

Literary Representations of Female Identity: Feminisms in Arab-Muslim Societies and Clashing Paradigms on Conceptions of Modernity, Tradition, and Selfhood

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Abstract

The essay examines the texts of the two women writers – Leila Abouzeid (from Morocco) and Nawal El Saadawi (from Egypt) – as offering two female perspectives within what is commonly referred to as “feminine” writing in the Arab Muslim world. My main interest is to explore the various discursive articulations of female identity that are challenged or foregrounded as a positive model. The essay points to the serious pitfalls of some feminist narratives in Arab-Muslim societies by dealing with a related problem: the author’s setting up of convenient conceptual dichotomies, which account for the female experience, that reduce male-female relationships in the given social context to a fundamentally antagonistic one. Abouzeid’s novel will be a case study of a more positive but also realistic and complex perspective on female experience.

Introduction

The question of Muslim identity in the face of shifting cultural paradigms has long been at the heart of the debate on modernity and tradition in the Arab-Muslim world. As suggested by the epigrammatic words of Foucault and al-Ghazzali above, these shifting cultural paradigms revolve (among other things) around changing perceptions of the (female) *body* as a locus of identity. In *Nawal El Saadawi’s Woman at Point Zero*¹ and Leila Abouzeid’s

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Year of the Elephant,² this question of the “female body” acquires more specificity and complexity, as well as more urgency, insofar as it is tied to the definition of female space and selfhood as understood and experienced by the female protagonists. Such a selfhood appears, until recently, to have long been relegated to non-discursive positions within a given Arab-Muslim social and cultural context, with a few remarkable exceptions in every society and historical period.

Case studies of feminism and female writers in Arab-Muslim societies typically reveal two main tendencies. The first one is to define Arab-Muslim feminisms mainly from the perspective of Middle Eastern feminists from Egypt, while giving comparatively little academic attention to North African female writers, as Elizabeth Fernea rightly notes.³ The second one is to categorize them uncritically in terms of movements that replicate certain western models of liberalism, many of which are exclusively secular in the general direction of their political aspirations and social goals. The main shortcoming of such approaches is to sum up feminisms in Arab-Muslim societies in terms of privileging the materiality of existence as the primary anchor for female identity formation in those societies. Consequently, the crucial role of the spiritual heritage is overshadowed, although it goes into the very construction of individual and collective centers of consciousness in Arab-Muslim societies. The work of Fatima Mernissi, a Moroccan sociologist, offers some good insights on the diverse and complex sociocultural and political realities of various manifestations of feminism in the Arab-Muslim world.⁴

Nawal El Saadawi (an Egyptian physician and writer) and Leila Abouzeid (a Moroccan journalist and writer) are two professional middle-class women who have held leading roles in their respective governments. Both of them use fiction to explore and represent patterns of relationships that situate them as individuals in relation to “authority,” “tradition,” and “modernity.” Their respective texts feature female protagonists who, although seemingly caught in the same kinds of personal crises and social dilemmas, are given notably different ways of expressing and rationalizing them. The ideological paradigms informing the two novels’ worldviews (varying between an exclusively secular and dissident view and a nationalist and conforming one) seem to represent different determinants of female identity in its two dimensions: the way *it is* as well as the way *it ought to be*.

In this essay, I will examine the ways in which the novels produce these two different viewpoints. As the victimization of the female protagonists is not the focus of this analysis, it will not be discussed. The central issue is

the overarching viewpoint framing the two women's stories: the one that describes the causes of their misery and the effects of their marginalization, and that articulates viable alternative means and modes of self-expression and self-affirmation.

I will compare the main protagonists' perspectives on their personal and social realities in order to reveal two fairly distinct female representations of identity within Arab-Muslim societies. I will argue that both texts seem to diagnose related identity problems from two standpoints that, although not mutually exclusive, have significantly different consequences for their vision of a content, independent, and unified female self. The choice of El Sadaawi and Abouzeid is meant to emphasize the diversity (cultural and geographical) in female narratives on identity within Arab-Muslim societies. My main interest is to explore the various discursive articulations of female identity that are challenged or foregrounded as a positive model. In the essay, I target the cultural and sociopolitical contexts, as well as the intellectual persuasions, informing the two authors' representations in order to underline the variety and difference in women's experience within Arab-Muslim societies.

