Nawal Al Saadawi and Hanan Al Shaykh's Authorship: Between Arab and Western Reception

Diana M. Obeid
Old Dominion University

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NAWAL AL SAADAWI AND HANAN AL SHAYKH’S AUTHORSHIP: BETWEEN ARAB AND WESTERN RECEPTION

by

Diana M. Obeid
B.A. 2005, Lebanese University, Lebanon

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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Approved by:

Avi Santo (Director)

Jennifer Fish (Member)

Lindal Buchanan (Member)
When Lebanese author Layla Baalbaki wrote her novel *A Space Ship of Tenderness to the Moon* in 1964 about a woman’s defiance to her husband’s wishes and his way of maintaining societal customs and traditions, an avalanche of criticism was directed against her. She was accused of obscenity and was put on trial before a Lebanese Prosecutor. Baalbaki’s experiences are symbolic of the paradoxical and contradictory reception many Arab female authors have received in the East and the West. In this thesis, I discuss this discrepancy of reception in the works of Nawal Al Saadawi and Hanan Al Shaykh, two of the most renowned female authors in the Arab world. While Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh’s works were disparaged and criticized in the Arab world, it was canonized in the West. This discrepancy necessitates the study of the discursive function of their authorship, for these authors’ reputations have traveled trans-nationally. It is important to note that these writers were active agents—not passive victims—in the social construction of their authorship. Although at times they seem wary of the reception they have received in the West, I will argue that they have been compliant and at times invited that reception.
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To my mother, my daughters, and, especially, my husband
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This thesis began as a research paper for Professor Avi Santo in his Authorship and Discourse seminar. Professor Santo devised an elaborate and rich list of readings discussing the varied aspects of authorship, which encouraged me to explore the discursive function of authorship as it applies to two Arab female writers, Nawal Al Saadawi and Hanan Al Shaykh. For this and for Professor Santo’s continuous guidance in this project, I am immensely thankful. I would also like to thank Professors Jennifer Fish and Lindal Buchanan for their insightful comments and suggestions during the review period.

I would also like to thank my mother, who has always been there for me, and my two young daughters, Taleen and Teah, who were very patient throughout this project. Last but not least, I am grateful to my husband who gave a new meaning to the phrase “for better or for worse.”
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INTRODUCTION

1.1 THE TOPIC AND THE RESEARCH

When Lebanese author, Layla Baalbaki wrote her novel *A Space Ship of Tenderness to the Moon* in 1964 about a woman’s defiance to her husband’s wishes and his way of maintaining societal customs and traditions, an avalanche of criticism was directed against her. She was accused of obscenity, and was put on trial before a Lebanese Prosecutor. The bookstores that carried her books were raided, and her books were destroyed (Awwad 21). At her defense, her lawyer argued that Baalbaki was greatly influenced by Western culture, to which she was introduced while she was traveling in Europe. This lifestyle ran counter to her conservative upbringing and nature. Although Baalbaki—against her lawyer’s wishes—tried to convey that her novels were not influenced by Western culture and that they represented a factual picture of the Arab society, her efforts fell on deaf ears (21).

In the Arab world, Baalbaki’s writings were dismissed as literature of foreign import serving a Western agenda. In the West, however, her writings were received as a revolutionary attempt at disclosing the oppression of a patriarchal system, which has long silenced Arab women. Her work was seen as representing an authentic artifact of that culture. Baalbaki’s experiences are emblematic of the paradoxical and contradictory reception many Arab female authors have received in the East and the West: inauthentically Western in the eyes of Arab critics, authentically Arab in the eyes of Western critics. In this thesis, I discuss this discrepancy of reception in the works of
Nawal Al Saadawi and Hanan Al Shaykh, two of the most renowned female authors from the Arab world.

Since the publication of her first novel *Mudhakkirat Tabibah* (1958); translated as *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* (1988), Nawal Al Saadawi—the Egyptian physician, feminist, author, and psychiatrist—has come under fire from politicians, religious figures, readers and literary critics, among others. Her dismissal from her position as both director of education in Egypt’s Ministry of Health and editor of *Health Magazine* following the publication of *Al-Mar‘ah wa-al-jins* (Woman and Sex) (*Contemporary Authors* 143) and her brief imprisonment during the Sadat regime triggered an avalanche of international protests (144). Defying government censorship restrictions, Al Saadawi was able to publish controversial books exposing—as she claimsthe culture’s treatment of Arab women. Al Saadawi has published twenty-seven books over the past thirty-four years, ranging from fiction to non-fiction, novels, autobiographies, articles, and plays. These works generally address Arab women’s status in the Arab world and in particular in Egypt.

Hanan Al Shaykh has published several works that have been translated into more than nine foreign languages. Her works were condemned in the Arab world for their sexual explicitness, and for their portrayal of domestic, sexual abuse and incest as part of the Arab culture. Hanan Al Shaykh’s works are mainly fiction with the exception of *The Locust and the Bird: My Mother’s Story* (2009), which is based on the story of Al Shaykh’s mother.

The discrepancy between the receptions these authors received in the Arab world and in the West necessitates the study of the discursive function of their authorship, for these
authors’ reputations have also traveled internationally. The authors themselves emerged as symbols of Arab feminism. It is important to note that these writers were active agents—not passive victims—in the social construction of their authorship. Although at times they have seemed wary of the reception they have received in the West, I will argue that they have also been compliant and at times even invited that reception.

Since this thesis is concerned with the question of location and its relation to the production and reception of knowledge, my own location as an Arab woman writing about female writers from the Arab world from within the belly of the First World needs to be highlighted as well.

1.2 METHODOLOGY

I study the social construction of Nawal Al Saadawi and Hanan Al Shaykh’s authorship as well as compare their literary reception in the Arab world and in the West. I argue that, regardless of Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh’s intentions, these writers’ authorship is determined by the discursive conditions surrounding the sites of production and reception.

Some feminists find the “death of the author” to be congenial, since, as Toril Moi writes, “for the patriarchal critic, the author is the source, origin and meaning of the text. If we are to undo this patriarchal practice of authority, we must take one further step and proclaim with Roland Barthes the death of the author” (62-3). Other feminists, however, find it problematic that the death of the author comes at a time when marginalized women writers have finally started receiving recognition for their writing. The death of the author denies women not only the ability to become authors but readers as well.
(Miller 106). Arab women writers have come into the writing scene much later than men and have had different historical, cultural, and educational experience than their male counterparts. Hence, announcing the death of the author not only closes a venue that has only recently opened to these women, but also denies them the opportunity to have their voices heard.

Foucault argues that the idea of the author as a unique creator of literature is a historical construct, the product of 19th century liberal ideology and its cult of the individual. Therefore, he replaces the authorial presence with the “author-function,” which relates to the conditions for the articulations discourses rather than their individual centered authority. The concept of the author function is useful to this thesis because it helps us to examine how Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh are constructed through discourse in a way that does not necessarily coincide with the authors’ intentions. Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh have been involved in a double critique: they criticize local treatment of women in the home countries while resisting a Westernized cooptation of their struggle by conducting an attack on Orientalist appropriation of the Arab woman. This sometimes led the authors to have “contradictory alliances”, however, in spite (or perhaps because of these authors’ attempts to shape themselves with whatever discourse is prevalent at the time, they both find themselves constrained and confined by that discourse.

Foucault’s “author function” is relevant when looking at Arabic texts circulating in both the West and the Arab world. By looking at the “author-function,” we can situate these Arab women’s writings within discourses of feminism and Orientalism and the different agendas that might govern their reception. In the case of Arab women writers, it is relevant to ask: What are the factors involved when a work of literature reaches the
global stage? What informs the reception of these authors in the Arab world and in the West? What role do the authors play in constructing a certain authorial identity for themselves? In the case of Nawal Al Saadawi and Hanan Al Shaykh, therefore, we must locate these writers’ “cultural production within the discursively produced conditions of possibility of a writing subject” (Lewis 26). This involves paying attention to the “rules and restrictions that control their access to cultural production and evaluating the role gender plays in the construction of the subjectivity they are supposed to possess” (26). Foucault’s work in this area helps us question how we think about power. Although women’s oppression can be explained by patriarchal social structures, this explanation is not sufficient. It is simplistic to assume that these women are merely passive and powerless victims of male power. Here I argue that Nawal Al Saadawi and Hanan Al Shaykh were not mere victims in their reception; rather they were active agents whom at times informed how they are received in the Arab world and in the West.

For my research I gathered academic reviews from both Arab world and Anglophone critics. In order to analyze the material and arrive at a more complete understanding of the factors that affected Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh’s reception in the Arab world and in the West, I looked at 17 Book reviews of Nawal Al Saadawi and 14 Book reviews of Hanan Al Shaykh’s works. The sources of these books are academic journals and books. I analyze these sources as sites-of-discursive-struggle that construct the authorship/authorial functions of these writers. Therefore, I analyze academic reviews as the medium where the reception of these authors’ works has taken place. I also explore how Orientalist and western feminist perspectives inform the reception of these authors. Intrinsic to feminism “is women’s sense of grievance an awareness of oppression, and
awareness that women suffer from systematic social injustice because of their sex” (Miles 162). As to Orientalism, Said defines Orientalism as “an enormous system or intertextual network of rules and procedures which regulate anything that may be thought, written or imagined about the Orient” (Gandhi 76). Said further argues that “there is rather a complex dialectic of reinforcement by which the experiences of readers in reality are determined by what they have read, and this in turn influences writers to take up subjects defined in advance by readers’ experiences” (Said 94). The crux of this argument is of essence to my thesis. For instance, Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh’s works are those that most align with Western expectations of Arab women’s social life and culture. These books were evaluated based on their “anthropological” value rather than their artistic merit. Western feminism played a major role in the reception of these authors in the West.

I divide reviews into two categories: reviews by Arab critics and reviews by Western critics. By Western literary critics, I mean those who are writing primarily for a Western audience in European and American journals. The major difficulty I found in gathering material is the rarity of Academic reviews on these authors in the Arab World. Part of the problem lies in the fact that being an Arab critic is not an easy feat. Arab critics are usually entrapped in what Said calls “avoidance”. They avoid being too critical for fear of being called misogynists. Conversely, they also fear being too supportive of women writers lest they be accused of supporting Western values or promoting “unacceptable” forms of literature. Hence, some of them resort to ignoring these writers, something Al Saadawi describes as the worst thing that could happen to a writer. By supporting certain readings of their texts, Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh have contributed to
cultural constructions that identify them with the West. These constructions affect the ways in which their texts are read in both their countries of origin and in the West. In order to be able to make this argument, I compare Arabic and English translations of Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh’s works. My objective is not a textual analysis per se; rather, I examine these books for what Ajaz Ahmed calls, “the complete set of metropolitan mediations” involving selections, publications, translations and so on so forth that might determine how these texts were received in the West. In particular I look at 15 books by Al Saadawi published in Arabic and 12 books published in English. I also look at 4 books by Al Shaykh published in Arabic and 10 books by Al Shaykh published in English. In addition, I analyze interviews conducted with both authors (mainly in the West): 9 by Al Saadawi and 4 by Al Shaykh. The discrepancy in the number of interviews conducted by Al Saadawi versus Al Shaykh speaks to the difference in their public visibility in the media and among literary circles.

1.3 CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh have tried at times to distance themselves from the plots of their novels arguing that their fictitious characters are just that: fictitious. When these fictional characters seem to reflect social reality, the two authors argue that it is only coincidental and not intentional. However, much of their work is still considered scandalous, blasphemous and has been banned in their countries of origin. The positions bestowed on Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh as representatives of Arab feminism make their reception worthy of attention. In discussing questions of location and their relation to the
production of knowledge, I argue that differently situated cultural intermediaries give different meanings of Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh’s author-function.

This thesis questions location and its relation to the production of knowledge as well as its reception. Hence, the importance of identifying the problems that might arise from my location as an Arab woman educated in American Universities and working on Arab women writers in the United States. However, my location has also given me access to books that might have otherwise been difficult to get. Moreover, the advantage of being a native Arabic speaker has helped me in comparing the Arabic and the English publications of the books under study. In addition, the West’s misconceptions of the Arab world compelled me to take on the journey of identifying certain “modes of knowing.”

