

Sexual Politics and Narrative Strategies in Modern Arabic Literature

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This paper¹ investigates the relationship between language, gender and identity as an introduction to its study of the nature of the literary discourse of women writers in modern Arabic literature. It offers a triadic typology of the development of feminist awareness in the Arab world and posits a homological relationship between this typology, changes in class background of the writers and their perception of national identity. Like any typology, particularly those concerning a body of discourse developed in a relatively short period of time, there are areas of overlapping and coexistence. The paper illustrates its theoretical claims by a close reading of three novels. In its practical part, the paper demonstrates the coexistence of the three distinct phases of female consciousness by deliberately selecting novels written in one decade, the 1980s, yet representing three different discourses. The change from one type to another does not constitute a clean break with all the qualities of the previous one; thus works containing heterogeneous qualities exist. But despite this interflow from one phase to another it is clear from the literary examples that the three different types are distinct in politics and textual strategies. The changes in female perception proceed from the passive to the active and from the simplistic to the sophisticated and those of narrative strategies correspond to them.

¹ It is important to state at the beginning that sexual politics in the title of this paper is a term concerned with the ways in which gender power relations are constituted, reproduced and contested, and not with sexuality or the erotic. Feminist literary theory has aptly shown that gender is not merely a biological difference but a more comprehensive concept inscribed into all aspects of humanity from everyday language to the sub-conscious. Gender is both a socially constructed concept and an ideological force which are at work in various types of discourse.

Gender, Language and Identity

Gender and identity are socially constructed, culturally conditioned and verbally coded in various forms of discourse. Post-structuralist theory suggests that the common factor in the analysis of social organization, social meaning, power relations, and individual consciousness is language. Language is the place where actual and possible forms of social organization are defined and contested. It does not reflect an already given social reality, but rather constructs social reality for us; it is not an expression of a unique individuality, but rather shapes the individual's subjectivity in ways which are socially specific.

The assumption that subjectivity is constructed implies that it is not innate, not genetically determined, but socially produced Unlike humanism, which implies a conscious, knowing, unified, rational subject, post-structuralism theorises subjectivity as a site of disunity and conflict, central to the process of political change and to preserving the status quo (Weedon 1987:21).

Neither social reality nor individual subjectivity have fixed intrinsic meanings. They acquire meaning through language, for

different languages and different discourses within the same language divide up the world and give it meaning in different ways which cannot be reduced to one another through translation or by an appeal to universally shared concepts reflecting a fixed reality. For example, the meanings of femininity and masculinity vary from culture to culture and language to language. They even vary between discourses within a particular language, between different feminist discourses, and are subject to historical change (Weedon 1987:22).

This makes language truly social and a subject for political struggle, for the manipulation of language is in a way a manipulation of both social and subjective reality. As for gender, the sexes stand in relation to each other not as two distinct entities, but as two different, often foreign, languages.

Michel Foucault has elaborated in his concept of the 'discursive field' the vital relationship between language, social institution, subjectivity and power. He proved that the manipulation of language through conflicting discourses, patterns of dominance and marginalisation, and systems of values and canons of taste has social and political ramifications (Foucault 1972:21-76). The manipulation of language is nowhere clearer than in narrative discourse in which a literary text becomes an arena for debating, undermining and subverting the prevalent discourse and consequently the social and political order underlying it. This is so because the polyphonic nature of narrative text allows characters to correct, rewrite, or appropriate the views, and with them the inherent ideologies of other characters. With

the advent of modernistic sensibility, the waning of authorial control and the prevalence of fragmentation enhanced this process and turned narrative into an effective weapon in the war of the sexes.

The literary text itself is enmeshed in an elaborate network of intertextuality which engages the reader in an attempt to map the dynamic relationships by which the writer at hand has willfully recoded visions elaborated in other texts. The rubrics of narrative grant the writer a great freedom in this domain for it can easily subvert prior literary vision by placing it in a new hierarchical order. The organization of discourse in a narrative text reflects the awareness that within any given discursive field not all discourses will carry equal weight or power. There is a constant process of marginalisation of certain discourses in order to invigorate and enforce others, and narrative discourse is the literary text that records this delicate process in action. This is the reason for selecting Arabic narrative discourse for our inquiry into the complexity of the interaction between gender and both national and individual identity in order to elaborate the various modes of female consciousness and the development of their literary manifestations.

Patriarchy and Logocentrism

Arabic narrative discourse has long been recognized as a reflection of the many political, national and social issues of the Arab world, but it has rarely been studied as a battleground for the war of the sexes that have been waged through narrative since the rise of its various narrative genres at the turn of the century. The persistent neglect of this issue participates in consolidating the status quo and positing it as the unquestionable norm. Modern Arabic narrative discourse has therefore played a significant role in shaping, influencing and modifying the existing power relations between men and women in society. In a patriarchal society the literary discourse reflects the social structure the dynamics of which are based on a power relationship in which women's interests are subordinated to those of men. In general patriarchy is a social order which structures norms of behaviours, patterns of expectations and modes of expression, but in Arabic culture it has acquired a divine dimension through the religious ratification of the supremacy of men enshrined in the *Qur'an*.

The divine is masculine singular and enforces the patriarchal structural order which permeates all forms of social interaction. The divinity bestowed on men also encompasses the masculine language of the *Qur'an*, and slights the feminine language of everyday life. The gender vision inherent in the diaglossia of Arabic language has not been studied, nor has the equation between the written and the literary and the system of connotations inherent

in the linguistic cannon been investigated. The logocentrism of the written language is closely related to the patriarchal nature of society on the one hand, and the masculine character of the traditional establishment on the other. In its pure literary form, poetry, or in its other scholarly, linguistic and theological endeavours, classical Arabic literature has been predominantly male controlled and oriented.

The strong patriarchal nature of both Arabic society and its traditional literary establishment made it extremely difficult for women's discourse to emerge within the tradition. Although there is the exceptional poetess, such as al-Khansā' (575-664?), her poetry was sanctioned by the establishment because she devoted her powerful elegiac talent almost entirely to immortalise men, her two brothers, Mu'āwiyah and Ṣakhr, and urge her tribe to revenge them. The other major work which is presumably written by a woman or largely from a female perspective, *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* (The Arabian Nights), has been excluded from the literary canon and banished into the marginal domain of folk and oral literature, and even banned on occasions. It is ironic that such a rich and sophisticated literary work has been omitted from the literary canon for centuries, yet survived and continued to play a significant role throughout the Arab community from Iraq to Morocco and from Syria to the Sudan.