In his analysis of Arab novels, Halim Barakat identifies three main trends: novels of reconciliation, novels of exposure, and novels of revolutionary change.⁵ The first category describes novels in which "[v]isions depicting social reality in a state of harmony are combined with concern about threatening changes,"⁶ the second category consists of novels that "expose the weaknesses of society and its institutions without exhibiting real commitment to the restructuring of the existing order,"⁷ and the third category refers to novels committed to "radical change." Such novels engender an encompassing vision of society as a whole, in a state of conflict rather than harmony. Society is depicted as a complex and vital whole in which individual or psychological issues cannot be isolated from social issues. The inner struggle that constitutes the main preoccupation of novels of rebellion is portrayed explicitly as a manifestation of the external struggle in novels of revolutionary change.⁸

I will show that although Barakat's definitions apply to certain features of the two novels under discussion, they are limited in that they fail to account for moments in which the individual-society relationship portrayed is complex. On the one hand, El Sadaawi's novel only partially lends itself to being seen as a novel of exposure, since the protagonist sees her *individuality* and not so much society as the center. She reveals society's flaws and weaknesses only insofar as this contributes to helping define her

selfhood. In Abouzeid's novel, the individual is not given primacy over society and society does not occupy a more important position in the protagonist's worldview. The novel could be seen as a text that falls between "novels of exposure" and "novels of revolutionary change," but that differs from both in that the protagonist does not have an internalized sense of society's supremacy.

Firdaus, the female protagonist in *Woman at Point Zero*, seems to be engaged in a subversive process of the total *feminization* of various discourses of authority, tradition, and modernity. In contrast, Zahra, Abouzeid's spokeswoman in *Year of the Elephant*, seems to reflect a process of *negotiating* female space with the same discourses. For her, identity is *relational* and realizes itself through different levels of reality and consciousness. Her movement toward selfhood and understanding can best be described in terms of the literary and religious motif of the "quest." Though they differ in a number of important respects, the narratives of Firdaus and Zahra reflect a key feature of "novels of exposure": their voices serve to criticize society's excesses. Both characters set out to foreground their "self" and "femininity" as the main subject of their narrative.

They are partners in the same cause insofar as they both problematize the politics of gender roles and institutional truth to account for their marginal social existence and the human indignities associated with it. But while Firdaus' narrative exposes the *material* effects of this politics on the *body* and attempts to think of an alternative route out of the body's viewpoint, Zahra's narrative reveals what motivates her *psychologically* and *morally*, as well as attempts to identify with a universal and transcendental order of things. In the former case, subjectivity is disembodied and trapped in a deterministic universe, whereas in the latter subjectivity has interiority and searches for modalities of identification with other constituents of selfhood that emphasize unity, such as faith, humanity, land, language, and positive figures of spiritual leadership.

Woman at Point Zero

In her prefatory remarks, El Saadawi establishes the biographical character of her novel based on what she describes as the story of Firdaus, a "real woman." Firdaus, who was imprisoned and sentenced to death after being convicted of murdering a pimp and who comes to be associated with the image of a prostitute later on, tells the story of her abused childhood and adulthood from a prison cell. The female narrator points out that she came

to be a witness to Firdaus' story in her capacity as a psychiatrist conducting research on women prisoners "who suffered degrees of neurosis."⁹ The matter-of-factness and precision of these remarks have, at first glance, a distancing effect. They suggest that the fictional first-person narrator, who listens to Firdaus' story, is bracketing it as a clinical case study of a woman prisoner whose psychological poise is beset by male oppression, and whose asocial behavior manifests itself in obsessional thoughts, compulsive acts, and excessive anxiety. Indeed, such are the main characteristics of Firdaus' behavior patterns as a victimized and lower-class female peasant figure. While these descriptions point to the troubling psychological effects and emotional damage inflicted by the different forms of male oppression represented in the text, they raise questions about the narrator's reliability as an *important* narrative voice because of her supremely egocentric language. Her closing words on men ring with a dim pessimism: "My life means their death. My death means their life."¹⁰

However, the preface complicates this view of the first narrator's relationship to Firdaus and undercuts the former's authority in a way that projects Firdaus as the *only* valid source of "truth" and point of reference: "This woman, despite her misery and despair, evoked in all those who, like *me*, witnessed the final moments of life, a need to challenge and to overcome those forces that deprive human beings of their rights to live, to love and to real freedom [*my italics*]."¹¹ The apparent identification between the first-person narrator and Firdaus results in the assimilation of the two voices, instead of having Firdaus' voice relativized and embedded in the female doctor's. This, in turn, seals off the world of *Woman at Point Zero* within the confines of Firdaus' cynical worldview, which plays out the same dynamics of violence existing at the story level and complicates any possibility of redeeming her identity in positive terms. Narrative truth does not seem to be questionable in the text, and yet several issues (e.g., knowledge, individuality, desire, freedom, religious values, time, and space) are at stake because of the text's framing devices.