In Chapter II, using Foucault’s argument to look at textual production as the artifact of a culture rather than as the product of a single individual, I analyze the literary reception that Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh received in their countries of origin and in the West. I argue that, although these receptions were seemingly contradictory, they actually informed and were informed by one another. In particular, I look at books, articles in academic journals, and newspapers and treat these findings as sites-of-discursive-struggle that construct/constitute the authorship of these writers. In recent years, a noticeable number of works have been appearing in Western markets and classrooms. This interest has been a source of great debate among critics. Some regard it as a phenomenon steeped in Orientalism while others see it as an overdue attempt at recognizing literary genius. These words were used after the Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz won the Noble Prize in 1988. The dominant culture, Jacquemond contends, “select[s] for translation works from that culture that fit prevailing stereotypes of it” (153). Whatever the case may be, the
reception of Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh in the West is unquestionably worthy of attention.

Chapter III situates the study at a time when literary criticism has moved from the traditional assumptions about the authority of the author to the notions of the “death of the author”. Taking a Foucauldain approach, I treat Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh’s authorship as a sites-of-discourse and analyze how these writers have constructed and construed their own authorship. In that sense, Richard Jacquemond—An Expert in translation studies—maintains that there is a kind of compliancy on the part of the non-English writers because these writers may write only for the sake of being translated into English: the language of “power, culture, and knowledge.” Writers know that publication in English holds the key to being recognized both internationally as well as in their society. Such writers are accused of having a “willingness to assimilate their writing to English or French expectations, conventions, norms, and genres” (153). In case of the Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh a comparison between the Arabic and the English version of their books show that Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh have been trapped by the very Western discourse on Arab women that they have at times tried to resist or de-mystify.

Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh’s attempts at criticizing the reception of their books in the West and Al Saadawi’s anti-Western, anti-imperialist rhetoric did not stop readers from interpreting their books in a certain way. For instance, Al Shaykh valorizes the West for its ability to give marginalized groups a space where they can speak, write, and publish, while, at the same time, she is critical of the reception of her books in the West and the reasons behind that reception. Hence, after examining speeches, interviews, and presentations conducted by these authors, I argue that, although the writers objected to
the misappropriation of their image in the West, they have invited it in some ways. The problem lies in the production of knowledge in and for the West. As Audre Lorde once said, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (331).

In the conclusion I bring the strands of the argument presented together in order to argue that although Orientalism played a major factor in the reception of Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh in the West, these authors were not mere voyeurs in that reception. It is appealingly simple to argue that the literature that circulates in the West (Anglo-American markets) is due to the Western fetishization of the Oriental Other and that the reception of these texts is another kind of market colonization. This argument ignores questions of location and its relation to the production of knowledge as well as the multiple factors that might regulate that reception.
CHAPTER II
AL SAADAWI, AL SHAYKH AND THE POLITICS OF RECEPTION

2.1 AN OVERVIEW

Before the middle of the nineteenth century, there were no known published writings by women in the Arab world (Badran xxvii). Arab women embarked on the craft of writing in general at the beginning of the twentieth century when Egypt and Lebanon both became bastions of women’s journalism (UN 101). Women intellectuals like Zaynab Fawwaz (1850-1914), Labibah Hashim (1882-1952), and May Ziadeh (1886-1941) wrote articles in newspapers and magazines distributed throughout the Arab world, fighting for their rights and striving for equality with men (Awwad 16). However, it was only during the 1940s that Arab women began to compete with male authors, although female authors are still fewer in number than their male counterparts (Cohen-Mor 2). Nonetheless, these women writers cannot be considered as representatives of all facets of Arab society. In parts of the world where illiteracy is still prevailing, and where the majority of women are preoccupied with the harsh realities of life, writing becomes a privilege that only those of the Middle class or upper-Middle class can afford (4).

Still, it is worth mentioning that the mere fact that these women writers have the intellectual capability and the economic means to write does not imply that these women’s writing will be received without opposition. Arab women writers may still find it difficult to publish their writings or to find readership for their material (5). In other words, and in Foucauldian terms, increasing knowledge does not mean increasing freedom (The History of Sexuality). Writing, for women in the Arab world, was not
considered a respectable profession. Some religious men even considered it an act of subversion, and many women were forbidden from crossing that fine border and encroaching on what was considered a male space (Faqir 52). Nawal Al Saadawi and Hanan Al Shaykh, were accused of doing just that.

Moreover, Arab women writers’ attempts to put pen to paper were not only considered acts of defiance, but also acts of betrayal, for these writers were sometimes accused of aligning with the West against their culture in the sense that their writings were considered another form of Western colonization, foreign to the Arab culture, and hence unrepresentative of the Arab women’s plight (Mernissi xxx). Amin Malak, for instance, uses the term “mimetic mode” to describe the fiction of Arab and Muslim women where the Western readers have “an eager anticipation of a candid, courageous unveiling of some of the chilling acts of violence perpetrated against women in several Muslim societies, at times even in the name of religion, acts such as the hideously gruesome practice of female circumcision or genital mutilation” (159). Although the accusation of unveiling grizzly details of a culture is not exclusive to Arab women writers, it becomes more interesting in case of Arab women because the Western reader has certain preconceptions about Arab culture. These preconceptions are rife with stereotypes of oppressed Arab women and men.

In this chapter I will trace the literary reception of Nawal Al Saadawi and Hanan Al Shaykh in both the Arab world and in the West. I argue that differently situated cultural intermediaries give different meanings to Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh’s author-function. In the Arab world, Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh’s writings were evaluated in terms of their compliance with what are considered Western values. While in the West,
on the other hand, their overt tackling of topics such as women’s oppression, female sexuality were reasons behind their acceptance on the global stage. However, it is relevant to mention here that, although there are certain commonalities with which Arab literary critics view Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh’s writings, these commonalities stop short when describing the artistic merit of each writer. Arab critics recommend Al Shaykh for her literary achievements. Edward Said, for instance, describes Al Shaykh as one of the “oppositional figures who frequently use literary virtuosity to form an oblique critique of life in the various Arab states” (Embargoed 280). In contrast and despite the fact that Arab critics are not homogenous in their description of Al Saadawi’s credentials, they mostly agree on the “shortcomings of her literary attainments” (Hafez 196).

In the West, on the other hand, these writers have been celebrated for their courageous documentation of a culture’s misogyny. Instead of treating their works as literature, Western literary critics looked upon these works as windows into Arab women’s lives and culture. For instance, in describing Al Saadawi, Lindsey Moore writes, Al Saadawi is “outspoken and prolific, [she]…has been the best known expositor of Arab Muslim female experience to Western audiences” (17). This paradox in reception between the writers’ countries of origin and the West implores the examining of their authorship-as-a-site-of discourse. In that respect questions on the roles feminism and Orientalism play in their reception should be asked. In doing so, I seek to build on Foucault’s concept of the author-function since thinking of the author as a function of discourse “allows for the retention of both the social and the subject” (Lewis 25). In that sense, the subject must be stripped of its creativity and analyzed as a complex and variable function of discourse. Foucault further argues that, “an author’s name is not
simply an element of speech...[rather, it] characterizes a particular manner of existence of discourse...[whose]...status and...manner of reception are regulated by the culture in which it circulates” (“What is an Author” 123). Hence, the author is “constructed” in relation to the text’s position within a particular culture (150).

This chapter is organized as follows: First, I give some biographical information on Nawal Al Saadawi and Hanan Al Shaykh. Here, I am well aware of the fact that by being involved in a biographical discourse about these writers, I might be at fault of further “constructing” an authorial identity that might define who these writers are. Therefore, any reading of a biographical text should be read with the skepticism we accord a literary text. In this section, I elaborate on some of the common themes both of these writers tackled as these themes intersect with the ways these writers were received both locally and globally. Next, I trace the reception of these writers in an Arab context and discuss what this reception actually entailed. I then examine the reception of these writers by Western literary critics. By Western literary critics, I mean those who are writing primarily for a Western audience in European and American journals. I conclude this chapter by analyzing the reception these authors received locally and globally in the light of arguments on Orientalism, post-colonialism and feminism.

2.2 NAWAL AL SAADAWI AND HANAN AL SHAYKH

The Egypt of the 1960s and 1970s informed the early works of Al Saadawi–most important is the Nasser-led pan Arab revolution in 1952. Nasser supported the notion of the emancipation of women, which many aristocratic women had been calling for since the late 19th century. A substantial number of legislative provisions were granted that
allowed women to participate in politics and increased their access to primary and secondary education. Although these measures allowed some women to participate in the workplace and some aspects of the political life, these slight improvements had no actual influence on the traditional patriarchal structure, which was, if anything, retained.

Nasser’s era was also known for its cracking down on any kind of intellectual, political, or physical opposition, which made it difficult for intellectuals to freely express what they thought of the regime or any other topic the regime deemed unacceptable. Nasser also angered the Moslem fundamentalists whom he imprisoned in great numbers. From the 1960s onward, Al Saadawi’s writings, like her contemporaries, began to take the shape of “committed literature”: using fiction to make a social and/or a political commentary. After the death of Nasser, his assistant Anwar Al Saadat took rule. The Sadat regime lessened the grip that Nasser had placed on the Moselm Brotherhood—one of the largest and oldest Islamic parties. However, although Sadat gave more freedom to the press when he first ruled, when the Muslim brotherhood and the Egyptian intellectuals became overtly critical of his politics, he arrested them in great numbers. In spite of his attempts to reign in the Moslem Brotherhood, their power has grown significantly. The Research Center of Al Azhar in Egypt—where the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood was a student—became the “intellectual police.” They had the jurisdiction to crack down on any publishing establishment and confiscate any book they deemed “unacceptable.” For instance, in 2007, Muhammad Sayyid Tantawy, the then Grand Imam of Al Azhar, is reported to have asked the Egyptian Government to crack down on journalists whom he believed deserved boycotting. He even warned readers that reading or buying newspapers is tantamount to sinning.
Nawal Al Saadawi has claimed to document her personal life and history in her writings: *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World* (2007) and *Memoirs from the Women’s Prison* (1994). In the books Al Saadawi relates her political commitment as well as the persecution she has undergone from local politicians, religious leaders, literary critics, and readers. Al Saadawi is a medical doctor, who became the director of education in Egypt’s Ministry of Health in 1958 and an editor of *Health* magazine in 1958. However, in 1972, following the publication of her non-fiction book *Al-Mar‘ah wa-al-Jins* (*Woman and Sex*), which triggered antagonistic attack from political and religious authorities, she was expelled from her positions. In this book Al Saadawi discusses different aggressions committed against women’s bodies including female circumcision—an extreme form of genital mutilation practiced in some rural parts of Egypt and Africa. It was this topic that was later highlighted in Western newspapers and media more than any other topic Al Saadawi has discussed or written about. This earned her the title of representative of Arab feminism. From 1973 to 1976, she worked on researching women and neurosis at the Ain Shams University’s Faculty of Medicine; and from 1979 to 1980, she was the United Nations Advisor for the Women’s Program in Africa (ECA) and the Middle East (ECWA). Al Saadawi continued to publish four more books dealing with topics related to the treatment of Arab women in the Middle East: *Al Mar‘a Heya al Asel* (*Woman is the Origin* 1971), *Al Wajih al Ari lil Mar‘a al-Arabeya* (*The Naked Face of Arab Woman* 1974), and *Al Mar’a wa al-Sira al Nafsia* (*Woman and Neurosis* 1975). In 1980, she published her first work in English, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World* (1980). In 1981, the Sadat regime arrested and imprisoned her for three months because of her writings (Saiti 153). Al Saadawi was not
the only one imprisoned at the time. 1,035 Egyptian intellectuals were imprisoned at the same time by a decree issued by President Anwar Al Sadat. In the West, however, Al Saadawi’s imprisonment was viewed in context of her writing: “her explicit writings on the oppression of women in Egypt led to her imprisonment” (Code 611). In actuality, Al Saadawi was imprisoned after voicing her criticism of Sadat’s policies. In spite of the censorship, Al Saadawi was able to publish twenty-seven books in the last thirty-four years. Arab men were considered misogynist for not allowing Arab women to publish. However, Al Saadawi has been writing since 1948, and it was only in 1982 that she became known in the West with the publication of her book *The Hidden Face of Eve.*

Nawal Al Saadawi published her book *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* in Arabic in 1960 and was translated into English in 1989 by Catherine Cobham. In 1968 she wrote *Searching. The Death of the Only Man in the World* (1974), which was translated by Sherif Hetata in 1985 and published in English under the title *God Dies by the Nile.* Al Saadawi wrote four more books before she started publishing in the West: *The Circling Song* (1978); *Death of an Ex-Minister* (1980); *She Has no Place in Paradise* (1979) and *Woman at Point Zero* (1979). Because Al Saadawi has been writing since 1960 and was only known in the West since 1982, the question arises of who has been publishing Al Saadawi’s books in the Arab World during those years?