In their seminal book, *La Jeune Née*, Hélène Cixous and Cathrine Clément (1986:65) have emphasised the solidarity between logocentrism and patriarchy which they call phallogentrism in Christian tradition, but the condition in Arabic is even stronger, for such association is enshrined in the scripture. The emergence of modern narrative discourse in Arabic literature spelt the end of this association and of the male monopoly of literary discourse. It is therefore not surprising that women were among the most active pioneers of modern narrative discourse. At the turn of the century, 'Ā'ishah al-Taymūriyyah (1840-1902), Zaynab Fawwāz (1860-1914), Farīdah 'Atiyyah (1867-1918), Zaynab Muḥammad, Labībah Hāshim (1880-1947) and Malak Hifni Nāṣif (1886-1918) were among the active pioneers of narrative fiction. This tradition continued throughout the twentieth century until the contribution of women writers gained currency and prominence in contemporary Arabic narrative and ended the old male monopoly on literature.

Another factor which undermined the sacred alliance between patriarchy and logocentrism is the diaglossic nature of Arabic narrative. From the early stages of the genesis of modern Arabic narrative discourse, diaglossia has been one of the major topics of controversy concerning the language of narrative fiction². The dichotomy between the formal literary language and the spoken vernaculars in it has only been debated and

² For details see Sabry Hafez (1992).

explained in literary terms. It is more than a mere linguistic or even literary issue for it involves a major restructuring of ideological and cultural representations. It is therefore no mere coincidence that the strongest opposition to the use of the spoken vernacular in literary text was waged by the traditional establishment who perceived it as a threat to both the social order and literary canon. They were aware that the acceptance of the vernacular in the literary cannon amounted to relinquishing the monopoly of the male over the literary realm. They may also have suspected the secular nature of narrative discourse and by extension its democratic and liberating force.

Yet the emergence of modern narrative discourse as a new mode of literary expression has been effectively employed to consolidate the status quo and enhance the solidarity between patriarchy and logocentrism. Like its Western counterpart, Arabic narrative was used to enforce the patriarchal social order by enshrining its values in the major works of its genres. The trilogy (*Bayn al-Qasrain*, Palace Walk, 1956, *Qasr al-Shūq*, The Palace of Desire, 1957, and *al-Sukkariyyah*, Sugar Street, 1957)³ of Najīb Mahfūz is the patriarchal novel par excellence. Its hero, the charismatic Ahmad 'Abd al-Jawwād, is both the father of the family and the pivot of the narrative world. From his loins all the protagonists emerge, and from his social and business activities other characters are brought into being. He is the prime mover of the text and the source of its life and in relation to him every character in the novel is hierarchically placed. Narrative structure, characters' motivation and spatial presentation are all mobilised to reflect and enforce the patriarchal order. Although the novel contains a detailed and vivid account of everyday life and interaction between characters from the middle and lower strata of society, its long text contains no trace of colloquialism. Its concern with the linguistic purity of its *fusha* (formal and standardised Arabic) is inseparable from its interest in the immaculate portrayal of the patriarchal order.

Feminist Literary Typology

Since the early stages of the genesis of modern narrative discourse, women writers tried to undermine the solidarity between logocentrism and patriarchy. The question of language is closely linked to both gender and identity and the female writers' attempt to express their gender difference led to the development of certain syntactical mutations. They played an impor-

³ The trilogy is now available both in English and French translations. See Mahfūz (1956, 1957a, 1957b).

tant role in forging a new mode of linguistic expression which proved to be more felicitous to narrative discourse. They also exploited the secular and liberating qualities of narrative discourse to express their own views and enable feminine values to penetrate and subvert the patriarchal order that contains them. Feminist literary theory has strongly objected to the fitting of women between the lines of male tradition, and strove to free itself from the linear absolutes of male literary theory (Showalter 1985:131). It developed a different typology for the study of women's literature which is not dependent on systems of classification derived from male dominated writing. In order to study the literature of women writers in Arabic it is also necessary to develop a system of classification evolving from the study of their work and not imposed on it by expecting it to conform to the male one. Since no exhaustive study of women's writers novels in Arabic has been undertaken, I shall adopt with some modifications a typology developed by a feminist critic working on the English women novelists.

Feminist literary theory proved that women writers' attempt to comprehend and express their sexual difference generates an interesting subculture which manifests many of the symptoms of subordination and even forceful subjugation. In her study of the female literary tradition in the English novel, *A Literature of Their Own*, Elaine Showalter demonstrates how the development of this tradition is similar to the development of any literary subculture.

First there is a prolonged phase of imitation of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, and internalization of its standards of art and its views on social roles. Second, there is a phase of protest against these standards and values, and advocacy of minority rights and values including a demand for autonomy. Finally there is a phase of self-discovery, a turning inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity. An appropriate terminology for women writers is to call these stages: Feminine, Feminist, and Female (Showalter 1977:13; Moi 1985:56).

In her study these three phases seem to be neatly divided into equal historical periods, each of which lasts forty years⁴. Each period was compartmentalised and socially, historically as well as literary distinct.

During the feminine phase, dating from 1840 to 1880, women wrote in an effort to equal the intellectual achievements of the male culture, and internalise its assumptions about female nature In the Feminist phase, from about 1880 to 1920, or the winning of the vote, women are historically enabled to reject the accommodating postures of femininity and to use literature to dramatise the

⁴ Her book came out in the 1970s and although the last phase was open to the present and the future, it seems from the works studied that it is roughly forty years.

ordeals of wronged womanhood. . . The purest examples of this phase are the Amazon utopias of the 1890s, fantasies of perfected female societies set in an England or America of the future, which were also protests against male government, male laws, and male medicine ... In the female phase, on-going since 1920, women reject both imitation and protest—two forms of dependency—and turn instead to female experience as the source of an autonomous art, extending the feminist analysis of culture to the forms and techniques of literature (Showalter 1985:138f)

This typology corresponds to Julia Kristeva's conception of the various stages of the feminist consciousness and struggle for identity. She rejects both biologism and essentialism as explanations of gender and argues for a historical and political approach that perceives the development of the feminist struggle as a three-tiered process

which can be schematically summarized as follows. 1 Women demand equal access to the symbolic order Liberal feminism Equality 2 Women reject the male symbolic order in the name of difference Radical feminism. Femininity extolled. 3 Women reject the dichotomy between masculine and feminine as metaphysical (Moi 1985:12).