The text's mainframe is the first-person narrator (the psychiatrist who is, one might argue, a fictional El Saadawi figure). The narrator's voice ushers in Firdaus' voice and is soon drowned and outweighed by it. The power that she yields as a doctor diagnosing and listening to a woman prisoner is visibly taken over by Firdaus when the latter decides to initiate the telling of her story on her own terms, and finally agrees, after much reticence, to receive the doctor in her cell. The first-person narrator's self-effaced character and the power of Firdaus's voice are seen when the latter forcefully

opens her narrative in a commanding tone: “Let me speak. Do not interrupt me.”¹² They are conveyed symbolically even earlier by the doctor’s words upon her first encounter with Firdaus:

Suddenly we were face to face. I stood rooted to the ground, silent, motionless. I did not hear the beat of my heart, nor the key as it turned in the lock, closing the heavy door behind me. *It was as though I died the moment her eyes looked into mine. They were eyes that killed, like a knife, probing, cutting deep down inside, their look steady, unwavering [my italics].*¹³

The idea of the first-person narrator as “silent” or “dead” emphasized in the above-quoted passage is highly ironical in this context. The image of the knife that kills foreshadows the crime of which Firdaus is to be accused and marks the climax of the story and of the protagonist’s psychological drama. From the very early pages of the text, we see that Firdaus’ relating her story as a powerless, poor peasant girl reflects a consciousness that has been, up to the point of her imprisonment, disturbed, distraught, and very upset. The intensity and persisting nature of her pain, conveyed through her words and permeating the entire narrative, gives emotional validity to her account. Her story starts at the peak of her personal struggle and search for identity, and in the middle of total spiritual desolation. It is interesting to note that at this point, Firdaus introduces herself by playing on conceptual dichotomies that cement the text’s fictional universe in absolutist and univocal terms.

She begins by reminiscing about early childhood experiences closely tied to the image of an abusive father. Her memory of her father soon becomes an epitome of the male image as an analytical category in the text. Firdaus’ words establish this category’s homogeneity and universality when she expresses her feelings as a child watching a throng of men walking out of Friday congregational prayer: “Sometimes I could not distinguish which one of them was my father. He resembled them so closely that it was difficult to tell.”¹⁴

This undifferentiated perception of the male given by Firdaus the child is also the one that determines the vision of Firdaus the adult. Examples of negative male figures proliferate in the text and punctuate key moments in her journey and growth into adulthood. From a child-abusing father to a child-molesting uncle, from an avaricious and a cruel older husband to complacent and domineering male coworkers, and from numerous male figures involved in sexual aggression and exploitation who force her into the humiliating world of prostitution, all these male characters come out of

the same mold: namely, one that emphasizes their bestiality, selfishness, and non-human qualities.

Firdaus' language expresses unequivocally the kinship between all of the males in her life, as the words she addresses to the police upon her arrest indicate: "I am saying that you are all criminals, all of you: the fathers, the uncles, the husbands, the pimps, the lawyers, the doctors, the journalists, and all men of all professions."¹⁵ The demonization of male figures is also effected by the representation of disembodied male images in the fictional world of *Woman at Point Zero*. A recurring technique is to reduce men to two menacing and sinister eyes that are emblematic of physical violation. The malevolent male gaze that objectifies the female body and destroys female interiority and subjectivity is transferred to all males in the story. Its mechanism is described by Firdaus when she is roaming aimlessly in the streets, trying to escape her uncle's oppressive household:

In the dark I suddenly perceived two eyes, or rather felt them, moving towards me slowly, closer and closer. They dropped their gaze with slow intent down to my shoes, rested there for a moment, then gradually started to climb up my legs, to my thighs, my belly, my breasts, my neck and finally came to a stop, fastening themselves steadily in my eyes, with the same cold intent.¹⁶

As a consequence of this elaborate system of imageries, Firdaus' universe excludes entirely any individualized or qualified male images. In her assessment of El Saadawi's text, Fedwa Malti-Douglas argues that:

[t]empting as it might be to agree [...] that all males in the novel are evil, that conclusion is unfortunately not true. A slight glimmer of light exists with the male prison doctor in the prologue of the novel. He does not believe Firdaus is guilty."¹⁷

It is true that this male doctor who arranges the first-person narrator's visit to Firdaus is the only male that does not appear to be conniving, yet Malti-Douglas' positive interpretation does not take into account his structural insignificance in the text. For instead of representing a different male viewpoint, he rather seems to be a *papier-mâché* institutional male voice that does not represent or have any direct jurisdiction that can positively influence Firdaus' fate or relativize her narrative. The consequence of such representation is to attribute categorical unity and sameness to male identity in a manner that underscores the impossibility of envisioning a social order in which male and female identities are not antagonistic, and in which difference and multiplicity *within* each identity category is not conceded.