Al Saadawi’s first book was published in 1948 in Egypt by Madbouli library, which published sixteen of Al Saadawi’s books and distributed many more. The last book Al Saadawi published with Madbouli was *Breaking the Boundaries* (Kasser al Huduud) in 2004. This is significant because Al Saadawi is often portrayed in the West as a victim of Arab male misogyny adamant about silencing outspoken female writers. The
story that is most highlighted about Al Saadawi’s publisher, Madbouli is his shredding of two of her books: *The Fall of the Imam* (1987) and *God Resigns for the Summit Meeting* published in English in 1996. The two books, according to Madbouli, were shredded in the presence and under the supervision of the Egyptian authorities, which raises questions about how much of that act was of Madbouli’s free will.

Madbouli justified his actions by claiming that the only objection he had to Al Saadawi’s two books was her defaming of God. As to the books themselves, in *God Resigns for the Summit Meetings*, the writer depicts God as a king and surrounded by soldiers with a lake of water and rivers of wine under his feet. The devil, meanwhile, appears as a handsome 30-year-old-man. *The Fall of the Imam* is about Bint Allah, the daughter of God, who was pursued and killed by the authorities and whose mother also was stoned to death according to the *shari’a* (Islamic law), thus becoming another victim of the Imam’s vicious cruelty.

In the Arab world, where any mention of religion and Islam, in particular, can be detrimental, it is not surprising how such books can cause a stir. However, that does not explain the way the West fed on this story anointing Al Saadawi to the status of a victim and Arab critics and publishers into patriarchal villains. In no way here am I trying to claim that there is a freedom of press in the Arab world. Nonetheless, it is important these female writers were publishing in the Arab world before they became known in the West.

Hanan Al Shaykh was born in Lebanon in 1945 to a conservative Shiite Muslim family. In 1963 at eighteen years of age she began studying at the American College for Girls in Cairo, Egypt, and at the age of twenty-two she wrote her first novel, *Intihar Rajul Mayit* (*The Suicide of a Dead Man* 1970). When she returned to Beirut, she pursued a
successful career as a journalist, eventually working for the daily newspaper Al-Nahar—the most prestigious Lebanese newspaper. Upon her marriage, she moved to the Arabian Gulf, where her husband worked, and there she wrote her second novel Faras Al Shaytan (The Praying Mantis 1975), which is presumed to be largely autobiographical. Neither was translated into English. It was the translation of her third novel, The Story of Zahra (1994) that introduced Al Shaykh to Western readers and established her as one of the most prominent Arab women writers. The novel—about a young girl’s victimization under patriarchy—traces Zahra Ibrahim’s multiple abuse at the hands of her mother, her father, her uncle, her lovers, and her husband. Al Shaykh’s novels were banned in many Arab countries due to their sexual explicitness. However, her work has been translated into twenty-one languages and is now published all around the world. Only in London (2001) was shortlisted for the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize, and her latest work is a short story about the life of her mother Hikayati Sharhoun Yatoul (My Life is a Story that Needs Lengthy Explanation 2005). Her collection of short stories includes “Wardat al-Sahraa” (“Desert Rose 1982), and “Aknus al-Shams An Al-Sutoh” (“I sweep the sun off rooftops” 1998). In her work, Al Shaykh “is particularly concerned with the baring of social and political hypocrisy and the exploration of female sexuality” (El-Enany 195). In other words, she is involved in exploring the taboos of the Arab world. The repression of sexuality and the silencing of any discussion of this topic leads—as Foucault argues—to an increase desire in speaking about sexuality and results in a pleasure of breaking the taboos:

If sex is repressed, that is condemned to prohibition, non-existence and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression. A person who holds forth in such language places himself [/herself]
to a certain extent outside the reach of power, [he/she] upsets established law; he /she] somehow anticipates the coming freedom. (*History of Sexuality* Vol 1. 6)

However, this freedom is a double-edged sword, for it is this sexual freedom that the Orientalist gaze is attracted to.

Some of the themes Arab women discuss are deeply concerned with the “inequality between the sexes, which is manifested in male domination and the oppression and marginalization of women. Their fictional works abound with female characters who are trapped in abusive situations in which their male kin…act as the authors of their destinies” (Cohen-Mor 10). Al Saadawi’s and Al Shaykh’s focus on the body and sexuality are the main reasons behind the criticism they have received in the Arab world. Arab literary critics described their ideas as imported from the West and associated them with Western feminism. Meanwhile, in the West, their writings are hailed for their “authenticity” and courageous “unveiling” of a culture borne to secrecy and oppression. It is still unfortunately true that the image of Arab women in the Western imagination is that of docile, heavily veiled, and oppressed whose lives are dictated by the whims of the males in their families and the religious doctrines they belong to—mainly Islam. In spite of the historical changes the Arab world has undergone, and which women were, inarguably a part of, this image still prevails. It is interesting to note that the enormous struggle Arab women have undergone to influence the change in their status has gone unnoticed or was even ignored by the West who still denies these women any kind of agency. The question then is what accounts for this discrepancy in the reception of these authors between the West and the Arab world?
2.3 NAWAL AL SAADAWI

The Arab critic Sabry Hafez writes, “Al Saadawi has earned a great deal of fame in the West as the major Arab feminist without having had a significant impact on her standing within the context of Arab culture at large and Arabic literature in particular” (188). Hafez goes on to write that, “as a novelist, Saadawi is by no means the best female Arab writer” (188). Hafez is not the only Arab critic who has questioned the popularity of Al Saadawi in the West or criticized her literary achievements. Other prominent literary critics also followed suit. For instance, Henry Zoghaib, Lebanese poet, writer and literary critic, in his review of Al Saadawi’s *The Hidden Face of Eve*, writes that, “since it was published in English in 1980, this book has attracted the attention of Western scholars for the wide range of information it gives about women’s condition in the Arab world” (687). He then wonders about the popularity of the book “since it is unusual to have a book of Arab literature in demand in the Western World” (687-8). In *The Hidden Face of Eve*, Al Saadawi starts with her own clitoridectomy as a six-years-old-girl and then goes on to address a range of topics: from sexual aggression against female children to the circumcision of young girls, to prostitution, to marriage, divorce, and sexual relationships. The book first appeared in Arabic under the title *Al Wajih al Ari lil Mar’a al-Arabeya* (The Naked Face of the Arab Woman) with two chapters, which later were omitted from the English version: “Woman’s Work at Home” and “Arab Woman and Socialism.” These chapters were replaced with a longer chapter on female circumcision.

The discrepancy between Al Saadawi’s books in English vis-a-vis Arabic and the role she played in accentuating the kind of reception she received in the West will later be discussed in chapter 2. Muslim critics of *The Hidden Face of Eve* said that Al Saadawi’s
reference to Islam as one of the many elements contributing to the oppression of Arab women is playing into Western assumptions that Islam is hostile to women. They further accuse Al Saadawi of defaming God in one of her other books when she describes “The Creator” as a king in his sixties who rarely left his palace without guards or soldiers accompanying him. Other descriptions have “The Creator” sitting by a pond surrounded by rivers of wine, a place similar to *Al Janna* (Heaven) as described by the Koran. Al Saadawi also characterizes the devil as a handsome man in his thirties, and describes several characters related to religious figures in the Koran—including Saint Peter—as the Creator’s assistant. These are some of the things that angered Al Saadawi’s Muslim critics.

However, not only male or Muslim Arab writers have directed their anger at Al Saadawi, but also female Arab feminists have expressed similar views. Ahdaf Soueif, an Anglo-Egyptian feminist concurs with Sabry Hafez when she comments, “El Saadawi writes good scientific research, but she writes bad novels. It is unfair that the West thinks that what she writes represent Arab women’s creative writing” (qtd. in Valassopolous 176). Alia Mamdouh—an Iraqi novelist—asserts that she has “large question marks about the West’s celebration and focus on El Saadawi.” Al Saadawi, Mamdouh argues, “does not represent the true picture of the creativity of Arab women” (12). She further accuses Al Saadawi of “turning creativity, which is imagination and living memory into a lab to show sick deformed samples which she presents as generalized social types” (12). Rana Kabbani, in a review of Al Saadawi’s book *Death of an Ex-Minister* (1980) writes, Al Saadawi’s book is “disappointing in many ways, and its short-comings are especially poignant in light of Dr. Saadawi’s importance as an activist for Arab feminism” (340).
Furthermore, Amal Amireh in her groundbreaking article, “Framing Nawal Al Saadawi: Arab Feminism in a Transnational World,” questions Al Saadawi’s credentials and popularity within an Anglo-American audience (59).

In *Woman at Point Zero* (1975)—a novel that generated a great deal of interest among its Western critics—Al Saadawi portrays the life of a woman—Firdaus—who faces oppression at the hands of men and society mainly in the name of religion. Firdaus has been subjected to different kinds of abuses: from being treated as inferior to her brother; to her inability to attend school; to the cliterdictomy which was performed on her as a young girl and which left her psychologically and sexually wounded; to her marriage to a much older man which led her to escape and work as a prostitute. This is the period in Firdaus’s life where she assumed an illusionary freedom that ended with the murder of her pimp and her eventual execution. Through her oppressed life, Firdaus finds herself silenced in multiple ways. Her uncle and aunt refuse to listen to her, and so do the court and the newspapers. It is only the author/doctor/psychiatrist who gives voice to her story. In his criticism of the novel, George Tarabishi—a Syrian critic and translator—maintains that, “Firdaus’s story is undoubtedly worth telling. However, presenting it as an individual, isolated case is one thing; and elevating it to the level of a theoretical issue is quite another” (32-3).

Moreover, Sabry Hafez argues that from her first novel, *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* (1989), to her novel *The Fall of the Imam* (2009) Nawal Al Saadawi’s fiction had not undergone any “artistic and intellectual development” (188-9). He further suggests that this lack “may also suggest a certain disregard for the intelligence of reader at home, for whom she has been labouring the same issues over and over again, without ever
stopping to ponder the reasons for the ineffectiveness of her endeavour” (189). On The Fall of the Imam, Hafez writes, “apart from confirming for the Western reader the Hackneyed stereotype ‘think the worst of the Muslims and it will probably be true,’ the book offers little insight into what makes a person fanatic, or motivates a leader to become oppressive and despotic” (196). Hafez admits though that the “critical assessment of Saadawi’s work is an extremely difficult task. Her road to literary creativity is paved with good intentions. She aspires to achieve justice, and to fight for her sisters’ rights, equality and self-determination, in a traditional and highly patriarchal society. Any treatment of her work has to acquire a fine balance between appreciating her good intentions and pointing out the shortcomings of her literary attainments” (196). Hisham Sharabi, professor of History and Chair of Arab Culture at Georgetown University—is worried about the effects Al Saadawi’s writings might have, for, according to Sharabi, “it is difficult to explain to the non-Arab reader the effect...[Al Saadawi’s writings] can have on the Arab Muslim male” (33).

In studying Al Saadawi’s works, Arab critics focus their attention on Al Saadawi’s literary style and what they describe as her “literary shortcomings.” Her political agenda, however, is less highlighted. For, in Arab critics’ opinions, Al Saadawi writes “unambiguously angry works” that secured her a place on the global stage. On the contrary, Western critics highlight the subject matter of Al Saadawi’s books at the expense of her literary or artistic talents. On that behalf, Edward Said writes, “would that more Western feminists attended to writers like Al-Shaykh rather than to the overexposed (and overcited) Nawal Al Saadawi” (“Embargoed” 450). Said reflects many Arab critic’
opinions who see in Al Shaykh’s writings a reflection of the “true” status of Arab women while, according to these critics, Al Saadawi’s writings fail to do the same. Hence, Arab critics might vary in their criticism of Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh’s writings: between those appreciating Al Shaykh’s literary style and her portrayal of Arab women and society and those critical of Al Saadawi’s writings and her political message which these critics presume is tinged with “hyperbolic exaggeration.” On the other hand, Western critics use the same yardstick in discussing these writers’ works. They are more interested in the authors’ depictions of the exotic “Other” than in their literary achievements.

The critical reception Al Saadawi has received from her Arab critics might have been harsh and, as Joseph Zeidan claims, would never have taken place had the writers been men (6). However, one should be wary of the Western critics’ presumption that the source of this reception is the Arab critics’ misogynist attitude toward Arab female writers. As I argue in the section on the Western critics of Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh, what is interesting about the reception Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh received by Western critics is not only the criticism itself, but the way they downplayed any criticism coming from Arab critics labeling it as a misogynist discourse while assuming a more credible position for themselves.