As various states of female consciousness, Kristeva's scheme is as relevant to the classification of women's narrative discourse in Arabic as the triadic typology of Showalter. Kristeva's is not a chronologically based system, thus allowing for a greater degree of overlapping and coexistence. This overlapping is particularly relevant to the experience of Arab women writers, for it explains why certain texts contain a mixture of qualities some of which belong to one phase and others to the following one. The presence of certain dominant features of a specific type does not necessarily result in the exclusion of all others. Dominance is a key word in differentiating between various types of feminist literary discourse.

Homology and Interaction

The typology of modern Arabic narrative discourse is homologous rather than identical to that of its Western counterpart. Its similarity with its Western counterpart is considerably modified by a constant interaction with its socio-cultural context. Although the three types elaborated by Showalter can be identified in Arabic literature they do not fall neatly into equal historical categories. The experience of Arabic women novelists demonstrates that the condensation of these phases gives rise to an interdependence between them in a manner that makes each phase necessary for the emergence and development of its succeeding one. The completion of one or more of these

phases by one national literature does not make it possible for another to overlook it even if the latter is aware of what the former underwent. For a long time, the marginalisation of women's writing hindered the flow of their experience from one literary tradition to another. Although the first phase of feminine writing in Arabic literature started after the end of its English counterpart in 1880, it was inevitable for Arab women writers to go through it even if some of them were aware that the work of their English counterparts had finished with this stage and were engaged in the second one.

The brevity of the period in which Arabic narrative went through these three different phases created a certain overlapping in presentation and literary qualities, but the three phases remained as distinct and different in Arabic as they were in English and other literatures. In addition to the general continuum of any subculture, these three phases in the development of the female literary tradition in Arabic narrative were more stages of female consciousness in Kristeva's sense than autonomous periods of literary development. As such they were linked to two main factors: the change in the class background of the female writers and subsequently their formative experience, and the nature of the collective perception of the national identity. The perception of gender and/or individual identity is generally linked to the wider perception of the national-self and its place in the surrounding world. This forges the individual and the social into a unitary condition which seeks to articulate its tenets in a particularised literary language capable of formulating alternatives. The change from one phase of women's literary discourse to another is both a manifestation of the wider socio-political conditions and an active force in the process of formulating them.

The homology and the interaction between these three sets of changes, the social, political and literary is part of a wider change in the literary sensibility from the traditional sensibility with its metonymic rules of reference to the modernistic one based on metaphoric rules⁵. Elsewhere, I have elaborated the nature of this change in the literary sensibility in modern Arabic literature, the transition from the first to the second and the different sets of rules of reference underlying each one (see Hāfiz 1990:116-183). What is relevant here is to mention that the first two phases of the feminine and feminist discourse in Arabic literature take place within the rubrics of traditional sensibility in which the literary text is perceived as an extension to or reflection of external and largely hierarchical reality. While the third one, the female discourse, is part and parcel of the modernistic sensibility which emphasises the autonomy and internal cohesion of the literary text and minimises its dependence on exterior absolutes or hierarchised reality. The

⁵ For a detailed discussion of the difference between metonymy and metaphor in the typology of literature, see David Lodge (1977).

two different sensibilities provide each phase with its literary context, enable the reader to react to its products with the analogous interpretative responses and explain certain overflow of characteristics between the two first phases. They also locate women's work in a wider framework of secular Arabic discourse and dispense with simplistic arguments of imported feminism. The relevance of Showalter's and Kristeva's schemes is that they can be used as a starting point, then qualified and modified to suit the new context.

Feminine Literature of Imitation

The prolonged phase of 'Feminine' writing characterized the output of the upper class Turco-Circassian women in Egypt and the Levant. This period is characterised by what Margot Badran calls 'invisible feminism' (see Badran 1977 & 1990), a condition of minimum awareness of gender difference and an inarticulate demand for the bare essentials of feminine rights. The awareness of gender difference is normally confined to the areas recognized by the patriarchal order and indispensable for the preservation of its authority and hierarchical allocation of roles and space. The portrayal of the delights of domestic bliss and the joy of its protective enclave played an active role in enforcing the confinement of women to the harem and even raised it to the status of a desirable utopia. Women's presentation of the life in the harem has the authority of first hand experience and was more effective in communicating the patriarchal message to other women.

The books produced by women writers of this early period circulated in the harem and as a result centred around the experience of their prospective readers who fitted congenially in the patriarchal system. It is natural that the titles of these rudimentary novels were either of a highly traditional and moralistic nature (such as *Natā'ij al-Ahwāl fi al-Aqwāl wa-l-Af'āl*, 1888; *Mir'āt al-Ta'ammul fi al-Umūr*, 1893⁶; *al-Durr al-Manthūr fi Tabaqāt Rabbāt al-Khudār*, 1895; *Husn al'Awāqib*, 1899⁷ and *al-Fadīlah Sirr al Sa'ādah*⁸) or of an entertaining and sentimental quality (such as Zaynab Fawwāz's *al-Hawā wa-l-Wafā'*, 1897⁹ and *Mudhakkirāt Waṣīfah Miṣriyyah*⁹, 1927, a work of seven volumes some with sensational titles like

⁶ These two maqāmah type narratives are by 'Ā'isha al-Taymūriyyah

⁷ These two autobiographical narrative works are by Zaynab Fawwāz.

⁸ This is one of the titles of the seven volume work of narrative by Zaynab Muḥammad.

⁹ This series of narratives are by Zaynab Muḥammad who probably was one of the maids in the Khedival Court. They all appeared around the 1920s and the last in approximately 1927.

Bārīs wa-Malāhīhā 'Ashiq Ukhtih, *Daḥāyā al-Qadar*, *Ākhirat al-Malāhi*, *Awāḍif al-Ābā*', etc.¹⁰). The rudimentary narrative of these women writers was not much different from that of their male contemporaries in its social or moralistic outlook or in its language and textual strategies.

This soon changed with the nationalistic stance of Hudā Sha'rāwi and others at the beginning of the twentieth century and their articulation of the need for women's participation in the country's struggle for independence. They called for granting women certain 'essential' rights so that they could manifest their support for the patriotic cause. The female role in the nationalistic struggle in which the polarisation was between a monolithic national 'self' and a foreign 'other' was completely subordinated to that of the male. The whole period was distinguished by the idealization of the beauty of the country and the romanticisation of patriotism. In this stage national interests and with them national identity were seen as monolithic and abstract, a vision that was totally in harmony with the prevalent patriarchal world view of the predominantly bourgeois elite. The interests of women were not distinguished from those of men nor were the concerns of the rich from those of the poor. This reveals that one of the reasons for the failure of the nationalistic project at the time is the inherent contradiction in its quest for liberation; namely the desire to liberate the male from foreign domination but subject the female to the domination of the patriarchal system.