Firdaus' voice has a great deal of force when she exposes the corruption, hypocrisy, and mendacity underlying the power wielded by government authority figures, symbols of religious and educational institutions, the elite, and the general state of decadence associated with the rise of a selfish middle-class obsessed with its lust for power, control, and prestige. The representation of male figures in *Woman at Point Zero*, however, is symptomatic of Firdaus' unidimensional perception of reality, which affects her self-perception and that of others. Indeed all characters seem to operate on only one level of reality: one that is expressed at the level of the *body* and is peopled by *automated* and *hollow* individuals, as discussed below. Firdaus' words as she is in the streets once again, this time on the run from her brutal husband, reveal a world that features people (including Firdaus) as automatons and stresses their anonymity, loneliness, and estrangement:

I walked through the streets with swollen eyes, and a bruised face, but no one paid any attention to me. People were rushing around in buses and in cars, or on foot. It was *as though they were blind, unable to see anything*. The street was an endless expanse stretched out before my eyes like a sea. I was just a pebble thrown into it, battered by the waves, tossed here and there, rolling over and over to be abandoned somewhere on the shore [my italics].¹⁸

In addition to its indifference, hostility, morbidity, and impersonality, the characters' experiences in the world of *Woman at Point Zero* are flagrantly *corporeal*, as Firdaus' physical confinement in the prison from which she is telling her story symbolically emphasizes. Little emphasis is placed on other spheres of experience associated with the mind and the spirit. From this standpoint, Firdaus' world is identified with physical deprivation and is plagued with moral inertia. It is a world from which it is impossible to escape and, much less, to change the human existential condition. The fact that the ultimate stop of her journey is physical confinement in prison is therefore highly significant. The flux of her experience shows an obsessive preoccupation with the *body* as the space within which the dynamics of male-female power relations unfold. There are many recurring patterns of physical violence that serve as organizing motifs, such as the repeated images of physical violation of Firdaus' body by uncouth male figures.

The representation of the body in relation to power recalls Foucault's account on prisons as instruments of power in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries:

That punishment in general and the prison in particular belong to a political technology of the *body* is a lesson that I have learned not so much from history as from the present. In recent years, prison revolts have occurred throughout the world. There was certainly something paradoxical about their aims, their slogans, and the way they took place. They were revolts against an entire state of *physical* misery that is over a century old [...]. [A]ll these movements – and the innumerable discourses that the prison has given rise to since the early nineteenth century – have been about the *body* and *material* things [...]. [T]hey were revolts, *at the level of the body, against the very body of the prison* [...]. [I]t is this whole *materiality* as an *instrument and vector of power*; it is this whole technology of power over the body that the technology of the “soul” – that of the educationalists, psychologists, and psychiatrists – fails to conceal or to compensate, for the simple reason that it is one of its tools [my emphasis].¹⁹

Foucault’s account here is part of his complex theory on human subjectivity and its determinants that emphasize the materiality of identity. Indeed, it is difficult to miss the total physicality of experience delineated in Firdaus’ world. In the context of this world, her consciousness seems to mourn the permanent loss or lack of an unexpressed or perhaps an illusory ideal that is defined in *physical* terms. This lost ideal resonates throughout the novel with nostalgic evocations of the time prior to her circumcision, when Firdaus mournfully broods on her loss of physical pleasure:

It [physical pleasure] belonged to a distant past, had been with me somehow right from the beginning. I had experienced it at the time. Yet it seemed to go back further than my life, to some day before I was born, like a thing arising out of an ancient wound, in an organ which had ceased to be mine, on the body of a woman who was no longer me.²⁰

Firdaus defines the markers of her liberated self and inner change in terms of a celebration of physical pleasure and comfort tied to her economic independence, which her profession as a prostitute offer her:

Can the Nile, and the sky, and the trees change? I had changed, so why not the Nile and the colour of the trees? When I opened the window every morning I could see the Nile flow by, contemplate the green of the water, and the trees, the vivid green light in which everything seemed to bathe, feel the power of life, of my body, of the hot blood in my veins [...]. I let myself sink in this feeling of warmth and softness, drown in the perfume of gentle roses, savour the comfort of the silken sheets as I stretched my legs [...]. I drank in the liquid softness through my nose, my mouth, my ears, through every pore in my body with a thirst which knew no end.²¹

In El Saadawi's text, physical pleasure also is associated with the sexual ambivalence evoked in descriptions of Firdaus' relationship with a few female characters with whom she forges some kind of solidarity and bonding, including the first-person female narrator herself. Malti-Douglas credits this sexual ambivalence in El Saadawi's fictional universe by suggesting that it is a manifestation of a "female force" that can "effectively battle [the] universality [of patriarchy]." ²² Besides being somewhat ambiguous, especially since Malti-Douglas adds that El Saadawi's heroines are ultimately doomed to failure in their battle with patriarchy, ²³ this reading betrays violence because it redeploys the same dichotomous view of male-female warring relationships to construct the image of an autonomous female. In addition, it evokes a female experience that is far from being a socially viable alternative for reconfiguring male-female relationships in the given sociocultural context.

