

**Revolutionary Spirit and the Quest for a Real Self,
Emancipation and Dignity in Nawal El Saadawi's Two Women
in One**

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This research paper studies the protagonist's quest for a real self, emancipation and dignity in Nawal El Saadawi's Two Women in One. It investigates how El Saadawi depicts Bahiah and Saleen as revolutionary subjects who rebel against patriarchal gender rules and despotic authorities. But it mainly concentrates on Bahiah's constant quest for a real self, emancipation and dignity in a sexist edifice and underscores the impediments she encounters. It seeks to identify the events that contribute to the formation of her integrated self. An attempt is made to scrutinize Bahiah's quest for an authentic self, emancipation and dignity through exploring her resistance to the androcentric culture, her relationship with her family, her interaction with people of her age, her tense relation with her community, her bond with her boyfriend, Saleem, her understanding of love and sexuality, her perception of national freedom, her commitment to fight the despotic authorities, the alienation she suffers in the course of her journey and the role of narrative and introspection in texting the self. It shows the protagonist as an intrepid revolutionary fighter for freedom and equality. The study also casts light on El Saadawi's views on the root causes of women's oppression. The article ends with asserting the success of the protagonist's journey towards the goal of constructing her real self, emancipation and dignity and the need to rethink the Islamic discourse to filter out the man-made patriarchal rules and the traditional norms that perpetuate women's oppression in an attempt to rectify the vicious treatment meted out to women in the androcentric Arab societies. It establishes the heroine and her creator as revolutionaries per excellence

ABSTRACT:

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Nawal El Saadawi was born on October 27, 1931 in a small village called Kafr Talah in Qalulbyya in the Egyptian Delta. She is an Egyptian feminist writer, a doctor and women rights activist. She has attended the Medical School in Cairo. She is known for her controversial writings which question despotic authority and patriarchal power that permeates Egyptian society. In 1982 she has founded Arab Woman's Solidarity Association, an international organization dedicated to "lifting the veil from the mind" of the Arab women (Douglass 11) through holding seminars that discuss gender relations and women's statues. She was dismissed from the Ministry of Health in 1972 after the release of her controversial work, Women and Sex. Because of her political views, activities and audacity to advocate women's liberation and oppose the tyrant authorities, she was incarcerated in September 1981 and often silenced. Many of her works have been banned in Egypt and sometimes in other Arab countries for her scathing criticism of social, religious, political and traditional systems that oppress wo/men. She has been accused of apostasy and political radicalism. She received death threats from Islamic fundamentalists. The Egyptian government develops hostility towards her writings and activities. Hence, she was compelled to flee Egypt in 1992 and go to

North Carolina where she taught a course on “dissidence and creativity” as a visiting professor at Duke University in Durham. She returned to Egypt in 1997. But she does not shy away from dealing with taboos and unearthing the decadence of the government. She continues her revolution against the oppressive forces that targets wo/men.

El Saadawi began writing in 1957 and has written prolifically. She writes in Arabic but a large number of her works have been translated into English and other languages. Her literary works reflect the social, political and cultural reality of the Egyptian society. They give readers a penetrating look into the world of gender oppression, political corruption and social neglect from the standpoint of a female character. They received literary acclaim from a number of critics all over the world. She is considered as one of the Arab world’s most prominent writers. She is an internationally acclaimed feminist and the most successful Arab woman writer in the West. She is “a consistent, brave voice in the face of the powerful patriarchal structures of Egyptian culture” and that “her writings are responsible for exposing these very structures and their effects on the lives of women” (Zucker 239). She has published several works, both fiction and non-fiction, which portray the oppression of Arab women and the resultant effect of such dehumanization on women's psyche. She is a committed writer who uses her works to reflect upon social, cultural, economic and political forces that have a disturbing effect upon on her society, especially on the oppressed and the marginalized women. Her works reflect her firm resolve to challenge the dominant rusting state apparatus which cripples people's lives and to expose the taboos in her society. She strongly repudiates the inherited values that aim to perpetuate women’s oppression. She plays an iconic feminist role to emancipate

Arab women from the fetters of sexism and capitalism. She shows tremendous courage in addressing the thorny issue of woman sexuality in her conservative society and to air issues pertaining to taboo and religion which others prefer to overlook. She exerts her efforts to fight social hypocrisy to the point of paying the exorbitant price, namely imprisonment and exile. Indeed, she consistently displays remarkable strength and fortitude throughout her imprisonment, exile and throughout her long crusade for advocating Arab women to attain liberty and equality.