It is interesting that the feminine literary discourse which prevailed in Egypt and the Levant in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the early period of the twentieth are currently echoed in Arabia and the Gulf. This highlights the uneven literary development of various parts of the Arab world, and the coexistence of the three types of writing in the contemporary literary scene. In this type of feminine discourse (written by Wardah al-Yāziji, Wardah al-Turk, Zaynab Fawwāz, Faridah 'Atiyyah and Labībah Hāshim in Lebanon, and 'Ā'ishah al-Taymūriyyah, Malak Hifni Nāṣif (Bāhithat al-Bādiyah) and Zaynab Muḥammad in Egypt at the turn of the century and recently by Laylā al-Uthman and Thrayyā al-Baqṣami in Kuwait, Fawziyyah Rashīd and Munūrah al-Faḍīl in Bahrain, Salmā Maṭar Sayf in UAE and Ruqayyah al-Shabīb, Maryam al-Ghāmīdi and Latīfah al-Sālim in Saudi Arabia), female writers reproduced not only the world view inherent in the predominantly masculine discourse, but also adopted its version of the passive, docile, selfless female. In their works the value system encoded in the hierarchical social order which places the female at the bottom is adopted without questioning and even praised for its concern and protection of the meek, helpless female.

¹⁰ Zaynab Muḥammad's novel also exploited nationalistic feelings. Part six of the novel was titled *ilā Rahmat Allah Yā Za'in al-Sharq* with a clear reference to Sa'd Zaghlūl.

The narrative works of this type are but a variation on the patriarchal discourse in which the nature and social role of women are defined in relation to norms which are clearly male. Gender and identity are perceived within the confines of the patriarchal order and their narrative representation is structured in a manner that serves the preservation of the prevalent hierarchy. Yet the female writers of this type, though conforming to the male views and canons were marginalised and their names were almost purged from the literary history of modern Arabic literature. The marginalisation of their writing is both a consequence of the gender relations which have structured women's absence from the active production of 'important' or 'serious' literature, and a direct result of their own discourse which made their writing no more than variations on the main patriarchal discourse whose strong presence renders any variation unimportant. Yet these imitative variations on the prevalent male discourse were the necessary first step without which subsequent development would not have been possible. It accustomed both the reader and the patriarchal establishment to the phenomenon of women writers. It also earned the women writers respect, a necessary prerequisite for taking their writing seriously, and more importantly made the 'invisible woman' clearly visible. Despite its conformity, or rather because of its ability to appease patriarchal fear by adopting its vision, it took a major step towards subverting the male monopoly on discourse.

Feminine Literary Discourse

The feminine narrative discourse is represented in this study by the novel of the Kuwaiti female writer, Laylā al-'Uthmān, *Wasmiyyah Takhruj min al-Bahr* (Wasmiyyah Emerges from the Sea, 1986). In this novel one finds a clear example of the internalization of the male perspective and its faithful reproduction by a female writer. Like the writers of the first phase of feminine discourse in Egypt and the Levant, Laylā al-'Uthmān's work¹¹ appeared within the context of establishing a new national literature. Before

¹¹ She started her career as a journalist in 1965, then turned to the short story in 1974. Her first collection, *Imra'ah fi Inā'* (A Woman in an Urn) appeared in 1976. Then came *Al-Rahīl* (Departure) in 1979, *Fi al-Layl Ta'ti al-'Uyūn* (At Night Sirens Appear) in 1980, *Al-Ḥubb lah Suwar* (Love has Many Forms) in 1982 and *Fathiyyah Takhtār Mawtiahā* (Fathiyyah Choses Her Death) in 1984. Her first novel, *Al-Mar'ah wa-l-Qitah* (A Woman and a Car) appeared in 1985 and was followed by *Wasmiyyah Takhruj min al-Bahr* in 1986.

1970, Kuwait had no narrative literature of any significance¹², and al-'Uthmān's narrative work can be seen as part and parcel of the process of establishing a new literary discourse capable of shaping a specific identity¹³. Although the work of the Kuwaiti writers started when the main stream Arabic narrative has moved away from the traditional sensibility towards the modernistic one, their work as well as that of the rest of the Arabian peninsula is produced within the rubrics of traditional sensibility and according to its dynamics and metonymic rules of reference.

Wasmiyyah Takhruj min al-Bahr is no exception. It aspires to reflect the reality of a changing Kuwait and the impact of this change on social interactions, roles and gender. The dominant narrative voice in this novel is not that of its heroine, Wasmiyyah, whose name is enshrined in the title, which reflects a male stereotypical vision of the female as a siren emerging from the sea, but of the hero 'Abdullah. The narrative oscillates between first and third person, in the former 'Abdullah speaks of his internal feelings and anxieties and in the latter he narrates the rest of the story and presents other characters. The identification between 'Abdullah's personal perspective and that of the third person narrative enhances his authority and presence in the absence of his direct voice. This creates a textual equivalent of the stereotypical male whose women conform to his system of values and ideals regardless of his physical absence. The prevalence of his point of view throughout the narrative, and particularly when he is not involved in the narrated event, is a manifestation of the all embracing patriarchal order whose control over the world of narrative is seen as the natural norm.

The prevalence of the perspective of the male hero throughout the narrative is ostensibly intended to glamorize the female, but results not only in the male's manipulation of the narrative point of view, but also in structuring the absence of the female and denying her any narrative voice. The heroine of the text is the epitome of the silent woman who has internalized the male belief that the silent female is by definition a chaste one, for verbal intercourse leads inevitably to sexual intercourse. The idealization of the female through the eyes of the male narrator is a strategy that allows the text to reproduce in its heroine the desired female; the one

¹² A few rudimentary forms of narrative writing appeared in periodicals in the late 1940s and early 1950s, particularly the work of Khālid Khalaf, Hamad al-Rujayb, Fāḍil Khalaf and Fahd al-Duwayri. But these early pioneering work did not develop into mature narrative work and the 1960s witnessed the dwindling of these early attempts

¹³ The group of Kuwaiti writers who participated in this process all started their work in the 1970s, such as Sulaymān al-Shaṭṭi, Sulaymān al-Khalīfī, Ismā'īl Fahd Ismā'īl, Laylā al-'Uthmān and others. For a detailed historical account see: 'Abdullah (1973), Ismā'īl (1980) and Ghallūm (1981).

that internalizes the male perception of the feminine 'right' code of conduct, and enables the narrator to be the active agent who inspires and controls her action. The ultimate presence of the heroine is mainly achieved through her complete absence, her death by drowning which identifies her with both the sea and the siren of the title.