2.4 HANAN AL SHAYKH

The reception of Hanan Al Shaykh in the Arab world differs drastically from that of Al Saadawi’s. For instance, while most of the Arab critics agreed on the shortcomings of Al Saadawi’s literature, they all agreed on Al Shaykh’s literary accomplishments.
Hanan Al Shaykh herself makes the distinction between her writings and Al Saadawi’s when in an interview she says, “I am not a Nawaal El Saadawi, I am a novelist…a commentator not a campaigner” (qtd. in Lancaster 42). Despite her efforts to distance herself from Al Saadawi to appease the society, Al Shaykh’s books were also banned in some Arab countries and the reception she received in the West was also questioned.

One of Al Shaykh’s novels, which was a source of controversy in the Middle East, is *Women of Sand and Myrrh (Misk al-Ghazal* 1989). The novel is set in an anonymous Middle Eastern country and was chosen as one of the fifty books of 1992 by Publishers Weekly (Sollars 726). Critics and readers of Hanan Al Shaykh who are aware that the writer has spent some years with her husband in the Gulf region presume that the writer is describing that region. Some Western critics even grab that opportunity to make critical cultural comments on that society.

Typical of the biographical discourse is the continuous attempt to find a relation between the life of the author and the text where “the text becomes nothing but an index of this life” (Barker 1). This in turn “affects” the emergence of a particular account of the “author” (10), which is particularly true in case of Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh. For instance, Al Shaykh’s stay in Kuwait was directly tied to her ambiguous Middle Eastern country in her *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, and her fictitious novel became an eye witness account unveiling what is taking place in that culture. This gave more “credibility” to her story, something some of her Arab critics were wary of. They were worried about the kind of messages her writings might promote about Arabs to an imaginary Western reader presumed to assume the worst of Arabs.
For instance, Rana Kabbani contends that “the despair [Al Shaykh and Al Saadawi] feel compelled to narrate almost cripples their craft, for they are able to offer so little hope, so little possibility of survival as females, that their tales read like one long catalogue of horrors” (341). Arab male critics, on the other hand—and in contrary to what is widely presumed—appreciate Al Shaykh’s literary style and see in her characters an “authentic” representation of the status of Arab women. However, when studying the reception of these writers in the Arab world, Western critics tend to group Arab critics into one homogenous category and as we will see from the Arab response to Al Shaykh’s writings, this grouping is not only troublesome but also wrong.

About *The Story of Zahra*, Joseph Zeidan writes that Al Shaykh “made such important literary contributions to the traditions of novels by Arab women that this novel could be deemed a major literary milestone” (214). He further adds, “for the first time in this literary tradition, nationalist and feminist causes are treated as inseparable and equally critical” (205). A review of the book in *Al Anwar*—a Lebanese newspaper describes Zahra as a heroine who “embodies every Arab woman, her suffering, her frustration, her deprivations, her traditions. She is a witness for all to the life of the Lebanese in the thirty years since Independence” (qtd. in Gass and Cuoco 113). Another newspaper, *Al-Safir*, finds that, “Al Shaykh scandalizes in her book *The Story of Zahra* by her depiction of many of our lives, our traditions, and our customs. But it is for our benefit” (113). Ashour et al. saw in Zahra’s suffering, a suffering that “mirrors the collective suffering of women and refers to the strong link between women’s suffering and war” (30). As to Al Shaykh’s *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, which gained a considerable popularity in the West, Sabry Hafez, for instance, saw in the narrative, “a
subtle criticism of the gender-based system and its oppressive nature without resorting to any of typical hackneyed jargon” — a term he used to describe Al Saadawi’s writing (qtd in Gass and Cuoco 113). Arab critics like Nawar Hassan Al Golley channeled their criticism to Western critics who — he argues — cannot see beyond their prejudices and who refuse to acknowledge how Al Shaykh, like Naguib Mahfouz — the winner of the 1998 Nobel Prize Laureate in Literature — before her, dealt with issues of women’s sexuality. He further maintains that Western critics would rather assume that “Arab fiction is silent on questions of gender and that the repression of women is a cultural norm of the Arab world” (147). From the criticism of Al Shaykh and Al Saadawi’s writings by Arab critics, we can notice that most of the criticism was channeled towards the effect these authors’ writings might have an imaginary Western reader and the consequent damage these writings might confer on an image of an Arab culture already misunderstood in the West. However, the fact that these writings might influence or “corrupt” Arab women who are consuming these works does not seem to concern Arab critics as much.

2.5 NAVAL AL SAADAWI AND HANAN AL SHAYKH IN A WESTERN CONTEXT

In this section I examine the reception of Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh in the West. I argue here that although Western critics might not have been homogenous in their reception of these authors, most of them were not concerned with the literary merit of these authors’ writings. Hosam Aboul-Ela, for instance, writes, “there has always been a tendency among Westerners writing about Arab intellectuals to either ignore completely
or dramatically marginalize various dissident and minority trends in local thinking” (744).

In the rare occasions where a review tackles Al Saadawi’s literary style, the Western critic would seem to agree with the “repetitious,” “obvious,” “rambling prose,” that Arab critics accuse Al Saadawi of using. However, this criticism is quickly deemed unimportant and is justified by Al Saadawi’s ability to expose the culture. Describing Al Saadawi’s books, Joel Beinin writes, “[the books] are sometimes artistically flat, in the worst tradition of socialist realism, but that they cry out loudly against the prevalent gender and class oppression of contemporary Egypt at a time when few others have had the courage to raise their voices” (47).

What Western critics cannot seem to overcome when discussing authors like Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh is their preconceived expectations of what constitutes Arab women’s oppression and its direct relation to Islam. For example Vivian Gornick’s literary review of Nawal Al Saadawi’s *The Hidden Face of Eve*, published March 14, 1982 in the New York Times, instead of discussing the literary merits of the book, begins with an anecdote about an educated woman whom she met in Egypt who was circumcised at a young age. Then she moves on to talk about how men in Egypt can marry four wives and how the husband has the right to divorce his wife, stop her from working or traveling, and take custody over her children. Gornick then makes a sweeping generalization about the status of women in Egypt, “the mass of women in Egypt live out their lives in the manner ordained by such social conditions” (1). Gornick concludes her review by making the following prediction, “Western feminists do have reasons to think Islamic law will never grant women full recognition. It may be possible to abolish the
practice of circumcision, but it will not be so easy to abolish the idea of woman as an instrument of man’s honor or dishonor—That idea springs from a religious notion in which equality for women and service to God cannot coexist” (2). Gornick’s review is exemplary of how-Western critics have dealt with Al Saadawi’s books.

Fedwa Malti-Douglas, author of *Men, Women, and (God): Nawal Al Saadawi and Feminist Poetics*, for instance, argues, “it is difficult to think of a woman writer who has exploited the revered Arabo-Islamic textual tradition as thoroughly as she has” (202). Even Al Saadawi’s tackling of genital mutilations is seen in the context of Islam. For example, Francois Lionnet writes, “the phenomenon of female excision and infibulations, which is performed in parts of Africa and the Middle East...constitutes an important aspect of the cultural identity of Islamic women” (21). While Miriam Cooke sees in Al Saadawi’s *Prison Memoirs* a reflection of the “authenticity and poignancy of lived experience” (emphasis mine 117), Mohit Ray describes Al Saadawi as a “zealous writer” who “through her books and articles tried to expose the real condition of women in the Arab and the Egyptian society” (458). However, some Western critics are aware of the misconceptions that Al Saadawi’s writings may enforce. In that respect, Carol Bardenstein argues, “[Al Saadawi’s writings] can lend itself to being appropriated by segments of the [Western] audience for reinforcing stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims in general” (526). Bardenstein uses Al Saadawi’s novel *The Circling Song* as an example. In the novel, the rapist is portrayed as a rough man with a dark skin, while the victim is a white woman. Although Al Saadawi is not unique in her portrayal of the dark-skinned villain and the fair maiden, the fact that this imagery was commonly used in Orientalist
fiction, and is still fresh in the minds of both Arabs and Westerns, makes its symbolism more effective.

Al Saadawi’s reputation in the West has definitely been a major factor in drawing the attention to writers like Hanan Al Shaykh who were well known in their countries of origin but were still unheard of in the West. Hanan Al Shaykh like Nawal AL Saadawi was looked upon in the West as a representative of Arab feminism. However, Al Shaykh refuses to be labeled a feminist. In an interview with Paula Sunderman, Al Shaykh was asked whether she considered herself a feminist, Al Shaykh’s replied as: “If I consider myself a feminist, then I would label myself. And I prefer not to label myself because I feel when writing about women that I am writing by extension to all human beings” (628). Nonetheless, Al Shaykh’s assertion that in her writings she is addressing not only all women but all human beings fell on deaf ears, and her writings were seen only in the context of the Arab world and “Islamic” patriarchy. In a review of Al Shaykh’s Women of Sand and Myrrh, the reviewer contends that, “[Al Shaykh…strips away the hypocrisy in an unnamed society that can only be Saudi Arabia…Mrs. Al Shaykh relates the corrupting influence of Saudi Arabia through the narration of four women” (16). At the same time, the Herald—an Australian newspaper—hails Al Shaykh’s novel for its timeliness on one hand and for its ability, on the other hand, to show that “while religious fundamentalism and male chauvinism continue to subjugate women, turning the Arab world back in on itself, little is likely to improve” (qtd. in Gass 157). The Sunday Telegraph sees in Al Shaykh’s novel a “rare novel” in which Al Shaykh “lifted the corner of a dark curtain. A tale of woe indeed but one that—thanks to the author’s intense sense of individual humanity—illuminates much: how people live daily, ordinary lives in a
battlefield, why women endure with seeming passivity the harsh prohibitions of Islam.” Christopher Dickey begins his review of Al Shaykh’s *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, which appeared in *Newsweek*, by mentioning several places a reader might see Arab women in London, such as Harrods, Cafes, and Trocadero. Then, he switches and says that although you might be able to see these women, “their lives are hidden from Western eyes as the inner sanctum of an 18th century seraglio” (68). Until, of course, writers like Hanan Al Shaykh “lifts the veil” from what he calls “the confines of the modern harem” (68). Hence for Western critics the works of these Arab female authors are no longer judged upon their literary merit. To the contrary, these texts become windows into Arab women’s lives and culture and the writers are evaluated as critics of Islam rather than as feminists.

2.6 IMPLICATIONS

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, more important than the study of the lives of the writers being analyzed in the study of their author-function, or the role “the figure of the author is made to play in the analysis of literary texts” (Mills 119). Keeping that in mind, shedding the light on the biography of the author could help us understand the “developing interest in author’s lives and the historical development of criticism that takes at its focus the author’s life in relation to his work” (Bennet 22). When we can understand how an author becomes “individualized”, and when we study the status accorded to that author, then we will be able to “locate the emergence of notions of authenticity and authorial attribution” (151) accorded to that author.
In his book, *Conscience of the Nation: Writers, State, and Society in Modern Egypt*, Richard Jacquemond writes, “the most translated works by Arab women writers have been those that most display the contrast between the values of emancipation, defended by their authors and associated with the West, and the sexual oppressiveness of the ‘Oriental male they denounce’” (129). Consequently, in the West, the critique of Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh by their fellow male Arab writers was considered another mode of patriarchal abuse—a response expected from the culture. For instance, Malti Douglas argues, “for the original sin of writing within as well as without her own discourse, El Saadawi’s peers had sentenced her to the worst punishment that can be inflicted upon an artist: marginalization, silence, and neglect. From this perspective even attacks and slanders may be considered a small comfort” (208). She goes on to say, “how convenient it is symbolically to expel from the tribe a person one does not wish to hear. And how ironic because what is most devastating about the arrows shot by this daughter of the Egyptian countryside is that their points are sharpened by an insider’s knowledge” (14).

In that context, Rana Kabbani argues that Arab men have been essentialized based on their relationship with women, portrayed as “captors who hold women in their avaricious grasp, who use them as chattels, as trading goods, with little reverence for them as human beings” (78). For instance, Western critics were very disapproving of George Tabarishi’s criticism of Nawal Al Saadawi and felt the need to defend her against what they called—on several occasions—“misogyny and opposition to feminism.” Since the criticism of Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh in the Arab world might be described as another mode of patriarchal abuse, we find that some Arab critics are wary of criticizing these authors. As W.J. Mitchell writes, we “have literature nowadays emanating from the
former colonies of the Western empire, but any criticism of that literature [to be deemed objective] should come from research universities in Europe and the United States “(14). Al Saadawi herself voices such an assumption when in an interview she praises her Western critics for being “objective” and declares that she is not interested in what her Arab critic has to say because “he” is not qualified to appreciate her personality (al-Uwayt).