Although Firdaus' voice as a lower-class female forcefully indicts the trappings of male authority and power, it remains deeply caught in the same patterns of violence it seems to condemn. Consequently, the movement toward self-reconstruction is negative because it results in her dividedness and alienation not only in relation to others (the human world) and to the social world of institutions, but also in relation to herself. Furthermore, this movement is negative because it operates by conceptually redefining and setting the female identity against the male identity through a relationship of antagonism and violence. It never gets beyond this dialectic situation. Through Firdaus' view, the female identity can be vindicated only by reproducing the same structures of power she denounces – with the sole difference of reversing the male-female positions in the hierarchy.

As a result, the reader of *Woman at Point Zero*, just like the first-person narrator, witnesses a slow deconstruction of the autonomous, responsible, and positive thinking subject. Divested of moral agency, all characters, whether male or female, wallow in the mire of moral inertia and bestial existence, whose primitive and repulsive character is reminiscent of the logic governing George Bataille's critique of western idealist philosophies as well as utilitarian capitalism. In Bataille's view, these philosophies try to conceal the reality of the *body*, which he counters with the myth of the "acephalic man" (a headless mythological figure) who represents a body untrammelled in its behavior by the dictates of the head, as a symbol of "conscious authority" and that stands for "one of the servile functions that gives itself as, and takes itself to be, an end."²⁴ Furthermore, it is a body that has no dignity or glory.

Firdaus' skeptical tone, as a narrative frame, is troubling and alienating to the reader because it leaves us with a similar feeling, and because of its immediacy and lack of embeddedness in an external perspective – something that makes it significantly different from Zahra's narrative in *Year of the Elephant*.

Year of the Elephant

Instead of being mediated through a univocal source that creates a cyclic and absolutely deterministic universe, the world of *Year of the Elephant* is communicated through a multiplicity of discourses that do not compete for control. Rather, they seem to be related in complex and complementary relationships. Contrary to the image of a socially ostracized woman, *Year of the Elephant* foregrounds Zahra's story as one of *integration*. Using Zahra, a marginal social character from humble peasant origins, as the story's main narrator delivers a powerful social criticism. It is also very significant that Zahra is represented not as a passive female character, but as one who joins guerilla fighters during colonization through activism and support of men who are fighting, while risking her life. Her account of an incident during which a colonial man's shop was burned is very telling of her spirit of dedication to a higher cause, and her resolve to challenge traditional female roles that kill the intellect and the vitality of female identity:

After I helped burn Pinha's shop, missions came to me one after another, missions I carried out alone. If my grandmother had returned from the dead and seen me setting shops ablaze, delivering guns, and smuggling men across borders, she would have died a second death. Had all that even been in my own imagination, let alone my grandparents? May God have mercy on them, they prepared me for a different life, but fate made a mockery of their plans.²⁵

Yet Zahra's voice seems to be more in negotiation with, rather than seeking to dominate, other discourses of authority and power. Nor does Zahra's redefinition of herself seek to be actualized by destabilizing society's foundations, because her social criticism is done from within. Her personal account is a significant moment of constructing her selfhood at the crossroads of a variety of discourses in an attempt to redeem her identity – an identity that has been profoundly challenged after the personal crisis she undergoes as a result of her divorce.

Just like Firdaus' story, Zahra's is triggered by a personal calamity. The main difference is that her account has the character of spiritual awak-

ening and maturation. We can even argue that it is a moral parable of faith. Zahra's moralistic discourse creatively illustrates the power of dedicated and devoted faith according to her spiritual heritage. Contrary to the world of *Woman at Point Zero*, where this heritage is linked in absolute terms with institutional laws and naively equates legal and theological discourses with the *Male*, Abouzeid's novel stresses the *autonomy* of the realm of this spiritual heritage – as a sphere of *Truth* – from human laws. The narrator soberly dissociates this spiritual heritage from religious malpractices and associated deviant interpretations. Finally, she fosters spirituality's unifying and constructive value in the face of personal and collective trials during colonization, and of the palpable moral decadence and spiritual barrenness associated with the rise of a postcolonial elitist and egoistic bourgeoisie.