The study is confined to investigating the select novel from feminist perspective. It is an analytical study, substantiated by textual quotations. It is theoretically informed by both Islamic discourse and the feminist ideology. It attempts to critically examine the protagonist's quest for an authentic self in an androcentric culture through exploring her resistance of the androcentric culture, her relationship with her family, her interaction with people of her age, her tense relation with her community, her bond with her boyfriend, Saleem, her understanding of love and sex, her perception of national freedom, her commitment to fight the oppressive authorities and her struggle for obtaining an identity of her own in relation to the collective national identity. An attempt is also made to explore the role of narrative and introspection in texting the self.

This topic is chosen for its significant relevance to the present situation of Arab wo/men who are still oppressed by patriarchy and despotic authorities. Hence, it is hoped that this study will mobilize its readers and raise their awareness around the persistent predicament of Arab women and the suffering of men under the dispensation of autocratic rulers. Moreover, the search for self, emancipation and dignity is a topic that still prompts researchers from all cultures to ponder over.

Wo/men identify themselves with this captivating topic and experience a strong sense of gratification.

The novel *Two Women in One* was published first in Arabic in 1975 and was translated into English in 1985. It embodies El-Saadawi's "concern with an overarching patriarchy whose roots are social, religious and political [which] combines with her treatment of gender and the body in a formula that is nothing short of feminist" (Malti-Douglas 6–7). It is a semi-autobiographical novel because it amalgamates fiction and reality. It "reflects upon her [El Saadawi] life during her study in the Faculty of Medicine at Cairo University" (Badran and Cooke 107) and "embodies her political ideas" (She, *Breaking the Silence* 98). But it is clear that the novel "gives women more voices for sexuality than her [El Saadawi] autobiography" (She, *Breaking the Silence* 107). It is widely read as feminist text that explicates the compelling story of the protagonist and critiques the Egyptian androcentric culture that maims and vilifies women's lives and incarcerates them in its stygian prison. Also it can be read as a novel of social and political concerns. It explores the relationship between the female individual and the society. It epitomizes the daunting reality of women in Arab societies: the fragile status of women's rights and the discordant relationship between men and women that creates a rift in the Egyptian society. It deals with a middle class woman who strives to attain an authentic female self and gain political rights. It unmasks in an implicit manner the protagonist's thoughts about clitoridectomy and the damaging effects of this brutal act on the psyche of the victims. It delves into the life of Bahiah and unearths the repercussions she had suffered because of her fight against patriarchy and sexism. Bahiah is overwhelmed by a strong desire to chisel an identity of her own in a sexist set-up. Her predicament is augmented by

the Egyptian phallocentric culture that restricts her life. But she does not shy away from her struggle for self-affirmation. She persists in her crusade for self-realization and self-affirmation.

El Saadawi's dedication of her novel is intertwined with the heroine's desire to entrench an identity of her own. The novel is dedicated to the young readers, more precisely to the young women, exhorting them to resist patriarchal values that incarcerate them in the murky dungeon of sexism and preclude their yearning for education, dignity and identity. The dedication reads: "to all young men and women; that they may realize, before it is too late, that the path of love is not strewn with roses, that when flowers first bloom in the sun they are assaulted by swarms of bees...if they turn their tender petals into sharp protruding thorns, they can survive among hungry bees" (6). It is an embodiment of El Saadawi's revolutionary spirit that instigates Arab women to strive for emancipation and equality. Bahiah is determined to fulfill her potentialities and abilities in order to survive and build her real self. She is aware that self-realization demands trouncing patriarchal underpinnings that pervade her society and deform her individuality.