Therefore, although Arab women’s writing is gaining an unprecedented popularity in the West, one should not take their reception at face value. Tara Mendola criticizes the critics who “focus primarily on authors [like Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh] who have come to the attention of Western…academic elites via the great publishing homes of Paris or London.” She further adds that these critics refuse to acknowledge that the kinds of Arab women’s writing which attain the level of popularity do so through a capitalist, colonialist system that must not remain unproblematized” (228). In addition to Western critics patronizing attitude towards Arab critics, some have developed the attitude that these authors’ accomplishments are of a direct consequence to the influence of the West on their writings. Robert Murray Davis contends that Hanan Al Shaykh “has transformed herself into an English novelist” (149). Inge Boer, moreover, credits Al Saadawi’s insistence on equality between the sexes to Western feminism. Although one could argue that this might be actually true, it is worthwhile to come to understand how is it that a particular “truthful” discourse has come to take shape (Barker 31).

Central to postcolonial critique is the problematization of stereotypes and generalizations. Issues such as veiling and genital mutilations, the universalization of women’s problems, the assumptions that political problems are the same the world over
and the attempt to theorize difference through binaries, are sources of great debate. Within these binaries the Western woman is looked upon as a liberated, educated, developed female in contrast to the oppressed backward other (Mohanty and Spivak). Marnia Lazreg identifies this act of distancing other women as a mechanism that enables “Western feminists, rooted as they are in their historical and political systems to distance themselves from Other women” so that “texts written by other women, even when they seem to be made part of the canon and are taught with care, reinforce prejudices about other women” (35).

Studying the reception of these authors in their countries of origin and in the West raises questions pertaining to the recent status allotted to Arab female writing in the Anglo-American market. However, to look at this reception without analyzing the role the authors played in promoting such reception is not enough. Nawal Al Saadawi and Hanan Al Shaykh—as I argue in chapter 2—were not innocent bystanders, victims of an Orientalist discourse that tried to manipulate their image, they were also active participants in promoting that image. From the blurbs on their book covers, to the interviews they have conducted, to the discrepancy between their books in Arabic and their books in translation, to their inclusion of autobiographical, events in their fiction, Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh played a significant role in the way they were received. I argue that these writers understood the consequences of writing that kind of fiction. However, that is not meant to lessen from the achievements or influence these authors have had on the Arabic literary or feminist scene. Here, Foucault’s theory of power and knowledge becomes useful. Power is everywhere and wherever there is power there is resistance and in that sense it helps to view power/knowledge relations as matrices of transformation.
Whether we see these authors as involved in what Tara Mendola calls “literary prostitution” or in Kandiyoti’s “patriarchal bargaining,” the role they played in shaping their image in the West is worthy of our attention.
CHAPTER III

“LITERARY PROSTITUTION” OR “PATRIARCHAL BARGAINING”: THE ROLE THE AUTHORS PLAYED IN THEIR RECEPTION

[we should] refuse to understand ourselves simply as a bundle of reactions to all-powerful structures, or to the social relations within which we have been formed...[we should] search instead for possible indications of how we have participated actively in the formation of our own past experience.

(Haug 35)

“Little is known of what life is like for contemporary Arab women living in the Middle East,” reads the blurb on Hanan Al Shaykh’s *Women of Sand and Myrrh*. For readers thirsty for knowledge on a society that embodies everything secret and exotic, the blurb promises a privileged access into this “still closed society.” Before the English publication of Nawal Al Saadawi’s *Prison Memoirs*, the critic Miriam Cooke writes, “one looks forward to the English Publication of Saadawi’s *Prison Memoirs* which promises the authenticity and poignancy of lived experience” (117). Hence, from the blurbs on Nawal Al Saadawi and Hanan Al Shaykh’s books to the introduction to the English publications of their books, the readers are promised a glimpse into the real life of the Arab woman.

In the introduction to *The Hidden Face of Eve*, Al Saadawi sees her writing as having a social function that is bound to disturb and unsettle those in power: “it was also natural that a small minority express their fear, or even panic at words written by a pen sharper than a scalpel that cuts through tissues to expose the throbbing nerves and arteries embedded deep in a body...My pen will continue to lay bare the facts, clarify the issues,
and identify what I believe is the truth” (3). This claim for telling the truth is what Al Saadawi and her Arab critics don’t seem to agree on. This claim to the “truth” seems to have resonated with her Western critics more:

Hers was a project of social realism: to speak of all those things that had never been said...Many British women read her books. We shared the ideology of novel writing. We believed in telling the truth and that novels could testify and affect social reality.” (Prasad 6)

Shifting forms of Orientalism and feminism have determined the reception of Nawal Al Saadawi and Hanan Al Shaykh, however these authors were not innocent bystanders molded according to a Western conspiracy. In that sense, Foucault argues that power is not simply exercised in a monolithic way by those who “have it” over those who “do not have it”. In this chapter I will discuss the role Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh played in informing their reception in the West and the subsequent influence it had on their reception in the Middle East. The authors tried to regain some semblance of control over their authorial identity by criticizing Western critics for misinterpreting their words and by attempting to show that women in the West were not better off. However, their efforts were either at times ignored, or they, themselves, were ensnared in the confines of that identity. Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh influenced aspects of their reception: the discrepancy between their texts in their language of origin and English, the blurbs on their books, and the interviews these writers conducted and that aligned them with the West more than the Arab world. The roles played by these writers are the topics of this chapter.

First, I will discuss the political and historical circumstances that presumably led to the translation and consequent publication of Al Saadawi’s books in the Western markets and what the dominant factors are that led to the unprecedented reception Al
Saadawi received in the West. Roger Allen writes that, “within the Anglophone context, it almost goes without saying that the process of introducing Arabic fiction, once it has been translated into English, into the target culture is a process fraught with difficulties and more often than not, compromises” (481). In that regard, Amin Malak also argues, “to write their will, to claim a space for themselves, and to achieve their liberation, Arab and Muslim women, as suggested in their writings, need not only to maintain courage and perseverance but may also be ready to compromise” (160).

Some critics are non-apologetic in their condemnation of these “compromises.” Tara Mendola goes as far as to claim that “the category of “Arab women writers” and the genre of “Arab women writing” are at least in part the creation of European publishing houses” (228). She further goes on to say that “these are marketing categories; created to sell novels and promote a univocal narrative of Middle Eastern and North African women’s experience, one that is written in or translated into colonizer’s tongue” (228-9). In her article “Literary Prostitution” Mendola argues that “to focus primarily on authors [among whom she names Hanan Al Shaykh] who have come to the attention of Western… academic elites via the great publishing houses of Paris or London…refuses to acknowledge that the kinds of Arab women’s writing which attain the level of popularity do so through a capitalist, colonialist system that must not remain unproblematized” (228).

Although I agree with Mendola that the reception of these authors in the West must “not remain unproblematized,” to portray these authors as a Western construct denies any agency to these authors and ignores the role they have played in that reception. However, it is still feasible that these authors’ words were taken out of context
and their writings were in some instances manipulated to serve an Orientalist agenda. It is delimiting to explain their reception only through an Orientalist lens. Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh realized that to be heard they need to use the language of power and to use the language of power they had to do some bargaining.

3.1 AN OVERVIEW

Arab women in the West are often associated with words like “harem,” “polygamy,” “suppressed,” “veiled,” among many others, writes Marsha J. Hamilton in “The Arab Woman in US Popular Culture” (174). The Western media thrives with “repeated images of absent Arab women, ‘liberated’ American women and demonized Arab men” (Saliba 127). The status of the Arab women is usually perceived in the West as a result of Islam: “In Arab countries with sizable non-Muslim minorities, the condition of women appears to be related to the prevailing type of societal and cultural organization rather than to religion as such. It is a popular misconception among Westerners to assume that the practices, customs and institutions of the Muslim world were all determined by Islam” (Mikhail 3).

There is this constant fear among Arab critics that any kind of debate around the status of women in the Arab world might ignite this preconceived prejudice against Islam and subsequently distorts the image of Islam in the West even more. This trepidation is not exclusive to Moslem critics or to Al Azhar Research Center in Egypt, which is the chief center of Arabic literature and Islamic teachings in the Arab world. Arab writers—including women—are very careful to reject any misrepresentations of the Quran and
channel their criticism instead to the Islamic clerks who misinterpret some verses of the Quran.

The West seems to have the “Big Brother” effect on Arab writers and critics. The main concern for these critics becomes the effect Arab women writings may have on their Western critics and readers rather than on what influence they might have on the Arabic culture and society. In other words, Arab writers and critics are worried that these writings might provide “a new and major criterion for the imposition and maintenance of colonialism” (Jacquemond 153). This fear creates the sensitivity with which Arab critics regard the content of Arab women’s writing. This fear also prompts Arab women writers to attempt to disassociate from Imperialist cultures or “Westernization.” Fadia Faqir eloquently describes this phenomenon:

They fear being branded as westernized which is associated with many social problems and with the experience of imperialism: ‘While ‘modernization’ is considered highly desirable, ‘Westernization’ is considered equally undesirable...They see ‘emancipated’ Muslim women as symbols of ‘Westernization’ which is linked with the colonizations of Muslim peoples by Western powers in the not-too-distant past.” (House 175)

Consequently, this idea that these works of literature, of fiction, will be looked upon by the West as testaments, or documentaries about the Arab culture–thus reinforcing preconceived ideas about that culture and society–led Arab critics to be excessively vigilant about what they deemed acceptable or worthy of Western consumption. Furthermore, the first Arabic books that were translated by Arabists to European languages were books known for their elaborate literary style and complexity and were available for only a handful of educated scholars. This gave early Arabic literature a reputation of complexity and richness in style, which might explain the yardstick with
which Arab critics judge new forms of literature and the overt criticism with which they regard any work they deem lacking in literary style.

In addition to the extensive criticism Al Saadawi received for her literary style, additional criticism was hailed on her and her editors for adapting her writings to meet the expectations of her Western audiences. For instance Amal Amireh, a major critic of Al Saadawi’s work, writes that Al Saadawi “is popular in the West partly because her works have played into Western prejudices” (10). Her writings have reinforced the stereotypical images the West had of Arabs since Colonialism and consequently made her the most translated Arab writer. This becomes especially significant when we look at the rarity with which Arabic literature is translated into English and other European languages.

In that respect, Tijaswini Niranjana writes that translation is more than an “interlingual process.” She adds, “translation as a practice shapes, and takes shape within the asymmetrical relations of power that operate under colonialisms” (8, 2). Andre Lefevere, for example, talks about the “power relations” that inform the relation between the Arab world and the West and uses this relation to explain the lack of interest in translating works. He argues that the “relatively low prestige of Islamic culture in Europe and the Americas” is the reason behind the poor reception of the Islamic culture in Western markets. He further adds that this feeling of superiority that the West holds against the Arab world is not confined to the neglect of the latter’s literature but is also reflected in the liberties Western translators, editors and publishing houses feel they are entitled to when handling a text from the Arab world. The Arabian Nights serves as a great example of this process. Edward Lane and Sir Richard Burton undertook liberties
when translating that text which still has an immense influence on the stereotypical images the West had of the Arabs. These particular stereotypes are still prevalent 298 years later. In his preface to *The Nights*, Burton displays an “infantile pleasure” for being able to get a better insight into the mind of the Arab world. Burton explains *The Nights* in terms of its value to empire building, “[w]ith the aid of my annotations...the student will readily and pleasantly learn more of the Moslem’s manners and customs, laws, and religion than is known to the average ‘Orientalist’” (xxiii-xxiv). In that respect, Byron Farwell writes, “The great charm of Burton’s translation lies in the veil of romance and exoticism he cast over the entire work. He tried hard to retain the flavour of Oriental quaintness and naïveté of the medieval Arab by writing as the Arab would have written in English” (qtd. in Carbonell 80).