Her wilful death is presented as the conclusive feat of submission to the behest of patriarchy, for she intentionally sacrifices herself in order to preserve intact the supremacy of the patriarchal code of conduct. Her death is enveloped in certain ambiguities regarding its voluntary or accidental nature, yet the structuring of the event which led to her death made it inevitable to select her rather than 'Abdullah for this fate. This is enforced by both her initiative to hide underwater and her failure to cry for help when she was engulfed by the waves to demonstrate her devotion to preserving the order that dictates her annihilation. Her reward for such selfless surrender to the patriarchal order is inscribed into every aspect of the narrative to allow her absence to prevail over the presence of 'Abdullah's wife who shows less than total capitulation to his vision. The absent Wasmiiyyah becomes the ultimate object of desire while the present stereotypical nagging wife is presented as an objectionable obstacle in his quest for his desire.

At one level the novel contains a reproduction of an inverted form of the stereotypical female who uses her beauty to snare the rich and/or powerful male, for it tells the love story of the poor 'Abdullah and the rich and beautiful Wasmiiyyah. They were brought up together as children, the childish playfulness soon turned into adolescent passion that was curbed by the divisive social order. But this is far from what Kolodny calls 'inversion' which occurs when the stereotyped traditional literary images of women are being turned around in women's narrative works either for comic purpose, to reveal their hidden reality, expose their underlying prejudice, or connote their opposite (see Kolodny 1973:75-92). For the ostensible 'inversion' of the traditional stereotype has merely a sentimental connotation and conforms to the patriarchal conceptions. The inversion of the traditional tale serves the patriarchal control, for it enables the poor male, 'Abdullah, against the dictates of social class, to prevail over the rich female, Wasmiiyyah, in a manner that allows the patriarchal order to prevail over social class.

This is confirmed through the allocation of space in the novel, for while a whole variety of space is open to the male narrator, the female is confined to the limited domain of the home. This is not seen as a prison, but as a haven from the devilish heat of the outside world and the contamination of its experience. Indeed her departure from its protective habitat exposes her to danger and leads to her death. In addition, the association of the innocent love of childhood with the nostalgic past of pre-oil Kuwait that led a simple existence of fishing and tribal life is posited as a paradise lost. This

is contrasted with the materialistic ways of post-oil society which is strongly divided by class consciousness. The loss of innocence is seen as the cause of corruption and disharmony, but the only way to regain the lost paradise is through death. Although one can detect a Freudian implication in positing death as the ultimate object of desire, as Nirvana or the recapturing of the lost unity and the final healing of the split subject, the presentation of the action in the moment of the hero's drowning longing to attain unity with his lost beloved offers conflicting implications. With its emphasis on the return to the happy days of yore, nostalgia has been identified as an antifeminist textual strategy proclaiming the return to the past when men were men and women were women¹⁴.

Another aspect of this nostalgic resistance to change in the novel is the representation of the present as degenerate, corrupt and ugly. The hero's acceptance of its rules is posited as a loss of authenticity and masculine supremacy, for the woman who calls for its acceptance is presented as the nagging unattractive wife devoid of sympathy, love or understanding. She has no feeling for her husband, and is presented in the text as the devil incarnate (al-'Uthmān 1986:8). Despite her association with the present, she remains nameless, faceless and characterless, and her time, the present, is depicted as the time of 'gushes of black gold which emit greed, hatred, malice and endless hostility' (al-'Uthmān 1986:52). Her presence is purged from the text, whose core is the remembrance and glorification of the past. Her opposing character, Wasmīyyah, is not only named and her name is enshrined in the title, but she is also beautiful, tender, loving and understanding.

In nostalgic writings opposition past/present accumulates crucially important meanings. As we have seen, the term past is attached to other terms that make of it a locus of authenticity. So vivid does this constructed past become that the rhetorical strategies used to create it seem to disappear ... the mythic past becomes real (Doan & Hodges 1987:9).

This is what the novel aspires to achieve, to make this mythic and highly imaginative version of the past real by purging the text from any real representation of the present.

Feminist Inversion of Codes

The second and most prolific phase is that of 'Feminist' narrative discourse of protest against the standards and values of the patriarchal discourse and

¹⁴ For a detailed study of this, see Doan and Hodges (1987).

its implicit system. In this phase which extends from the 1930s until the 1970s, women writers realized that literary discourse plays a significant part in the social and political life of their nation. They also became aware of its function as a propagator of a 'world view' and hence of its vital role in passifying the oppressed or inciting them to revolt against their lot. For without altering women's perception of themselves and their role, it is difficult to motivate them to undergo the required change. This coincided with the spread of education, progressive urbanization, the acceleration of social mobility and the rise of the middle class and its wide participation in the political quest for national identity. It is therefore natural that the majority of women writers of this phase are descendants of middle class families who felt, with the euphoria of independence, that their chance had come to play a significant role in the development of their country. The old aristocratic class of female writers who perceived of literary activity as a luxury faded away to create room for the aggressive and aspiring middle class. The end of the colonial era in the Arab world and the emergence of independent states changed the nature of the nationalistic issues, and brought about a new agenda and a class and gender polarization. The romantic nature of the nationalistic cause of the past when the monolithic national 'self' was contrasted with the colonial 'other' was over, and in its place a number of contending political visions competed for public attention, and gender issues advanced to the foreground.

One of the major contradictions of this phase is that the more the 'Feminist' writer rebelled against the prevalent norms, the more attractive she became to the ruling establishment which was in the habit of co-opting the propagators of change. This was so because the newly established nationalist regimes were in need of a programme of social change which attracted wide support and, as a result, identified with the 'Feminist' call for reform. The main characteristic of the 'Feminist' narrative discourse of this phase, namely its desire to subvert patriarchal control of the distribution of roles, was seen by the nationalistic ruling establishments as directed against the old order, hence analogous to that of the new regimes. The association with the establishment gave the 'Feminist' discourse a boost, and enabled it to consolidate its grip on the educational establishment in many parts of the Arab world¹⁵. This resulted in opening new venues for women and enhanced their place in the literary world. The very number of women writers published in this period, throughout the Arab world and particularly in its old centres in Egypt and the Levant confirms this, from *Sahir al-Qalamawi* and

¹⁵ This reached its peak in the Tunisia in the 1960s where it was translated into legislations and succeeded in institutionalising many of the gains of the women's movement, thanks to the strong support of Bourguiba's regime.