The novel begins with "It was the fourth of September" (*Two Women in One* 7, hereafter only the page numbers is indicated). This suggests that this day is important in the life of Bahiah Shaheen for two reasons: first it was her birth day, and second she felt that on that day "something big would happen to her. She had the same feeling every fourth of September. Each year she felt that something big would happen again on that day, something even bigger than being born" (9). This persistent feeling shows that she is haunted by an obsession to discover her real self. It heralds the psychological awakening and transformation that will inform

her personality and lead to constructing her real self. This moment marks the beginning of her introspective journey.

In her arduous journey towards the goal of constructing her real self, Bahiah deploys effective strategies that raise her awareness of her plight in a patriarchal society. She scrutinizes herself as a part of self-critical policy through introspection. Narrative techniques and introspection are interwoven in a way that allows the narrator to articulate the protagonist's internal monologue. Introspection is presented through the third person omniscient narrator who delves into the consciousness of the protagonist and unearths the events and the experiences the protagonist has undergone. He discloses the social context and the political backdrop that affect her struggle, the internal turmoil she endures and the external obstacles that deter her quest for a real self. The narrator triggers and ushers her introspection that empowers her to search for her authentic self. She begins to identify her defects and hates her polite acquiescent voice. The narrator states:

She did not like Bahiah Shaheen. She could see her defects all too clearly. She hated that polite obedient voice. She was irritated by that placid look which did not see things, but allowed them to be reflected from her, like a watery surface. She hated that nose which was sufficiently upturned. She despised that paleness, whose real cause she knew. It was the paleness of a complexion drained of blood by fear, a fear that people seek to hide. (37)

Here, Bahiah introspects and comments on how she perceives herself vis-à-vis the collective identity of her community. She understands that the self related to the collective, which her family wants her to cling to, has grave defects. These defects refer to the expected behavior of women according to the established gender roles.

The “Obedient voice ” refers to the unquestioning conformity of women to the preconceived roles of their society. The “placid look” refers to the passive role women were expected to play. The “fear ” refers to the individuals' feeling that they are different from the collective and the collective cannot represent their individuality and aspirations. Bahiah's fear is the fear of discovering her real self. She “is afraid her of real self, of that other self dwelling within her, that devil who moved and saw things with the sharpest powers of perception” (37-38). She also introspects and realizes that there is a lack in her life, as well as in others; sometimes she appears determined resisting people who try to curb her freedom. Sometimes she appears undecided, hindered, and lost. She “was afraid that by a magic touch she would become somebody other than Bahiah Shaheen, somebody who was her real self” (36). She "had never known exactly who that real self was. But she had always been sure she was not Bahiah Shaheen, hard-working, well-behaved medical student, the girl with the light brown skin standing hesitantly before the door ” (36-37). This denotes that Bahiah’s probing of her true self involves conflict with how others see her. Her awareness of their sexist perceptions of her provokes her to ignore them. Yet, confronting her emptiness and fear can be viewed as part of the unfolding of her growth, “It was a violent consuming desire to experience the peak of danger to its very end, that we might be rid of it forever” (46). In her attempt to gain her true self, Bahiah is quite prepared to discover her buried true self and proceed to her destiny: She “knew that another will was lying in wait for her, ready to seize the slightest opportunity to destroy her...” (48). However, danger and fear serve as an incentive that encourages her to overcome the social inhibition that curtail her freedom.

The title of the novel typifies the protagonist's rebellious bent. It divulges her splintered self. It suggests that there are two conflicting selves dwelling within Bahiah's psyche: the obedient and diligent student whose propriety is above reproach in the eyes of her family, and the rebellious Bahiah whose desire for identifying her real self is boiling against the conventional life of her society. The novel depicts Bahiah's inner self as recalcitrant and nonconformist. "She never knows exactly what she wanted from life. All she knew was that she did not want to be Bahiah Shaheen, nor be her mother's or father's daughter; she did not want to go home or to college, and she did not want to be a doctor. She was not interested in money, nor did she long for a respectable husband, children, a house, a palace or anything like that" (60). The narrator posits an instrumental question to her quest for a real self, "What did she want then?" (60) He makes it clear that she "had another mind. She could feel it in her head, a swelling thing that filled her skull, impishly and secretly telling her that all these were worthless and that she wanted something else, something different, unknown but definite, specific yet undefined. Something she could draw with the tip of her pen on the blank sheet of the paper like an individual black line" (60). She aspires to entrench her real self.