Upon examining the relationship between the West and the Arab world, Thomas writes, “Arab culture, vis-à-vis the West, has largely been positioned through the selections of translational material. The prevailing view of Arabic culture as a mixture of the quaint, the barbarously primitive, and the comfortably dependent, is to a large degree a product of these texts” (104-5). Edward Said also argues that these Orientalists’ writing has created not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe, “There is a rather complex dialectic of reinforcement by which the experiences of readers in reality are determined by what they have read, and this in turn influences writers to take up subjects defined in advance by readers’ experiences” (94). Such writings according to Said produce “a tradition of what Michael Foucault calls a discourse, whose material presence or weight, not the originality of a given author, is really responsible for the texts produced out of it”(94). Hence, “as literary texts are culturally produced, they also—in
their own ways—produce culture” (Hestetun 42). In case of Arab women writers, it is interesting to see that the works that are chosen for translation are those works that mostly align with Western readers’ “horizons of expectations.” Therefore we see that through the process of translation from Arabic to English these books have undergone textual changes that conform to Western ethnocentrism.

3.2 AL SAADAWI AND THE WEST

Al Saadawi’s introduction to the Western audience began in 1980. Amal Amireh relates that to the Iranian Revolution in the 1970’s and the fear—that gripped the West—at the time of the revival of Islam. Amireh argues that the Iranian Revolution resurrected the image of the Arab woman as oppressed and the reappearance of the veiled women only confirmed the conviction that the source of that oppression is Islam. Hence, Al Saadawi could not have appeared on the Western stage at a more influential time. Al Saadawi’s political involvement, her outspokenness, her continuous presence in Western conferences and gatherings, and the fact that she was living in the United States were all major factors facilitating Al Saadawi’s path into the Western markets.

Al Saadawi’s first book appeared in print in the Arab world in 1958 and its first translation to English was in 1988. However, this period of time is drastically diminishing, and now Al Saadawi’s books appear almost at the same time in Arabic and English. For example, Memoirs from the Women’s Prison was published in Arabic in 1983 and was translated by Marilyn Booth and published in English in 1986. The book is based on Al Saadawi’s experience in jail after she and a number of writers were imprisoned for criticizing the Sadat regime. In 1985 Al Saadawi wrote God Dies by the
Nile, which was translated by Al Saadawi’s husband, Sherif Hetata, in the same year. The book was banned in some Arab countries for it was considered anti-Islamic. In addition, the book was published under a different title in Arabic—Mawt al-rajul al-wahid al-ard (The Death of the Only Man on Earth). According to Al Saadawi, Arab publishers refused to publish the book in its original title for they did not want to have anything to do with the death of God: “I want to write freely about…religion, sex, God, authority, the State. But the publishers also censor me. Even in Beirut” (“Reflections” 403). The Fall of the Imam was published in Arabic in 1987 and in English in 1988. This book was also translated by Sherif Hetata, which might explain the speed with which these books were translated from Arabic to English. Nonetheless, as Amireh explains, this is still “an honor of which few writers in any language can boast” (217). This speed of translation although might be considered complimentary, should be examined carefully for it raises questions on what texts are chosen for translation. As Huggan states, the literary text available for a metropolitan reader becomes an ‘anthropological exotic’ which

describes a mode of both perception and consumption; it invokes the familiar aura of other, incommensurably ‘foreign’ cultures while appearing to provide a modicum of information that gives the uninitiated reader access to the text, and, by extension, the ‘foreign culture’ itself. (Huggan, The Postcolonial 37)

Al Saadawi’s relationship with her Western publishers is also worthy of attention. In the British preface to her book, The Hidden Face of Eve, published by Zed books, Al Saadawi talks about the oppression of Arab women and how that oppression is not related to the Islamic culture but is rather a result of a long period of oppression against women in all regions and in all cultures. Al Saadawi was also critical of Imperialism and American tendencies to see Islam as the source of everything dubious. However, in the
American edition of the book the preface disappears, and the publisher Beacon Press replaces it with a foreword by the American professor Irene L. Gendzier. Al Saadawi denies having anything to do with the changes, and in that respect writes:

I gave [Beacon Press] my book—the preface, introduction, everything. Beacon Press cut it without my permission, making me feel that I have been exploited and my ideas distorted. Without the preface, it appears that I am separating the sexual from the political, which I never do. To me, women who think they are liberated but who are obsessed with sexuality are not liberated. They are living a new slavery. They are obsessed by not having men around just as they were obsessed with having them around. It is the other side of the same coin. (Patterson and Gillam 190).

L. Gendzier in her foreword gives an apologetic explanation of Al Saadawi’s earlier introduction in an attempt to bridge the rift between Al Saadawi and her Western readers who were angered with her earlier comments. The selectivity with which Western publishers receive Arab women writing is not new. However, Al Shaykh’s statement that she had nothing to do with the changes made to the book conflicts with her earlier assertions that she gets involved with every aspect of the publication process.

3.3 WESTERN FEMINISTS AND AL SAADAWI

In the late 1980s and in the 1990s, Universal feminism came under fire from Post-colonial feminists who questioned the way Third World texts were introduced to Western audiences. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, for instance, argues that Western feminist discourse “colonizes an entity called Third World Women, casting her as silent victim in need of discursive succour from her more liberated Western sisters” (333-59). This is especially true for Arab women who were treated as victims of an oppressive Islamic culture, and thus in need of saving from their more liberated Western counterparts.
Outspoken women are deemed exceptional and are hailed as heroines for their ability to expose the atrocities of their culture. Furthermore, the role played by Western feminists in marginalizing these women becomes clear when we look at the way issues related to Arab women were looked upon in isolation from the cultural context in which these issues prevailed. Such issues include genital mutilation and veiling. Next, even when invited to International Conferences addressing Third World Women’s issues, Arab feminists were invited as voyeurs and not as participants: something Al Saadawi openly criticized. After the Wellesley Conference, which was entitled ‘Women and Development’ and was held in Boston, Massachusetts, Al Saadawi and two other feminists wrote a protest letter to the organizers of the Conference arguing that Western feminists monopolized the panels. When they—Third world feminists—attempted to discuss the issues pertaining to them, they were denied. When they insisted on being heard, their behavior was considered disruptive (Al Saadawi Reader 143). In one of her interviews, Al Saadawi later reports how she found herself, “sitting in the audience listening to an American woman speak about Egypt. She had spent three months in Egypt. She wrote a book and there she was preaching and teaching about Egypt” (Patterson and Gillam 190-1). This led Al Saadawi to speak against what she called, “neo-colonialism in the name of feminism.”

I raised this issue and said that, at these International conferences, you listen to because we know about our problems and how to diagnose them and you speak about your own problems in your own countries, and don’t speak about my problems. This sort of neo-colonialism in the name of feminism has to go. (Patterson and Gillam 186)
Al Saadawi has attempted more often than not to find her voice amongst International voices bound on silencing her. However her attempts fell on deaf ears and she herself was entrapped in this East West intersection. In the United Nation’s ‘International Decade of Women’ conference held in 1980 issues related to female circumcision and veiling were the main focus of Western feminists. Al Saadawi who was invited to that conference as a presenter, addressed many topics ranging from health, education, and employment, but it was only clitordictomy that was highlighted in an article published by the *New York Times* under the heading “Female Circumcision a Topic at UN Parley” (Amireh 225). In a response to the decontextualization of her discussion of clitordictomy and in an attempt to decolonize the assumption that clitordictomy is a hegemonic representation of the cruelty of the culture, Al Saadawi turns the practice into a symbolic and material sign of women’s oppression:

Women in Europe and America may not be exposed to the surgical removal of the clitoris. Nevertheless, they are victims of cultural and psychological clitordictomy...No doubt the physical ablation of the clitoris appears a much more savage and cruel procedure than its psychological removal. Nevertheless, the consequences can be exactly the same, since the end result is the abolition of its functions so that its presence or absence amount to the same thing. Psychological surgery might even be more malicious and harmful because it tends to produce the illusion of being complete, whereas in actual fact the body may have lost an essential organ. (*Hidden Face of Eve* xiv-xv)

Here Al Saadawi tries to assert that oppression is not a matter restricted to Arab women only. Western women too are victims of oppression albeit a different one. However Al Saadawi’s attempt at regaining some control over her misappropriation by a counter attack on imperialism failed. In addition to the Western critics who found her introduction “disappointing,” Leila Ahmed—a Muslim Egyptian feminist—describes Al Saadawi’s introduction as a boast of anger where “women are driven to
support...revolutionary movements that have nothing to recommend them except that they are indigenous to the third World and are opposed to the West” (751). Central to post colonial critique is the problematization of stereotypes and generalizations. Such issues include veiling and genital mutilations, the universalization of women’s problems, the assumptions that political problems are the same the world over, and the attempts to theorize difference through binaries. Within these binaries the Western woman is looked upon as liberated, educated, developed female in contrast to the oppressed backward other (Spivak and Mohanty). For example, on the topic of genital mutilation Uma Narayan writes:

There is no need to portray female genital mutilation as an“African cultural practice” or dowry murders and dowry related harassment as a “problem of Indian women” in ways that eclipse the fact that not all “African Women” or “Indian Women” confront these problems, or confront them in identical ways, or in ways that efface local contestations of these problems. (Narayan 98)

In that respect, Al Saadawi, in her preface to The Hidden Face of Eve, criticizes American and European feminism for portraying “female circumcision” as a barbaric activity, and thus removing it from its geo-political, economic, and religious context:

I am against female circumcision. But I disagree with those women in America and Europe who concentrate on Issues such as female circumcision and depict them as proof of the unusual and barbaric oppression to which women are exposed only in African and Arab countries. I oppose all attempts to deal with such problems in isolation, or to sever their links with the general economic and social pressures to which women everywhere are exposed, and the oppression which is the daily bread fed to female sex in developed and developing countries in both of which a patriarchal class system prevails. (xiv)

Al Saadawi in more than one occasion attempts to regain some control over her misappropriation by a counter attack on Imperialism on one hand, and on Western feminists Orientalist tendencies on the other. However, her attempts come to no avail. In
addition to the Western critics who found her introduction to The Hidden Face of Eve “disappointing,” Leila Ahmed—a Muslim Egyptian feminist—describes Al Saadawi’s introduction as a boast of anger where “women are driven to support...revolutionary movements that have nothing to recommend them except that they are indigenous to the Third World and are opposed to the West” (751). It “is disappointing in that it is more remarkable for its rhetoric than for any clarity or force in its arguments” (750).

In spite of the criticism Al Saadawi had for her Western critics for blowing up the issue of genital mutilation out of context, it is interesting to study the role Al Saadawi herself played in igniting the debate about that topic. First, the timing when the English version of The Hidden Face of Eve was published is crucial. The book, which was translated by Al Saadawi’s husband Sherif Hetata, coincided with the year the UN conference on Circumcision took place in 1980. Next, the discrepancy between the Arabic and the English version led some critics to criticize Al Saadawi for raising interest in that topic. One of the main Arab critics of Al Saadawi in this area is Janine Dallal. Dallal accuses Al Saadawi of addressing the topic of genital mutilation in order to appease to the “prevailing socio-political views in the West.” For instance Al Saadawi introduces changes to the title of the book where the word “Hidden” is used in the English version instead of *aari* “naked” as in the Arabic version and a whole chapter is delegated for genital mutilation entitled The Mutilated Half, which in the Arabic version was just a chapter number. Dallal argues that through these changes Al Saadawi is catering to her Western audience who associate Arab women with words like “hidden” or “veiled” but would not want to associate the word “naked” with Arab women. Furthermore, Magda al-Nowaihi accuses Al Saadawi—whom she says is by no means an
important novelist in the Arab world–of appeasing to her Western readers through reinforcing “certain stereotypes that the West holds of the Arab world, particularly in terms of its treatment of women” (qtd. in Slee 51-4).

The openness with which Al Saadawi discussed gender issues did not break the stereotypical image of a silent oppressed Arab woman. In contrast, Al Saadawi’s discussion of these topics played into the Western tradition of portraying these women. She said what they wanted to hear. Ironically enough, Al Saadawi’s critique of Western misappropriation of “female circumcision” backfired for it was that particular topic that ignited her popularity in the West. Al Saadawi presumably must have known that for an Arab woman to be heard, she must say something that would pique the interest of her listeners. At the same time, Al Saadawi was hopeful that by attending International conferences she would help “raise issues related to social justice, peace and development” (Reader 32). However, picking up on Foucault, an author might exhibit authority by writing himself differently, but that authority lasts only as the writer is accepted as author. After that the author becomes part of the normal and is named by society. In that sense, although Al Saadawi tried to regain some control over her authorial identity time and again she found herself entrapped within forces beyond her control.