'Ā'ishah 'Abd al-Rahman to Laṭīfah al-Zayyāt, Ṣufī 'Abdulla, Jadhibiyyah Ṣidqī and Nawāl al-Sa'dāwī in Egypt, Samīrah 'Azzām, Laylā Ba'albaki, Imīlī Naṣrallah, Laylā 'Usayrān, Kūlīt Khūrī and Ghādah al-Sammān in the Levant and Nāzik al-Malā'ika and Dīzi al-Amīr in Iraq. Yet many of their texts reveal a peculiar tendency to invert the prevalent patriarchal order without a clear understanding of the dangers involved. The inversion of an unjust order retains the inherent contradictions of its original system, albeit in an inverse form. They are recuperating the ideology of the system which they set to repudiate. The critique of a male-dominated vision becomes entangled in the metaphysical framework of male supremacy it seeks to dismantle.

This is evident in al-Sa'dāwī's (1987) novel, *Suqūṭ al-Imām*, (The Fall of the Imam, 1988), which relates the story of an illegitimate woman who discovers that her real father is the Imam, a political leader who exploits religion for his own ends. The heroine, Bint-Allah, recalls the story of her problematic relationship with her father while she watches his assassination and the ceremonial preparations for his official funeral. The novel's structure is a structure of equivocation, selective and controlled by both the account of the public assassination, the preparation for the official funeral and the flashes of subjective memory which punctuate the current events and provide them with their historical dimension. The history aspires to inscribe in its subjective account both the education of the 'female' in the face of adversity and the general history of the corrupt political establishment of patriarchy.

On one level of interpretation, the novel is a female *Bildungsroman* which elects to maximise the obstacles and constraints in the path of its female protagonist in order to elaborate the process of her cultural and sexual formation. The heroine is not an ordinary young woman, but the Imam's illegitimate daughter. She was wronged by her father, who left her mother and married another who shares with him the fruits of his success and the reins of power. The heroine and her mother are relegated to poverty and persecuted if they dare to reveal their relationship with the Imam. For a 'feminist' project, the wronged woman is an appropriate point of departure and the plot enhances this by making the very identity of her heroine the problematic issue in the novel. The revelation of the heroine's identity poses a threat to her father, the Imam, and his corrupt authority. The power of the Imam, or in other words of patriarchy, is based on the suppression of the identity of his daughter, of the 'woman'. The conflict between the woman's desire for self expression and the realisation of her identity and the institution of patriarchy is given added weight by making the Imam the ultimate symbol of power and the seat of political, cultural and religious authority.

In order to posit her heroine as the counter power in this multidimensional conflict and give her added religious significance, Sa'dāwī presents her heroine as a female version of Christ. The text insists on calling

her Bint-Allah (literally 'the daughter of God'), and endows her mother, who was a combination of a prostitute and a belly dancer, with martyrdom. But the fact that her father is a false God and her mother is no virgin Mary weakens the author's argument, for in order to sustain her role as a saviour, the novel needs to sever her relationship with her father, the false God. Yet suppressing her relationship with her father is exactly what the novel's patriarchal institution seeks to achieve. The conflict between these two strands in the novel's structure undermines its potency and highlights the equivocal nature of its project. The novel's challenge to patriarchy requires a reinforcement of the heroine's bonds with her father, while the added religious significance demands the weakening of these bonds. This structural equivocation is a product of the author imposing her ideology on her narrative. In her introduction to the novel, Sa'dāwī (1987:9) discloses her unease in naming her main character in a manner that demonstrates her imposition of certain ideas on the novel's structure. It is indeed a bright 'feminist' idea to invert the story of Christ and posit the heroine as his modern female version. It is also viable to raise abused women and prostitutes to martyrdom. But to bring this from the realm of vague intentions into solid narrative realisation capable of imparting a symbolic layer of meaning requires a poetically creative and skilled presentation capable of integrating this into the narrative structure.

Although the very orientation of the narrative makes the daughter's the prevalent voice in the text, the author fails to articulate the motivations for her war against the Imam, whose recognition she neither seeks nor respects. Setting the daughter against her father and making her a major threat to his corrupt establishment requires very sensitive treatment and an elaborate process of education sentimentale of which there is little in the Fall. The novel pays little attention to its heroine's social and cultural formation, so when she launches her crusade against the Imam she is lacking in motivation and credibility. As a result, the political and ideological objectives of her campaign against the Imam appear to be surgically implanted and the reader is asked to accept them as natural. Her feelings and views of her father lack the complexity of a love-hate relationship which one expects in a situation like this. One may surmise that the author's antipathy towards the Imam, and all male characters, is designed to help her heroine justify her behaviour towards them. The text has many obnoxious men, and a few less obnoxious women, but there is little interaction between all these characters to generate the dynamics of conflicting interests and clashing visions. The mere cumulative effect of the juxtaposition of situations and characters speaking in turn, dictated by narrating the selective past from the viewpoint of the present, fails to create the desired unity and the dynamics of opposing perspectives.

In addition, the Imam's despotic nature and fanatic views are portrayed as a product of an inferiority complex, for the Imam is not only

obnoxiously vulgar, contorted, cruel and stupid, but he is also from a low and poor background. The author seems to equate poverty with immorality and wealth with good manners and solid ethical values¹⁶, a position that is incompatible with much of 'feminist' ideology. This hierarchical concept of organisation is not confined to the characterisation of the Imam but permeates the structure of the whole novel. Ordering social value and status on a hierarchical scale contains implicit patriarchal connotations, despite the novel's strong attack on patriarchy. Although the feminist's ultimate aim is the dismantling of the patriarchal system, Sa'dāwi's thinking, in its hierarchical and binary structure, is identical to that of patriarchy. As Cixous and Clément (1986:65,64) demonstrate,

organisation by hierarchy makes all conceptual organisation subject to man. Male privilege, shown in the opposition between activity and passivity which he uses to sustain himself. Traditionally, the question of sexual difference is treated by coupling it with the opposition of activity/passivity, ... culture/nature, day/night, head/heart, intelligible/palpable, logos/pathos, man/woman always the same metaphor.

When it comes to man/woman opposition which Hélène Cixous sees as the core of the patriarchal binary thinking she insists on putting it on the page in its vertical and hierarchic form

Man

Woman

rather than in the horizontal juxtaposition which may imply opposition between equals. Hierarchy is the other side of the same coin of binary patriarchal thinking, and the two permeates every aspect of Sa'dāwi's novel.