Bahiah's quest for her real self is deterred by her patriarchal family who denies her the right to live her life the way she wants. The narrator says: "None of her life was of her doing or her own choice" (72). He further states, "Everyone told her what they wanted. No one asked her what she wanted. In fact, she had never wanted any of the things they wanted for her. The narrator asserts that "She did not want to be a doctor and especially not a chest specialist" (73). Her family see her as an obedient and diligent girl. Diana Royer enacts a comparison between

Bahiah's perception of herself and that of her family and community. She avers that Bahiah is seen by her family and others as obedient, diligent, conventional outwardly but with an inner self that is strong, inquiring, and nonconformist (51). When Bahiah defies the predetermined roles of women and rebels against her patriarchal father and callous mother, her family no longer sees her as their obedient daughter. As a nonconformist, Bahiah feels she does not belong to her family and the consanguineous bond does not bind her at all, "Now she was sure that she did not belong to this family. The blood in her veins was not theirs. If blood was all that connected her to them, then she had to question that bond. She had to question the very blood that ran in her veins and theirs. Her mother had not given birth to her. Maybe she was a foundling discovered outside the mosque"(59). She realizes that her parents hinder her efforts to forge her distinct identity through their attempt to shape her character in a way that denies her individual power and diminishes her real self. She is torn between her own desires and needs and the demands of her family. This conflict propels her into the abyss of identity crisis. She feels that she is two women in one.

El Saadawi concentrates on showing the vital role of Bahiah's father and mother in shaping Bahiah's character and her quest for a real self. Her imperious father humiliates her and curbs her freedom. He acts as a real obstacle that impedes her struggle for self-realization. He does not welcome her coming into the existence. He had wished that she was a boy. Hence, Bahiah feels guilty of being born a girl. The narrator presents an instance that shows the existence of big chasm between her and her father. On her eighteenth birth day, she observes her father smiles while she blows her candles. But she was " suspicious of his smile. Everything about her father becomes dubious " (16). He describes the domineering character

of her father through asserting that “ Her father stood like a vast high barrier between her and her real self blocking her way, guarding the entrance to the house with the bulk of his body, his coarse voice, huge palms and wide eyes” (27). He further states, “He would turn up at home, with his tall, bulky frame, his straight back, and those big strong hands that could slap her down...” (15). Her father physically and psychologically humiliates her. When he looked at one of her drawings, he "slapped her small hand with his broad palm and said: What do you mean by wasting your time scribbling? He crumpled the sheet of paper and tossed it into the dustbin” (26). When he picks her up from the prison, he threatens her with his sharp and firm look and gets her into the taxi. The novel describes how she is humiliated by her father and uncle:

Her father sat on her right, her uncle on her left. The door shut and the taxi moved off. It was as if she had been arrested again, but this time by another kind of police. Her father on one side and her uncle on the other seemed like policemen...they were like two strange policemen to her, taking her to the guillotine or a prison cell” (94).

Bahiah sees her father as a police man who controls her life and imagination. She expresses her disdain towards the phallogocentric culture through reflecting her father's bossy character in her paintings in the form of a policeman. The narrator states, “When she drew her father, she gave him two red eyes and a black handlebar moustache, huge hands and fingers coiled round long stick” (27). The “black handlebar moustache” is that of the policeman whom she saw on her way from school and the “long stick ” is that of her teacher who flaunts it every morning at school. Both her father and the policeman represent power. But her father incarnates the patriarchal assertion that disturbs her life. He considers her as