Al Saadawi herself was aware of such forces and was overtly critical of the selectivity with which Western reviewers met her work:

…and here is a very subtle form of exploitation practiced, unfortunately, by feminists–so called progressive feminists. Gloria Steinem of Ms. Magazine writes me a letter in Cairo and asks me for an article about cliterdectomy. So I write her an article setting forth the political, social and historical analysis, along with comments about my personal experience. She cuts the political, social and historical analysis and publishes only the personal statements, which put me in a very awkward position. People asked, how could Nawal write such a thing? She
has such a global perspective in cliterectomy, how could she write such a thing? They didn’t know Steinmen had cut the article” (Qtd. in Patterson and Gillam 190-1).

Hence, as we have seen Al Saadawi’s reception in the West can easily lend itself to an Orientalist study. However, one should also keep in mind the role Al Saadawi played in inviting such reception. Al Saadawi was described by Western critics as a “lone star” or as “a representative of Arab feminism,” an image Al Saadawi promoted of herself. For instance, in the English version of *The Hidden Face of Eve*, Al Saadawi relates that many women from Sudan and from other parts of the Arab world came to visit her clinic; while in the Arabic version of the same book we read that only Sudanese women came to visit her and there is no mention of any other Arab women. Al Saadawi by claiming that women from different parts of the world come to her to seek her advice is confirming the West’s conception of her as a “representative of Arab women."

Al Saadawi has appointed herself and was appointed by the West as a representative of Arab women. Without downplaying the important role Al Saadawi played as a writer and an activist, one should also consider the role Al Saadawi played in constructing her authorial identity in the West. Al Saadawi was regarded, by the West, as an isolated representative of Arab women while actually she is only a part of a long series of feminists that preceded her. Egyptian feminism appeared almost at the same time as Western feminism and had many prominent figures such as Hind Nawfal—a Syrian who in 1892 started her first journal and Huda Sharawi who founded the Egyptian feminist Union—amongst many others. Gayatari Spivak argues in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” that “postcolonial studies paradoxically risks perpetuating a neocolonial exploitation of the economically and politically dispossessed in the very gesture of speaking for these
groups” (271-313). Hence, the question lies in how much damage can one imbue on these women when speaking on their behalf.

Upon reading one of Al Saadawi’s most popular books, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, the images one is left with are those of brutalized girls, sharp razors, and fingernails. The facts that circumcision is an African custom, not an Arabic or Islamic custom, and is a tradition that even preceded Islam, are ignored. Circumcision, which does not exist in other parts of the Arab World, becomes an Arabic and Islamic custom because Al Saadawi’s book is about “Women in the Arab World” and as the blurb promises us will be an “indictment of the treatment of women in the Arab world.” Al Saadawi has done a revolutionary job addressing issues addressing Egyptian women’s concerns—issues that have long been silenced. However portraying these customs that occur in a confined geographical area as occurrences common to the rest of the Arab world is problematic.

3.4 HANAN AL SHAYKH AND THE WEST

As readers flip the pages of Hanan Al Shaykh’s *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, they enter a world of “polygamy,” “harems,” “women enclothed in veils and trapped in their golden cages,” “women forbidden from pursuing a career or finding a job,” and “women without passports held hostages to their husbands’ whims.” This is not a chapter in *One Thousand and One Nights* but a story of four women living in an unnamed Middle Eastern country. As you read the story of Tamr’s grandmother, who as a young girl marries a Saudi Sheikh and lives in an exotic harem, you are transferred into the Oriental fantasies of the *Arabian Nights*. Some Arab countries banned the book because of its explicit sexual language; its portrayal of lesbian relationships, and its presumable
exposure of life in the Gulf. However, in the West, *Publishers Weekly* chose the book as one of the 50 books of 1992 and to date there are more than 21,000 copies in print.

In this section I argue that Al Shaykh was an active agent—not a passive victim—in the social constructions of her authorship. By supporting certain readings of her texts Al Shaykh contributes to cultural constructions that identify her with the West. These constructions affect the ways in which her texts would be read in the Arab countries and in the West. Leila Ahmed writes, “just as Americans ‘know’ that Arabs are backward, they know also with the same flawless certainty that Muslim women are terribly oppressed and degraded. And they know this is not because they know that women everywhere in the world are oppressed, but because they believe that specifically, Islam monstrously oppresses women” (521). This stands true for most writings involving Arab women and especially for the writings of Al Shaykh.

In *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, Suha—one of the four female protagonists—complains about living in the Gulf: “there’s no freedom here. You can’t play tennis, go to the cinema, go for walks. There’s no entertainment” (96). She complains that the government has censored all newspapers and magazines and covered pictures of women’s bodies in “blank” ink. Western music is referred to as “the work of the devil,” (35) and dolls like Barbie are prohibited and replaced with dolls called Fula draped in burqa. Even the stuffed toys and statues shipped to the store where Suha secretly worked were “destroyed, every one that was meant to be a human being or animal or bird, since it was not permissible to produce distortions of God’s creatures” (13).

In an interview, when Al Shaykh was asked whether all these incidents were “a challenge to traditional Islam,” she replies:
Of course not. I have never thought only of religion when I was writing. I knew that I wanted to open a curtain on a way of living which is part of the Middle East yet different. This closed atmosphere attracted me and became juicy material for my imagination... for the unusual daily life there which carries many social problems, tempted me to write about my feelings. That women are still oppressed, etc... Even when I write [about] what appears to be Islamic behaviour, it is really more under the domain of social habits—which don’t relate to the true teachings of Islamic societies. (qtd in Larson 17)

Al Shaykh, like Al Saadawi, openly critiqued what can be called Islamic patriarchy in her writings. More often than not, however, they were quick to justify that their critique is not related to the Islamic religion itself.

This rush to defend Islam is not unique to the aforementioned writers. Arab women have, in one way or another, found themselves in a position where they had to defend Islam. In that respect, Ahmed in “Western Ethnocentric and Perception of the Harem” describes how upon attending a conference at the National Women’s Studies Association on “Women in Islam,” she felt dismayed that the presenters were giving a rosy picture of women in Islam. She further adds that after two years of living in the United States she found herself doing the same thing (521). Because of this fear of being misunderstood or misinterpreted, Arab women find themselves rushing to defend what they have at other times criticized.

The role Al Shaykh plays in informing the reception she receives in the West cannot be easily ignored. One example is the difference between the Arabic and the English version of her books. In this respect, the critic Roger Allen writes, “Readers of Al Shaykh’s Hikayat Zahra [The Story of Zahra] in both its original and English versions will soon become aware that much of the material of the original text that is local to Lebanon has been omitted from the translation” (479). One could argue that Al Shaykh
deleted this material because it is too particular to the Lebanese culture and society and might not be of interest to readers of other nationalities. However, this argument may not stand because many of Al Shaykh’s readers of her novels in Arabic are of different Arab nationalities.

There is also the difference in the fate of these women between the Arabic and the English version. For instance, *The Women of Sand and Myrrh* in Arabic ends on a positive note with the women portrayed as strong and perseverant. Whereas the English version ends with the Lebanese protagonist leaving the Middle Eastern country in despair and hopelessness and returning back to her country. Dallal argues that Al Shaykh wrote *The Woman of Sand and Myrrh* with her Western reader in mind. She goes further to say that Al Shaykh wrote the book intentionally so it can be translated. Dallal argues that this is clear in the opening chapter where references specific to Western culture and unfamiliar to Arabs, remain unexplained whereas references to Arabic culture, that are unfamiliar to Westerners, are explained in details. For an example, Dallal cites Suha’s explanation on why the imported soft toys were destroyed (8). In the book Suha explains why “the [imported] soft toys and dolls have all been destroyed [by the authorities]” (13). “Every one that was meant to be a human being or animal or bird [was destroyed] since it was not permissible to produce distortions of God” (13). Dallal argues that, if Al Shaykh was writing for her Arab audience, she would not have felt the need to explain this statement since Arabs know that this a Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, confined to the Gulf region (8). In contrast, Al Shaykh did not feel the need to explain references to “Barbie Dolls,” “Snoopies,” and “Woodstocks” that are from the Western culture and that might also be foreign to Arabs. This has led Al Shaykh’s Arab critics to argue that Al
Shaykh was writing in Arabic presumably to her Arabic audience, but in actuality she had her Western readers in mind. In other words by writing controversial topics that appease Western readers’ appetite for stereotypical images of Arabic culture, Al Shaykh has guaranteed for her self a place in the global literary market.

3.5 IN HER OWN WORDS

As the Arab woman writer holds her pen to write, she is aware of the invisible sets of expectations she must adhere to in order for her writing to be legitimate and for her voice to be heard. Hanan Al Shaykh is no exception. Through her novels, her interviews, in addition to her presence in London and amongst literary circles, Al Shaykh was aware that in order to achieve world recognition she has to meet certain expectations. Hence, her assertion that she finds in London a space to write that her hometown, she claims, does not offer:

London eggs you on, it makes you feel you are living in a healthy atmosphere, free of repression...Because I live in London I have come to know myself as I really am. In Beirut you exercise ‘camouflage’ like a chameleon, but in London you come to know who you are; you shed off your outer shell and see yourself as if in front of a mirror. (qtd. in El-Enany 198)

Although Al Shaykh valorizes the West for its ability to give marginalized groups a space where they can speak, write, and publish, she was critical of the Western reception of her books and the reasons behind that reception. In that respect she writes:

In the West they think if you are an Arab writer you are a spokeswoman for everything Arab...I try to be frank and straightforward but I make it clear I am not a politician or a historian. I am inspired by the society I am living in and I tackle those issues in my own way in my writing. (Lancaster 43)
The question that comes to mind here is: what society is Al Shaykh talking about? She could be talking about Arab society with her Arab or Western readers in mind. Therefore, more important than what Al Shaykh says or writes is where she speaks and writes from. Al Shaykh lives in London and is very active in the literary circles in the United Kingdom. In one of her interviews Al Shaykh relates the importance living in the West held for her: “Every time I used to go back to Lebanon, or come here to Egypt, I would become schizophrenic. Not this time. Now I know that I live in the West. I do not feel nostalgic anymore” (qtd. in Ghazaleh). Such statements encouraged Arab critics to accuse Al Shaykh of catering to her Western audience at the expense of her Arabic one.

Although some of Al Shaykh’s books gained great acceptance in the West, others did not receive the same fate. It is interesting though to examine the selectivity with which these books gained their popularity. For instance, the publications of *The Story of Zahra* and *Women of Sand and Myrrh* coincided with two wars: The Lebanese Civil War and The Gulf War respectively. It is the interest of the West in these wars that ignited Western interest in these books. Along the same lines, Geoffey Nash in his book, *The Anglo-Arab Encounter: Fiction and Autobiography by Arab Writers in English*, writes that “the success in the United States of the novel *The Kite Runner* (2005) by the Afghan-American Khaled Hoseini, is surely related to America’s intervention against the Taliban regime in 2001” (16). Therefore one could argue that political factors played a role in the reception Al Shaykh received in the West.

In spite of the validity of this argument, it is not enough to explain why Al Shaykh’s other books that appeared under the same circumstances did not receive the same reception. For example Al Shaykh’s novel, *Suicide of a Dead Man*, which was first
published in 1968 did not reach Western bookstores. In this book there is no criticism of Arab and Islamic patriarchy. The book is about a seventeen-year-old girl’s relationship with a man twice her age without any overt condemnation on part of the girl to the patriarchal system or to the society she lives in. The lack of controversial material from a Western perspective could explain the lack of appeal the book had from publishers could explain the lack of appeal the book had from publishers.