On another level of interpretation, the Fall is a political allegory based on the Sadat era and made of thinly disguised characters which lack inner motivation and have little symbolic value. In spite of his weakness and abhorrent dispositions, the Imam—read the 'man'—, has miraculously managed to attain power and employs a group of people who are more intelligent and better educated than he is to help him run a highly corrupt state apparatus. In addition he has succeeded in establishing a personality cult that enables his universally hated regime to survive after his death. This is so because most characters derive their credibility neither from the apt characterization, nor from the internal cohesion of the plot, but rather from their reference to real figures in Egypt's recent political history. The fictional

¹⁶ Here the text perpetuates the worst part of regressive morality which sees the poor as despicable, sleazy and the source of all evil, and associates good values with the rich.

world of the Fall strives for plausibility and derives it from its constant reference to extrinsic data. For those who cannot relate its events or characters to their historical referents, the *Fall* appears as an ambiguous fantasy, full of repetition and cardboard characters, and marked by a burdensome authorial presence which generates a heavy sense of didacticism and reproduces one of the worst aspects of patriarchal narrative.

The author's dedication of the novel and her preface attempt to suggest to the reader how to receive its events, and hints at both its political and feminist interpretation. Indeed Doris Lessing in her comments on the dust jacket responds to this and declares it 'a tale of women suffering under harsh Islamic rule'¹⁷, pointing out both its feminist posture and anti-Islamic stance. However, selecting bad patriarchs does not help Sa'dāwī's anti-patriarchal stance, for it is easy to trivialise her attack by arguing that good patriarchs do not behave in such an abhorrent manner. In this respect, the author resorts to easy solutions in supporting her argument, including the falsification of evidence. One such case is her use of the frame story of *The Arabian Nights* (al-Sa'dāwī 1988:53), where she rewrites the story in a manner inferior to the original.

On the artistic plain, the author allows her different characters to speak in turn in first person narrative giving us their own versions of certain aspects of the story. Unfortunately, they all speak with a unified language, the language of the author and not that of the character, which takes into account neither their different socio-psychological backgrounds, nor their opposing ideological stances. What unfolds in the Fall is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single objective consciousness, but a group of fragmentary characters who are objects of authorial discourse, and not subjects of their own directly signifying discourse. This calls into question the author's motivation for using the device of first person narrative and the logic of using such a demanding technique for a task that can be achieved by resorting to the usual functions of characterization and plot development. Although the allegorical nature of the text, and its ideological implications necessitate a rich dialogue between the various arguments and viewpoints, Sa'dāwī's discourse, in the *Fall*, is of a monological rather than a dialogical nature in the Bakhtinian sense of the term.

Unlike the polyphonic narrative of Dostoevsky which unifies highly heterogeneous and incompatible material, the compositional principle of Sa'dāwī's narrative is monophonic which reduces the plurality of consciousness to an ideological common denominator which is excessively simplistic. Sa'dāwī's road to literary creativity is paved with good causes

¹⁷ See the English translation of El-Saadawi's *The Fall of the Imam* (1988).

and honourable intentions. She aspires to achieve justice and wants to fight for her sisters' rights, equality and self determination in a traditional and highly patriarchal society. But her one-dimensional approach to her data impoverishes her narrative. Introducing her new ideas to such a conservative milieu warrants certain exaggerations and didacticism which are by their very nature incompatible with literary presentation. This leaves her critics in a quandary and has led some of them to advise her to confine her writing to militant theoretical prose. Luckily hers is not the last word in the Arab women's discourse, for there is a third group of younger female writers whose work is gradually acquiring attention and respect.

Sophisticated Discourse of Self-Realisation

The third type of 'Female' narrative discourse is the discourse of difference which expresses itself in a rich variety of different techniques. It emerged in the work of recent years as a reaction to the prevalent 'Feminist' perceptions that reduced the women's movement to a bourgeois egalitarian demand for women to obtain power in the present patriarchal system. It sees the feminists as women who crave power and social legitimization that grant them respect and a place in the prevalent but faulty system. Instead, the new female writers, such as Hanān al-Shaikh¹⁸ and Hudā Barakāt¹⁹ in Lebanon, Radwā 'Āshūr²⁰, Salwā Bakr²¹, Iqbāl Barakah²², I'tidāl 'Uthmān²³ and Saḥar Tawfiq²⁴ in Egypt²⁵, 'Alyā' al-Tābi²⁶ in Tunisia and 'Āliyah Mamdūh²⁷ in

¹⁸ See her novels *Hikāyat Zahrah* (1980), *Misk al-Ghazāl* (1988) and *Barīd Bierut* (1992).

¹⁹ See her novel *Hajar al-Dahik* (1990).

²⁰ In her novels *Hajar Dāfi* (1985), *Khadījah wa-Sawsan* (1989) and *Sirāj* (1992).

²¹ In her novels *Maqām 'Ajiyyah* (1986), *al-'Arabah al-Dhahabiyyah lā Tas'ad ilā al-Samā'* (1991), and *Wasf al Bulbul* (1993).

²² In her novels *Wal-Nazāl ilā al-Abad Asdiqā'* (1971) and *Laylā wa-l-Majhūl* (1981).

²³ In her two collections of short stories *Yūnis wa-l-Baḥr* (1987) and *Wash al-Shams* (1992).

²⁴ In her collection *An Tanhadir al-Shams* (1985).

²⁵ There are several other Egyptian writers such as Hālah al-Badri, Ni'māt al-Bihairi and Sihām Bayyūmi to mention but a few

²⁶ In her novel *Zahrat al-Sabbār* (1991).

²⁷ In her novel *Habbāt al-Naftālīn* (1986).

Iraq, are developing a fascinating narrative discourse of self-discovery. It is concerned with granting the voiceless female a mature narrative voice that is truly her own. Most of the writers of this new discourse come from a background of voicelessness; such as the poor shi'i community in the south of Lebanon or the working and peasant class in Egypt, Tunisia and Iraq.

Their subtle, shrewd and artistically mature techniques for subverting the prevalent order result in the most interesting female discourse in the Arab world, for it offers its discourse in the context of changing national realities and is careful not to alienate the other gender. The main feature of this reality is the disintegration of the old nationalist project and the emergence of new forms of traditionalism. The rational approach is rapidly making way for a new sectarian thinking whose rising forms of belligerency use the sacred to consolidate the shaky old order and manipulate a religious discourse to serve the patriarchal system. Fundamentalism resorts to the static religious discourse and fixed 'view of the world' to avert the danger of a dynamically changing society. Narrative discourse, by its very nature, is both secular and liberal and is capable of developing its counter strategies. In the varied and highly sophisticated narrative of these 'female' writers, the textual strategies capable of undermining the rising discourse of traditionalism and furthering the secular are numerous²⁸. One of these strategies is the glorification of the female; a literary strategy which aspires to break the male's monopoly on the divine and provide the sacred with a feminine aspect. This also humanizes the sacred and reflects a fundamental change in the perception of the female in the culture.