an extension of him and makes decisions on behalf of her. He intensifies her pain when he sells her to a strange man for three hundred Egyptian pounds without taking her consent. He does not value her as a person. He and her uncle free her from the prison and make arrangements for her marriage. They believe that marriage is the right choice for women that saves them from the university decadence. A male member of her family opines that “we should take her out of school. University corrupts girls' morals” (95). Another replied “I think we should marry her off as soon as possible: marriage is the strongest protection for girls' morals” (95). A third proclaims, “It's my opinion that we should do both: take her out of medical school and marry her off. We already have a groom” (95). The narrator depicts the poignant story of her marriage, “the father handed over his property to the bridegroom: Bahiah Shaheen passed from the hands of Muhammad Shaheen into the hands of Muhammad Yaseen” (100). Her father and uncles see marriage as “the strongest protection for the girls' morals” (94). They believe that marriage enables women to keep their morals intact. Bahiah is unable to prevent the imposed marriage. The narrator reveals her futility to avoid the coerced marriage and succinctly depicts it, “Iron fingers held her relentlessly. The bars were so close together that she could not even poke her head out, fate was her father, who owned her just as he owned his underwear. He could marry her off or not marry her off, for he was the broker, even though she never authorized him” (96). Bahiah considers her marriage “the basest deal in history” (102) and their rigid control over her life as “an assault on her reality, the usurpation of her will and of her very existence”(103). Hence, she decides to defy this imposed marriage and continue her crusade for self, emancipation and dignity. She refuses to consummate their marriage. She transgresses her family's honor through defying her father and visiting her boyfriend at home, refusing the imposed marriage, and

spurning her husband whom she detests. On her wedding night, her husband hurls insults at her. He denudes her of the feminine vibes through asserting that she is “not a woman” (102). But she does not accept humiliation. She refuses to sleep with him because she wants to torment his psyche and blemish her family's honor when they don't find the blood sign of her virginity. She believes that leaving her husband will have a lasting effect on her family's honor because there will be no evidence on the sheet or on her nightdress of the bride losing her virginity and thus “ the family would be all over the newlyweds' house searching in vain for the family's nonexistent honor” (103). She “ was trying to create a scandal, for scandal alone could save her now, could make everyone cast her out...She tiptoed out into the street” (102). She believes that making a scandal will enable her to extricate herself from the manacles of her imposed despicable husband and from the rigid grip of her family whom she sees as “ the usurpation of her will and of her very existence” (103). Her revolutionary behavior is instrumental to her struggle for constructing her real self.

Likewise, Bahiah's search for an authentic self, emancipation and dignity is deeply affected by her mother who “had never understood her” (18). Her mother embraces the traditional role of a woman as a wife and a mother who satisfies her husband's sexual urges, rears her children and does the household chores. Bahiah realizes that her mother had effaced her identity by embracing the phallogocentric culture that denies her a name. She is disturbed by her mother's submissive character which creates a feeling of anxiety and insecurity in her psyche because her mother is unable to communicate with her and guide her growth in way that guarantees attaining a distinct identity of her own. She realizes that her mother suffocates her spontaneous bent to discover her sexuality,

When her fingers approached her genitals while washing, she would jerk them away, as her hand had touched an electrified or prohibited area. She still remembered the rap her mother gave her as a child. The traces of her mother's big fingers were engraved in her memory and stuck to her skin like a tattoo. Her mother's voice still rang in her ears: ' Don't do that again'. Say ' won't do it again'. (74)

Torn by the lack of communication with her mother and by the heavy barrage of humiliation, " she burn[s] with desire to return to where she had come from, to escape the gravity and free herself of that body whose own weight, surface and boundaries divided it from its surroundings: A consuming desire to dissolve like particles of air in the universe, to reach a final, total vanishing point" (11). Besides, "She wanted with all her might to squeeze this womb, to halt its secret mad movement, to still it forever" (18). She resists her mother constant attempt to convince her to conform to the traditional roles women play in the society because she understands that her search for an authentic self should deviate from the path her mother had chosen. Hence, she separates herself from her mother and continues her crusade for building an integrated identity of her own.

The male members of Bahiah's family try to control her life. They keep an eye on her life because they are afraid that she will develop relationships with men. They wield strict control over her which impede her penchant to build her real self. Bahiah is extremely annoyed by their excessive control of her life because it threatens her very being and aggravates her alienation from her family and community. She feels her identity is lost and she has no place in a male dominated society. Hence, she develop her own strategies of resistance— deconstructing patriarchy and defying the oppressive political system. She rejects the cultural

conceptualization of women which her family embraced and struggles to extricate herself from the shackles of social and political inhibitions. She seeks meaning and justification for her existence of her family. outside the uncongenial ambiance.