Zahra's story is consciously cast in a discourse that is both juxtaposed to and transcends the institutions of which the particular male authority figures she criticizes are representative. Thus, it is very significant that she tries to redefine the intimate space of her identity as something that identifies itself with the autonomous sphere of God/Truth, an act that liberates her from the constricting and partial institutional laws that serve the male's interests. For what is at stake in Zahra's identity crisis is her spiritual self's integrity and not, strictly speaking, her immediate physical needs for food and shelter engendered by her divorce. Although this spiritual aspect overrides the actual physical pain and suffering, it is intimately tied to it and inconceivable without it. The body in her text seems to be the medium through which the soul and spirituality, in general, are cultivated.

From the very first pages of the novel, Zahra's identity crisis is defined in spiritual terms. She starts telling her story from the moment of her divorce, and then travels back in time to her happy childhood through the eventful period of her involvement with national resistance movements as a young woman. She reminisces on the change in people's sense of national unity in the aftermath of independence and on her sense of betrayal by her companions in the struggle for independence, including her husband. Interestingly, Zahra is not mourning her physical deprivation of the basic elements that secure a dignified existence (e.g., food, clothes, shelter, or money) as a result of her divorce. Rather, her crisis is expressed in terms of psychological weariness and disarray caused by a sense of betrayal on the part of something to which she had given up and sacrificed her whole self, including her body.

Zahra has just been divorced by a husband with whom she had joined other compatriots and shared with them years of solidarity and active participation in the national resistance movement during colonization. He sends her back to her home village in the Berber Atlas mountains with nothing but the following dismissing words: “Your papers will be sent to you along with whatever the law provides.”²⁶ The shock of Zahra’s personal disaster and her faltering spirituality at this point are described in the following opening lines from her story:

I come back to my hometown feeling shattered and helpless. Yesterday, anxiety was tearing me apart, but today despair is tormenting me even more. I wanted certainty, but when I found it, it only pushed me over the brink into total emptiness [...]. I have lived without ever seeing the man I married, the man I didn’t know until yesterday. And here I am home again, a stranger among strangers [...]. For whom or for what would I have returned? [...] Anyway, I’m not afraid and have no desire for revenge. I feel neither sorrow nor hatred, nothing but a vague awareness that something inside me has been extinguished, has finally come to a halt [...]. The thought of death attracts me, but I lack the will to die.²⁷

When Zahra finds her way to the room she inherited from her father, her sole property, she discovers that it has a tenant. It is highly significant that her only refuge in the entire village is the shrine in which she spends her first night after being betrayed and abandoned by her husband, and while waiting for the tenant to move out. The *shrine* is one of the important landscape features of Zahra’s home village, for it represents its identity and history. It is mentioned in conjunction with her reminiscence on the folkloric rituals from musical processions in the streets, traditional marriage rituals, to old and eccentric village women’s gossip and witchcraft, to childhood bliss in her grandfather’s backyard, through observing seasonal changes in nature, to the village’s daily rhythm of life structured around prayer times, and finally the dignified image of the sheikh reciting the Qur’anic verses in the shrine. All of these aspects of life in Zahra’s village represent fixed points of reference that shape the villagers’ subjectivities.

Upon her arrival at the shrine, Zahra sees the familiar face of her family’s spiritual mentor, the sheikh, who becomes in turn her spiritual mentor in the story. They engage in a significant dialogue that seems to bring up heterogeneous discourses evoked by their discussion of such things as black magic, nationalistic discourse, male abuse of power, and God’s concept of justice. Their dialogue moves toward a point of *transcendence*, or Divine Truth, where all the contradictions and excesses of other discourses

are neutralized and resolved. When the sheikh finally inquires about the reason for Zahra's divorce, she replies:

I don't eat with a fork. I don't speak French. I don't sit with men. I don't go out to fancy dinners [...] I'm nothing but an old coin fit only for the museum shelf. Their positions in society now call for modern women.²⁸

The sheikh's image inspires serenity and his voice reassures Zahra, who describes him as a "fountain of goodness in an age when even preachers are adulterers and drunkards."²⁹ Thus it is no accident that their encounter is the only evidence and manifestation of her intimate self. Zahra's words reflect a sense of realism and a sad awareness that we are not in a perfect world, although good still exists. This moment of disillusionment and reconciliation has a historical significance in that it symbolizes a mood of disenchantment experienced by those members of the colonial resistance who look with nostalgia to the Moroccan precolonial past in the aftermath of the euphoria and ardent nationalism that accompanied independence.