In the few works of this phase, the female writer has become increasingly aware of the inability of the 'Feminist' discourse to disentangle itself from what Hélène Cixous calls 'patriarchal binary thought' and its hidden male/female opposition with its inevitable passive/active evaluation as its underlying paradigm. The binary oppositions are heavily implicated in the patriarchal value system; and the new female writers posit a multiple heterogeneous *différence* against its scheme of thought. This is evident in Salwā Bakr's (1986) novel *Maqām 'Atiyyah* (The Shrine of 'Atiyyah), in which the narrative structure itself is based on the multiplicity of testimonies that make such *différence* capable of reflecting the two categories of the different and the deferred in Derrida's work. From the very title of the novel one becomes aware of the multi-layered structure, for the word *Maqām* in

²⁸ The limited scope of the present article does not allow a detailed study of the richly diverse contribution of this group; only one example serves to give the reader a feel for their attainments. Their work deserves a more detailed investigation which I have attempted elsewhere and continues to be the subject of subsequent work. In Arabic, I have written several articles on their work, particularly that of Radwā 'Āshūr, Hanān al-Shaikh, 'Alyā al-Tābi'i and Salwā Bakr.

the title means both 'shrine' and 'status', and refers in addition to the musical structure which is inherent in the piece with its variations on the theme and final coda. The second word 'Atiyyah' is the proper name of the heroine, a common Egyptian female name, as well as a reference to the age old concept of the female being created from man's rib and 'given' as a 'present' to the male. The passive meaning built in the Arabic morphology of the name, 'Atiyyah, is counterbalanced by it's active grammatical role in the *Idāfah* structure in which the name, 'Atiyyah, is the cornerstone of the grammatical structure of the title. This is enhanced by the selection of an androgynous name, 'Atiyyah, which is used in Arabic for both men and women; a feature which the text is keen should not escape the readers' attention, and often extends this androgynous nature to the heroine²⁹.

The narrative structure uses the polyphony of narrative voices neither to establish the various facets of truth nor to demonstrate its relativity, but to defer any application of patriarchal binary thought. The text posits narrative discourse against that of the media, seen as one of the main tools of what Louis Althusser calls 'the ideological state apparatus' and jettisons all the preconceived notions about the prescribed position of the female in the society. The novel resorts to a significant technique which acknowledges the absence of the woman and turns it with the dexterity of narrative treatment into a sign of its overwhelming presence. The main character of the novel, 'Atiyyah, is deliberately absent, as if to conform with the prevalent social norm, in an attempt to investigate this norm by taking its tenets as its point of departure. The primary concern of the novel is to exorcise this absence and turn it into a stark form of presence, superior in quality and significance to that of the omnipresent male. By taking absence as its point of departure the novel equates the writing of the story of the deceased 'Atiyyah with that of realizing the potential of the narrator of the story 'Azzah, in an attempt to suggest the vital connection between rewriting the story of their foremothers and reshaping that of the present generation.

The recourse to the technique of the novel within the novel (dating back to *The Arabian Nights* and which is one of the oldest forms of Arabic narrative structure) establishes the strong affinity between the novel and its deep rooted popular tradition. This narrative structure with its inherent intertextuality enhances the rich dialectics between the frame and the enframed stories on the one hand, and that of fiction and reality on the other. From the outset the text establishes both the perspective of narrative and the function of writing as well as its ideological stance *vis-à-vis* the

²⁹ The text refers several times (e.g. on pages 21,22,27,36,40) to various character—from her father to her husband—who perceived her as a man and to the different incidents in which she acted like one.

establishment. The story is presented as the fragments of a suppressed text divided, like the body of Osiris, among various voices and scattered over a temporal plain that spans Egypt's modern history from the national revolution of 1919 to the present. It is also seen as the attempt of its collector (the narrator and young journalist 'Azzah Yūsuf who is clearly an anti-establishment figure) to give meaning to her life after the death of her husband the Egyptian archeologist, 'Alī Fahīm. For the piecing of the various parts of 'Atiyyah story corresponds to the emerging and evolving love story which results in her marriage to the archaeologist and carrying his promised son.

The multiple identification of 'Azzah and 'Atiyyah with the ancient Egyptian Goddess Isis involves the reader in the relational network of the text and its intertextual implications. Although 'Atiyyah can be seen as Isis in relation to her own family, she can also be seen as a female version of Osiris in her relationship with 'Azzah. The identification with Isis is in constant interaction with its presentation as the female version of Osiris, for the inversion of roles in the 'Female' stage of writing is achieved without alienating the woman from her female self. This is enhanced on the text's ideological plane by positing the popular belief with its feminine synthesizing nature, in which the ancient Egyptian creeds are blended with the tenets of Christianity and Islam and integrated in their practice, against the dogmatic male version of Islam with its inherent fundamentalism. The shrine of 'Atiyyah is a continuation of that of ancient Egyptian gods while the religious opposition to it stems from both the male establishment that has been stripped of its virility by the rising and more potent fundamentalism and the media. Yet the popular beliefs in which many religious elements blend and harmonize, and which penetrate the testimonies of both male and female characters in the text, are victorious over the discredited official ones.

The novel succeeds in creating a textual equivalent of the social conditions in which sexual politics are structured around the suppression of the female voice, yet is able to write this voice into the very texture of the narrative. The presentation of narrative discourse constructs the textual space in a manner reproducing the structural order of patriarchy, while at the same time subverting its very authority. It gives the male voices the function of starting and ending the story, and squeezes the females, who are outnumbered by the males, into the middle. Men start the narrative and end it, ostensibly confident of retaining control, and leave the squabbling over its middle for women. Yet by cutting up the continuity of the male voice, and giving the female the interruptive role, it is possible to achieve the real inversion of the prevalent order by turning its structure against itself. In addition, grouping the female voices in the centre of the narrative sequence assures the continuity of their voices and the centrality of their position

within the hierarchy of the textual order. Unlike the 'Feminist', the 'Female' writer does not aspire to cancel out the male voice, or to subject it to the rubrics of feminist oppression, but to create a new order in which the two genders relate a different story of the female.

These three phases or more precisely three types of narrative discourse—feminine, feminist and female—correspond to similar phases in the development of the quest for and perception of national identity in a manner that reveals the interaction between the national consciousness and the position of women in society, and the impossibility of realizing the aspiration of a nation adequately without assiduous realization of the full potential of both genders.

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