Community play a significant role in shaping our personality. Bahiah lives in an inimical environment which paralyzes her attempt to negotiate an identity of her own and blossom into an autonomous self. her conservative community nurture women to be submissive, reserved and self-effacing and encourage them to incarnate beauty and femininity. It allow men to assert their personality and develop a positive attitude towards life while denies women the right to express their individuality. Hence Bahiah is bewildered about her purpose in life. The narrator states:

She had no clear purpose. She had never known exactly what she wanted from life. All she knew was that she did not want to be Bahiah Shaheen, nor be her mother and father's daughter, she did not want to go home or to college, and she did not want to be a doctor. She was not interested in money, nor did she long for a respectable husband, children, a house, a palace or anything like that. (60)

To get out of this augmenting confusion, Bahiah introspects and scrutinizes her relationship with her conservative community. She becomes aware that the restricted norms of her society constrain her freedom and impede her struggle for discovering her real self. Her community wants her to kowtow to its traditional life and comply with its norms. But she is aware that constructing her real self demands rejecting the kind of life her community chose. Unlike others, she does not aspire to become a doctor or an affluent person because these things have no

meaning for her. The narrator describes the dynamics of her mentality. "Some hidden insistent feeling told her that her future did not lie in those long, boring lectures, nor in getting a medical degree and hanging a shingle in the square saying 'Dr. Bahiah Shaheen, nor in settling her ass in a comfortable seat behind the wheel of the car. Something told her that all was meaningless..." (24). She feels that her real self does not rest in conforming to community rules but rather in rebelling against its sexist rules. This fuels her desire to cut ties with her family and community and launch her arduous journey towards the goal of self-realization and wholeness. She understands that the path to her destination is not strewn with roses; rather, she has to take immediate actions on different fronts; psychological, social and political. She comes to understand that attaining the real self demands suffocating the self related to the community. This helps her to attain a renewed sense of self and renewed political identity.

In addition to her introspection of her relation with her community, Bahiah scrutinizes people in her community and her contact with the young girls around her. She observes that the faces of people are the same. She feels the sameness of the people threatens her desire to build herself. The narrator reveals her thoughts about this disturbing uniformity, "... the faces on the tram were not those of fathers and mothers; instead they were those stunningly similar faces stamped out by the government like coins, sitting shoulder to shoulder in silence, their lower bodies immobile and fixed to their seats, their upper parts shaking slowly and rhythmically with the motion of the tram" (31). She realizes that the sameness of people indicates their conformity to established institutions and authorities that mould their characters according to their policies. She deems this homogeneousness as a real obstacle in the path of her struggle for constructing her real self.

Similarly, her contact with the young girls helps her to better understand herself. She realizes that the other female students “belonged to one species and she to another” (33). But this does not suggest that she has “an undying hatred for members of [her] own sex” (Tarabishi 71). She is different from the other female students because she had not undergone genital mutilation. This prompts her to behave in a way that differentiates her from other girls around her. She wears pants, has long sturdy legs and walks in a resolute manner. She contrasts her posture and dress with that of the young girls around her. She attempts to understand why the other young girls conform to the patriarchal system. The narrator describes the imposed style of attire which the young girls cling to, “[t]heir skirts wound tightly round the thighs and narrowed at the knees, so that their legs remained bound together whether they were sitting, standing, or walking, producing unnatural movement” (7). These skirts impede women's free movement which is described as a “strange mechanical gait, their feet shuffling along legs while knees remained clamped as if they were pressing their thighs together to protect something they were afraid might fall” (7). On the other hand, she observes that boys are portrayed quite differently. They stand “lift[ing] one foot and balance[ing] it on the edge of a low wooden stand” (8). This posture “was normal and permissible—but only for boys” (8). She further observes existence of differences between males and females in the classroom which privilege the male students. The third person narrator emphasizes that boys

push through the door, treading on each other's feet, their bags under their arms bulging with anatomy books, left hands clutching their precarious spectacles and right hands stretching out to push other bodies out of the way. They raced for the front seats in the lecture hall. Panting and out of

breath, they grabbed their seats and opened their notebooks with fingers red and swollen from the fight to clamber onto the tram. (22-23)