Zahra blames her divorce on the changing spirit of people after independence. Divorce as a moment of personal dividedness in Zahra's situation symbolically represents a "social divorce" seen in the disintegration of group solidarity and collective will after independence. It is a symptom of general chaos in the collective consciousness. Thus, on the one hand, her spiritual crisis parallels her society's cultural schizophrenia, as it finds itself between vestiges of colonial social hierarchies and values and, on the other hand, the national consciousness and enthusiasm generated by moments that brought the people together.

Zahra's words above, in response to the sheikh's question about her divorce, are therefore highly significant. They echo the moments in the text when she deplores the fading away of collective memory: "Lord, would we ever forget what France was doing to us? How quickly we forgot!"³⁰ The fading away of collective memory is defined in Abouzeid's autobiography, *Return to Childhood*, in connection with secularism's rise and what she sees as postcolonial cultural scars and disfigurement, of which she accuses her own father in the closing words to her autobiography:

I am amazed that my father has supported ideas such as those of the opposition. How could an intellectual, modern Muslim like my father have deserted eternal and basic principles that emanate from his nature, his roots, his culture, and his identity, principles that were formulated by God? How could he have adopted the secular principles imported from the West?³¹

Ideas of modernity and democracy are associated in Zahra's worldview not with secularism, but with a certain notion of responsibility, critical consciousness, and the protection of individual rights and principles of equality before the law – all of which are central issues in the postcolonial novel in general.

Using Barakat's categories, *Year of the Elephant* seems to fall between "novels of exposure" and "novels of revolutionary change." Zahra's voice as a critical device projects the novel as a text that relates to "novels of exposure." Insofar as it features a marginal female social figure as a protagonist who defines her individual struggle and salvation in the same way she views social salvation, *Year of the Elephant* relates to "novels of revolutionary change." However, it differs from them in that its viewpoint does not reflect a *collective consciousness*, but rather the potential for a collective consciousness that takes upon itself the task of reforming the social order. Zahra's conscious journey is a painfully lonely one. We do not see her realizing her transformed self in spaces that bear markers of social or political organization. Her personal salvation is tied to the shrine's intimate and personal space.

Her narrative, though, has the potential to transfer the shrine's liberating experience to social experience. This is seen in her critique of the change in social structures, which is heralded by a rising bourgeoisie and its selfish opportunistic mode of living, profiting from the relative chaos in which colonial rule left the country – a chaos she blames upon spiritual impoverishment. Zahra sadly and bitterly realizes that: "Change [after Independence] came, but only for a handful of people."³² Among these are people she had known personally and with whom she shared solidarity in pain during colonization. Some of these are her friends Roukia and her crippled husband Faqih, who accumulated their wealth from donations given to help resistance members. Zahra remains baffled in front of this new rising class' excesses and selfish indulgences, which reflect their preoccupation with and pursuit of prestige, living in luxurious government houses, and all the privileges that come from working in government administrations.

Her critique of the bourgeoisie recalls Franz Fanon,³³ Martinique's revolutionary writer, and his penetrating psychological analysis of the postcolonial situation. Her social critique also recalls Fanon's disavowal of the discourses of national consciousness associated with a liberal and intellectual bourgeois elite, which he saw as ineffective. Fanon attributes this state of affairs to the "scandalous enrichment, speedy and pitiless, of this [bour-

geois] caste” whose contact with the masses is so “unreal” and therefore is at the root of the lack of social and political cohesion.³⁵

In the face of this divided social scene, Zahra conducts her lonely journey of salvation by reinventing and cultivating a positive model of female identity. This journey does not sever the ties linking her to the sociopolitical community, but rather valorizes their importance by exploring the richness of spirituality as a potential organizing and founding principle of the community’s unity. Looking for a job that could help her sustain herself is only one instance of that type of difficult journey, although, ironically, the job she finds as a cleaning lady in the French cultural center only represents her isolation from social positions of power that could make her dream of a true social reform come true.

The positive model of female identity is also a product of the text’s transcendent moments created through central religious motifs and images. Examples of these abound, such as when she describes her role as a guerilla fighter in a way that associates her with the religious heroic female figure of Asma, the daughter of Abu Bakr, Prophet Mohammed’s companion and father-in-law. When the two men were hiding in a cave from enemies sent to assassinate the Prophet, Asma would smuggle food to them.³⁶ This is also seen when Zahra evokes childhood memories in nature inspired by the Qur’anic description of Adam’s experience in the Garden, when he learned the names of things from God:

Continuing along the path, we would come to a stream over which my grandfather had built a crude bridge of logs and mud bricks. The sunken garden gate appeared to date back to the days of Adam and groaned like a saw when we opened it. Finally, the garden appeared, first in dappled tones of green, then in an explosion of blooms. From these leaves and flowers I learned the names of different kinds of trees.³⁷