Nawar Al Hasssan Golley, writes that some Arab women writers “targeted readers back home, whereas others wrote to be read only in exile” (xiv). This can be particularly true in case of Al Shaykh’s Only in London. The book tells the story of three Arabs immigrating to London and how their stories intersect. Lamis is an Iraqi woman who has just divorced her much older husband, a man she moved to London to wed in an arranged marriage. Amira is a canny Moroccan prostitute who finds for herself a lucrative trade in the upper class hotels of Mayfair, disguising herself as a princess to lure more customers. Samir is a flamboyant gay Lebanese man who is smuggling a monkey into the country for cash. Nicholas is an Englishman working for Sotheby's who travels frequently to Oman and has a fascination with the Arab world. Lamis and Nicholas start a relationship, and Nicholas’s excessive attention to Lamis threatens her sense of self. Samir and Amira move in together, allowing Samir to act as Amira’s bodyguard while at the same give him the chance to pursue young men. In Only in London, the stereotypical images of Arabs come back with a vengeance. Sabry Hafez expresses his trepidation that such kind of writing will only “confirm Orientalist views of Arab” and not change them. Only in London reminds the reader of Rudyard Kilpling’s statement, "Oh East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet" (9).
Commenting on *Only in London*, Al Shaykh contends that she understands how her Arab readers might not connect with the main character in the book, the divorcee Lamis. Al Shaykh asserts, nonetheless, that Arabs in the Diaspora not only appreciate Lamis’s character but can also identify with her: “There is an abyss between the Arabs in the Arab world and those in Europe...The Arabs in Europe could identify with the novel and found it very authentic. But some people in the Arab world don’t want to know how certain Arabs in London live.” Al Shaykh’s anticipation of the reaction to her book, typifies the literary process through which writers consume images of themselves, and reinterpret those images in order to create and circulate new ones for themselves (Darnton 67).

Samia Merhez, following the Moroccan writer Abdelkebier Kahtibi, contends that Arab intellectuals have two tasks. They “must deconstruct the Occident’s logo-centrism and ethnocentrism, which affect the whole world, and they must deconstruct and critique the learned discourses that the Arab world has elaborated around and about itself” (260). Al Shaykh’s characters in *Only in London* “choose to go on despite the feelings of guilt enforced by their traditional backgrounds; they are able to reconstitute their identities ‘Only in London’” (Scultermandl 170). In other words, for Al Shaykh’s characters who have been displaced from their Arab countries, the only place to find autonomy and independence is London. Al Shaykh may have been involved in what Foucault calls “reverse discourses” where things that are prohibited or deemed unnatural can begin to speak on behalf of their legitimacy or ‘naturality.’ Al Shaykh’s attempt to regain control over her authorial identity was unsuccessful, and Al Shaykh herself fell into the role of the native informant or the ‘authentic insider’.
Gayatari Spivak warns against speaking for marginalized groups for fear of re-inscribing their marginalization. This creates a quandary for Arab women writers who want to discuss issues they feel most important to them without having to confirm any Western prejudices. Responding to this fear, Al Shaykh states:

I feel that I am writing about our society. This is our society. We cannot hide. We have to go through the darkest tunnels to come out into the light. And if we don't go into the tunnels of taboos and, you know, oppressions, and talk about it, then we will never emerge into the light. We will never be with integrity and free people. This is how I feel about it. And I want to tackle these things, because they are next to my heart. But, you know, I just decided really, really not to care. Just go ahead and write what I feel. (Schlote)

Arab writers in general, and Arab women writers in particular, find themselves in a position where they have to mitigate the thin line between “standing for the oppressed,” and avoiding the “colonizing mentality” (Hooks 145).

3.6 AL SAADAWI AND AL SHAYKH: TAILORING TO WESTERN EXPECTATIONS

“Arabic is misogynist and whenever the gender is not clear the masculine overpowers the feminine,” writes Faqir (Silence 18). Some Arab writers like Fadia Faqir found in Arabic a language suitable only for men and chose English and French as their preferred medium of expression. Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh wrote in Arabic instead. To support this decision, Al Saadawi offers this explanation.

In my dreams I used to see myself as a woman of letters like Taha Husayn because I loved the Arabic language, its letters, its words, its musical ring in the ear. I used to believe that God alone created the Arabic language, that He chose it over other languages and revealed the Quran in it. I imagined that the English language was made by God Almighty and that the Arabs were the best nation created by God. I would walk haughtily in the street, looking down on the
English, who spoke a mortal language and belonged to an inferior nation not mentioned in the Quran. (Awraqi Hayati 188)

As to Al Shaykh, she justifies her use of Arabic in the following way: “I am like in a sea, and this is the last wood which I'm attached to. My language. If I lose it, chalas, finish. No Hanan, no writing. So I will never write except in Arabic” (Schlote). Leila Ahmed—an Arab American professor at Harvard and an author of several books on the Middle East—praises Al Shaykh’s decision to write in Arabic and expresses her envy of “the wealth of literature” that Al Shaykh had the privilege of learning and acquiring through learning the language and the literature since childhood (Border 253-4).

One could argue that using Arabic for their medium might have put these writers in favor with their Arabic readers. Al Saadawi states that because “I…write in Arabic; therefore, I write mainly for people in our countries” (Adele 58). However, identifying her audience as the Arab world does not resonate with her Arab audience. For in another occasion Al Saadawi writes:

Before, I didn’t have the pleasure or the freedom to experiment. But now I want to go beyond that, to experiment with language, to experiment with ideas, to have more freedom. Even if the book is not published in the Arab world. At first, I wrote for the Arabic people, men and women. And I had to consider my audience. I was not writing for angels in the sky. My audience was the Arab people. So, if I spoke about something they would totally reject, it would not be there at all. But now I don’t care. (Gauch 404)

The freedom Al Saadawi sought comes from publishing houses in the West. However, this freedom does not come without strings attached. The reception the writers received in the West might be steeped in Orientalism. Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh are not mere voyeurs in that reception: the discrepancies between the Arabic and the English version of their books are great examples of their participation in the process. While one might be
quick to argue that Western translators and Western publishing houses are at fault in these cases, they are not entirely responsible for the discrepancy. In interviews, and on more than one occasion, Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh assure their readers that the translation and publishing process is acceptable. Al Shaykh asserts “I don’t worry at all when my stories are translated to the English language because I get involved with the translation.” Therefore, as I argue in this chapter Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh play a significant role in the way their reception has been perceived in the West—a role that alienated them with their Arab reader and brought them closer to their Western one.
CONCLUSION

“If we [the French] want to destroy the structure of Algerian society, its capacity for resistance, we must first conquer all the women.”
Franz Fanon

4.1 WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE

In the Author’s note to the English translation of her book, Banat Al-Riyadh (The Girls of Riyadh), Rajaa Alsanea writes that she has never imagined the West would be interested in what she—an Arab female writer—had to say. She justifies her reasons for thinking like that, as follows:

It seemed to me, and to many other Saudis, that the Western world still perceives us either romantically, as the land of Arabian Nights and the land where bearded Sheikhs sit in their tents surrounded by their beautiful harem women, or politically, as the land that gave birth to Bin Laden and other terrorists, the land where women are dressed in black from head to toe and where every house has its own well in the backyard! Therefore, I knew it would be very hard even impossible to shake this cliché. (viii)

The predicament Alsanea finds herself in is one that many other Arab writers—both male and female—share. As a result, they attempt to shatter these preconceived images and are then accused by Western critics of “romanticization.” These critics feel the writers have drawn a flowery image that contradicts almost everything they know about that society. If they are critical of their Arab society, they are accused of “selling out” their countries to the West. In this thesis I have studied how Nawal Al Saadawi and Hanan Al Shaykh’s work has been received in the Arab world and in the West. I have shown that while Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh’s works were criticized and at times even disparaged in the Middle East, they were canonized in the West.
Decolonization involves an investigation of the literature produced in the “first world” which as Al Saadawi herself argues, reproduces imperialist relations of domination by circumscribing an homogenous portrait of “oppressed Arab women”. Al Saadawi attempted to shatter the binary oppositions (oppressed/uneducated/silent vs. free/educated/outspoken) through which Arab vs. Western women are seen. In that respect she writes:

The oppression of women, the exploitation and social pressures to which they are exposed, [which] are not characteristic of Arab or Middle Eastern societies, or countries of the “Third World” alone. They constitute an integral part of the political, economic, and cultural system, preponderant in most of the world. (Hidden Face of Eve)

However, Al Saadawi’s attempts at bridging the gap between Arab and Western oppression have often been in vain. Different literary constituencies viewed Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh differently. In the Arab world the writers were accused of being complicit with Western Imperialism while in the West they were hailed for their outspokenness against Arab misogyny. Their critiques of global misogyny and Western feminist biases have largely been ignored. Hence, analyzing the reception of these authors is important, not only because it sheds light on how these authors were received in the West and in the Arab world, but it also sheds light on what it means to be an “Arab female writer.”

Herein lies the significance of the “author function” for it speaks to the way these authors were constructed in discourse and how this construction may not align itself with the authors’ intentions. Arab female authors, like Alsanea, have definitely benefited from the exposure Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh have received in the West—in the sense that they became more hopeful that their work could be published or even read. However there is a sense of trepidation that accompanies such exposure—a feeling captured in the epigraph
that opened this chapter. There is a fear that the authorial identity of these writers will be constructed and constrained by the discourse prevailing at the time.

Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh embrace some affinities with feminism but they refuse to be circumscribed by Western feminists’ Orientalist tendencies. In other words, their complicity is less with “the West” as some Arab critics contend, than in a shared concern for women’s experiences. However there is a price to be paid when joining the “global” conversation. Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh paid that price when their writings were misappropriated and their words were taken out of context, resulting in a shift in their authorial function from “anti-patriarchal” to “anti-Arab misogyny.” The dilemma Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh find themselves in is the dilemma many Third World intellectuals, and especially Arab intellectuals working in the First World, find themselves in. They are usually accused of “in-authenticity,” “ideological contamination” by the West, or they may even be accused of ‘selling out’ their countries. The question is then how to argue for women’s rights without being complicit with any “situated knowledge” (Haraway, 1988): be it ethnocentrist, racist, or even patriarchal.

The importance of analyzing local and global reception of Arab women authors is not restricted to Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh. However, analyzing Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh’s reception does shed light on what it means to be an Arab female author as well as how the category of “Arab woman” itself is authored. Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh’s image in the West as “representative of Arab writers” has led to the inclusion of their works in graduate and undergraduate courses in American universities on Women’s writing, African and Middle Eastern, postcolonial literature, world literature and feminist theory. The danger of teaching these works in American classrooms lies in the fact that
students may look at these novels as “windows onto a timeless Islam instead of a literary work governed by certain conventions and produced within specific historical contexts” (Amireh, 240). Hence, the use of these writers’ works by Western readers as raw materials without accounting for their specific historic and cultural contexts is problematic. This project has shed the light on the different cultural intermediaries involved in constructing particular authorial identities for these authors as ‘Arab women’ and how these identities function to give their work meaning. Post 9/11 interest in the Arab world has increased and although this interest is sometimes for all the wrong reasons, it has paved the way for the appearance of several Arab writers, both male and female on the global stage.

4.2 FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Research has recently shown the importance of online communities as “loci of meaning making” (Merskin 134). With the advent of technology, reviews of the authors’ works or observations on the authors themselves are no longer restricted to a group of intellectuals who write reviews in newspapers, literary journals, or on the cover of books. The Internet, websites, and blogs are nowadays used as an arena where people can express how they feel towards certain authors and their works. While beyond the scope of this Master’s thesis, a study of the online reception of these authors as compared with the literary circles I have reviewed might be fruitful and very rich. The Internet has opened a venue for Arab readers to communicate across borders; discussions on race, gender, politics, and religion can take place now with minimal censorship. Although authorial intention ‘guarantees nothing,’ I would also have liked to conduct interviews with the
authors themselves in order to see how they would respond to the way they were received in the Arab world and in the West. Another future direction this project can take is to compare the reception of an Arab male author (for example, Noble Prize winner Naguib Mahfouz) with Al Saadawi and Al Shaykh, which might investigate whether or not reception of these authors varies across gender or whether or not the same questions could be asked when the reputation of a controversial Arab male author travels transnationally.
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VITA

Diana M. Obeid
Institute of Humanities
BAL 3041
Old Dominion University
Norfolk, VA 23509

EDUCATION
M.A. in Humanities (2011), Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia
Graduate Certificate in Women’s Studies (2011), Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia
Graduate Certificate in New Literature (2010), Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia
B.A. in English Literature (2005), Lebanese University, Beirut, Lebanon

TEACHING EXPERIENCE
August 2011-present Adjunct Faculty of Arabic, Christopher Newport University, Newport News, Virginia
October 2009-present Lecturer, Lifelong Learning Society, Christopher Newport University, Newport News, Virginia
Classes Taught: Politics of the Veil; Women in the Middle East; Arabian Nights; Beginning, Elementary, and Intermediate Arabic

PUBLICATIONS
The In-laws’ Trap: a Novel. Baltimore: PublishAmerica, 2009
Enter Into the World of English. Bakaata, Lebanon: Dar Maan, 2004

PAPER PRESENTATIONS

SCHOLARSHIPS
The 2010-11 Nancy Bazin Graduate Scholarship, Women’s Studies Department, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia

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