls alive. She sarcastically speaks about being born “in better times” (*A Daughter of Isis* 19).

readers. This can be applicable to her autobiographical works, as she keeps reminding the readers of the prison of women inside the home, and of the poor inside Egypt.

The story of her mother who married at the age of seventeen and died when she was forty-five inspired Saadawi to write a work of fiction, *She Has no Place in Heaven*. It is quoted and referred to in *A Daughter of Isis* and *Walking Through Fire*, when she refers to her mother. She imagines her in Heaven looking for her husband, the only reward Muslim women have in paradise are their husbands on earth, but he has no time for her. Whenever she goes to see him she finds him busy; he is given seventy virgins whose virginity is always renewed. They are, therefore, in a continuous queue, waiting for their turn. The body of work that forms her autobiographies testifies to her awareness of the limitations of the genre. She introduces the sub-narratives of women's stories, fiction and facts to tie up her work, and states that this is by all means an unfinished work and that, "I have not sat down to write it yet" (*A Daughter of Isis* 353). She is experimenting with the genre of autobiography and unsettling its boundaries, introducing diaries, stream of consciousness, short stories, dreams and reveries. The temporal narrative sequencing is cross-cut by other writing forms that solidify the narrative self whereby the voice of Saadawi, her feminist awareness and political activism is felt and experienced by her readers because of the materiality of her condition in Egyptian time and space. The self is foregrounded in the stories as are the worries of her country, Egypt. Harlow refers to El Saadawi, amongst others, to demonstrate how prison-writings of women from the third-world "propose alternative parameters for the definition and articulation of literary conventions" (136).

The "I" in Saadawi's three works is aware of its own belonging to a culture, a country where writing is a serious crime, and a class of deprived Fellaheen. When she was ten, she kept a secret diary; she wrote what she felt and should not have been saying because it was sinful. She wrote poems and short stories or ideas that crossed her mind and made her think and revolt. The forbidden and the creative were interrelated and came together as one in her diary. This diary became a source of knowledge that she often quotes in her works. She also uses her grandmother's narratives, short stories or legends to consolidate her own stories. In her works there is no harem, no harem perfected and no Shahrazad either. Her writing challenges postcolonial critics who

are based in the West and write primarily to Western readership about Arab women, using the archetypal figure of shahrazad, buttressing their theories with words like harem, deconstructing the harem, the veil and what it stands for, theorising even what seems to be obvious and, in demystifying it, rendering it more complicated and vague. Writing is politically affirmative and cannot be creative unless it counters hegemony (*A Daughter of Isis* 352).

Notwithstanding the criticism levelled against her by Leila Ahmad, and many others, especially about female genital mutilation, and the representations of Arab women, El Saadawi remains one of the mostly read and translated authors and the most outstanding feminist in the Arab and Muslim world. Writing is political and empowering for her as a writer, and for many Arab women who grew up reading her books. Feminism for them is synonymous with her name. Her writing is not directed primarily at a Western audience, but it is written in Arabic and translated into many languages. Directed at Arab readers and powered by their own cultural references and codes, the act of reading is also political and for this reason El Saadawi is perceived as a very serious threat to religious fanatics and dictators. As a visiting professor in Duke University, she wonders how her American students will be able to understand her. In a country where reading means reading only the Koran and writing means writing about only it, and when the state controls what you write and say, and even when the states doesn't, the religious establishment and the Islamists do. They attack freedom of speech, they can even curb personal freedom and basic human rights in the name of Islam. It is difficult to explain how people go to the polls and vote for those who will oppress them in the name of religion after the so called "Arab Spring." But writing for her is an empowering weapon and, as long as she is writing, her fight against obscurantism, oppression and poverty continues.

In an extremely provoking passage, El Saadawi compares her writing to killing. Her experience of writing, of taking the pen and actually putting the letters on small pieces of paper, is an act of violence and aggression that erupts with passion, anger, and revolt. For her, writing is not meant to preserve life, in contrast to those critics who evoke the archetypal figure of shahrazad. Instead, life is an ongoing struggle. In *Memoirs from A Women's Prison*, she identifies or rather sees herself in Fathiyya, the murderess, who "took hold of the hoe and struck the blow" (116).

El Saadawi conceives her writing as more real than her life; when she writes she feels the passion of the murderess. What motivates her is the urge to fight oppression in her writings and because of that her writing is more important than life. The prison is synonymous with freedom; 'The pen is the most valuable thing in my life', and if she did not learn to write she would have learnt how to use the "hoe." Writing is instigated by the urge to kill, she writes in her secret diary, a point that she emphatically espouses in her writing as a young woman and as an adult "When a desire to kill seizes hold of me I pick up a pen and sit in front of a sheet of paper" (164).

*A Daughter of Isis* is about her childhood, and ends with her graduation as a medical doctor. *Walking through Fire* chronicles her later years and ends on her departure home after a short exile in the USA. She is unable to write in Egypt, so she leaves; for her, writing is larger than life. She expounds her own theories about life-writing and employs many writing strategies whereby her life-narrative is articulated through collective and shared processes of accommodating many female voices and stories. Malti-Douglas reminds El Saadawi's readers that "the textual backgrounds on which she is fighting are quite Middle Eastern" and "if we ignore this fact; we denude her texts of much of their power and specificity" (6).

*A Border Passage*, on the other hand, is personal and private, where experiences centre on the "I" of Ahmed as a postcolonial critic and émigré. The differences between the two authors are instrumental in showing how the politics of location and experience shape the author's sense of belonging and determine her writings and thematic focus. This article has demonstrated how El Saadawi's positioning as an activist in Egypt has made her narrative rigorously engaged in the struggle of her people and how Ahmed's *Border Passage* is directed primarily at Western academics and specialists, and challenges their views on Muslim and Arab women. Her attempt to represent and speak about subaltern women is undercut by her positioning in the West and belonging to an elite class in colonial Egypt. Ahmed elaborates on the West/East divide and focuses on the cultural in the construction of the self and the women she depicts in her work. For El Saadawi, "the clash is between the people who own the money and the military power—the colonizer and exploiters—and the poor and women. That is the clash: a clash of economic interest. There is no clash of civilizations; this is a very false theory to hide the economic reason for oppression" (Smith 61).

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