The novel’s ending with Zahra’s celebration of the “spiritual change [she] had undergone”³⁸ suggests that a similar path of change on a social level is possible through hard work and a dynamic involvement anchored in faith and spiritual principles of unity: “I want to believe that life is not full of the wicked alone, and that everything is new and different and as good as it can be.”³⁹

Zahra’s identity is clearly projected here as an entity that is realized through integration with something other than and beyond herself: the group, the country, the language, and the spiritual heritage. Interestingly enough, her family does not seem to have an equally determining power for her, as she does not seem to have found in it a positive model as an adult

(with the exception of her grandfather). But on the whole, Zahra's discursive articulation of selfhood foregrounds a positive model of *female* identity in the sense that it works through unity and inclusion instead of division and exclusion.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can see that both El Saadawi and Abouzeid use marginal female social figures as a critical device to expose social flaws, hypocrisy, vice, institutionalized violence against woman, as well as social injustice toward them. These seem to be associated with dominant discourses of "truth." In El Saadawi, the marginal figure of the prostitute undertakes such a task, but is consumed in a negative and ultimately self-destructive relationship with truth and power. Death is the only reality beyond, and therefore a better alternative in the protagonist's view. In other words, it is a relationship that identifies truth with the mechanisms of power and denies its independence and freedom from institutional control. By trying to define a feminine experience that opposes the male view of it, El Saadawi goes to the opposite extreme and seems to reconstitute a new dichotomy. She evidently replaces one negative male definition of the feminine by a new one, since both definitions never get outside the male–female dialectic situation.

On the other hand, Abouzeid's novel advocates an ethics of *dynamic* faith, where faith becomes the locus of the regeneration, growth, and transformation of consciousness. It is an ethics of a dynamic faith, of responsibility and active participation, and a production of the conditions that reinforce principles of life and spiritual plenitude in their widest sense. It is an ethics through which the self transcends the male-female dichotomy, and thus the limitations of the body and existential experience as reference points in explaining and ordering Muslim human reality. For it projects itself into a higher dimension of being, a transcendental point acceded by faith, while being rooted firmly in and shaped by its most immediate physical, social, and economic reality for the ultimate purpose of reconfiguring new modes of social relations and spiritual realizations.

Notes

1. Nawal El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero* (New Jersey: Zed Books Ltd., 1983, 1996).
2. Leila Abouzeid, *Year of the Elephant*, trans. Barbara Parmenter (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989).

3. Elizabeth Fernea, "Introduction" in *Year of the Elephant*. Fernea points out in her well-documented introduction the scarcity of scholarship produced on Moroccan literature, and how even in a work such as Len Orzen's *North African Writing* (London: Heinemann Educational, 1970), which covers nine North African figures, only two are Moroccan. None is a woman, p. xi.
4. Fatima Mernissi, *Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1992). Mernissi reverses the general misleading association between women's subjugation and fundamentalism by contending, on page 161, that "[r]educing women fundamentalists to obedient bystanders is to badly misunderstand the dynamics of the religious protest movement. [...] Even if at the beginning women recruits were there to be manipulated, in many Muslim countries today – for instance, Iran and Algeria – we see the emergence of a virulent feminist leadership within the fundamentalist parties."
5. Halim Barakat, *The Arab World: Society, Culture, and State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 216.
6. *Ibid.*, 210.
7. *Ibid.*, 216.
8. *Ibid.*, 229.
9. El Sadaawi, *Woman*, ii.
10. *Ibid.*, 100.
11. *Ibid.*, iv.
12. *Ibid.*, 11.
13. *Ibid.*, 6.
14. *Ibid.*, 13.
15. *Ibid.*, 100.
16. *Ibid.*, 41-42.
17. Fadwa Malti-Douglas, *Men, Women, and God(s): Nawal El-Sadaawi and Arab Feminist Poetics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 52.
18. El Sadaawi, *Woman*, 45.
19. Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 178.
20. *Ibid.*, 56.
21. *Ibid.*, 55.
22. Malti-Douglas, *Men, Women, and God(s)*, 207-8.
23. *Ibid.*, 208.
24. Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. and ed. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 199.
25. Abouzeid, *Year*, 38.
26. *Ibid.*, 1.
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*, 9.
29. *Ibid.*, 11.

30. Ibid., 42.
31. Leila Abouzeid, *Return to Childhood: The Memoir of a Modern Moroccan Woman*, trans. Leila Abouzeid and Heather Logan Taylor (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 93.
32. Abouzeid, *Year*, 54.
33. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963).
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid., 166-67.
36. Abouzeid, *Year*, 39.
37. Ibid., 15.
38. Ibid., 68.
39. Ibid., 70.