Bahiah, here, rebels against the discriminatory rules and practices that allow men to move around freely, wear the clothes they wished and behave freely, at the same time curbing women's freedom and behavior to enjoy the same. Bahiah defies these differences. The preordained dichotomy of one set of moral standards for females and another set for males forces her to defy the stifling sexism that pervades the society. The narrative presents some evidences that reflect Bahiah's audacity to challenge the exclusive male behaviour. For instance, she challenges some male privileges that are allowed only for boys in Egyptian society when she stands "in her usual way: right foot on the edge of the marble table, left foot on the floor, a posture unbecoming for woman" (8). She also embraces masculinity in her walk and behaviour. "She would jump as she walked. Swinging her legs freely and separating them wide apart, now certain that no glass object lay between them" (76). When her mother slaps her for putting one foot up on a chair and orders her to emulate her girlfriends' posture, she makes it clear she is different. She states, "Their [her girlfriends'] defeated eyes made her angry, and she was sure that she did not belong to this sex, that nothing in her was breakable. When she raised her eyes, her gaze was level, and no power on earth could make her lower them" (77). Even when her professor stares at her she refuses to lower her foot (8). Her behavior makes people wonder whether she is a woman or a man.

Bahiah's contact with Dr. Alwan shapes her quest for her real self. Though Dr. Alwan is a professor of Anatomy at Cairo university, he sees Bahiah as an object of desire. But she rejects his sexist behavior. "When he fixed his blue eyes on her, she would stare back at him with her own black eyes. She knew full well that

black is stronger than blue, particularly where eyes are concerned. Black is the origin, the root that reaches back into the depths of the earth” (9). She violates the society norms of propriety which expects her to lower her eyes when men stares at her. Bahiah uses turning the gaze back as a means of affirming her real self and deconstructing sexism.

Introspection acts a revolutionary agent that catalyze her to continue her struggle. It triggers her self-knowledge about the burden of her body on her soul. Through the third person narrator readers can gauge her thoughts about sexuality which informs the construction of her real self. She is “burned with desire to return where she had come from, to escape from the gravity and free herself of that body whose own weight, surface and boundaries have separated it from its surrounding” (11). She is perturbed by her mother's constant attempts of suppressing her sexuality. This instigates her to deem gender and patriarchy the hotbed of her troubles. Hence, she repudiates them. This self-knowledge of her body and sexuality pave the way for discovering and entrenching her real self.

Although Bahiah does not undergo the genital mutilation, she is overwhelmed by strong apprehension that stems from the fact that her sister had experienced this brutal act. She is waiting for her turn after her sister had gone through this brutal act. This indicates that her sexual identity is blurred by her parents who want her sexuality to be dormant until marriage. Hence, she is unable to determine what constitutes a normal sexual desire. She develops a feeling of disgust towards men, She was disgusted when she saw men's sexual organs bulging under their trousers; she wanted to throw up when a man dug his elbow into her chest as she waited for the tram. She hated men with their trousers, their ugly protruding organs, their greedy, shifty eyes, their smell of onions and

tobacco, their thick moustaches which looked like black, dead insects flapping over their lips. (98)

Her undying hatred of men can be attributed to the horrible event of infibulation which her sister had undergone and to her mother's suppression of her growing sexual awareness. Bahiah also realizes that young girls are expected to be non-sexual beings before marriage. But after marriage, they are expected to “ suddenly change from non-sexual beings with no sexual organs to a sexual creature who sleeps, walks, eats and drinks sex ” (101). She realizes that the young girls' sexuality is determined by the collective and not the individual. They are groomed to perform the typical roles of a wife. In her seminal book *The Hidden Face of the Earth*, El Saadawi opines that young girls in Arab World are raised along very rigid and orthodox teachings that aimed at “moulding her into an asexual being” (46). Hence, She empowers her protagonist to revolt against these teachings.

Bahiah has a penchant for others to get to know her. This is finally concretized when she meets Saleem who stirs her desire to discover her self. Her relationship with Salem marks a turning point in her life and in her struggle for self , emancipation and dignity. It prompts her to struggle for self-discovery. Saleem engages her in a conversation while she is looking at a painting at a gallery. This conversation triggers a conspicuous change in her character, initiates her journey towards self-realization and prompts her to articulate her political dedication for the cause of her oppressed nation. Reflecting on her relationship with Saleem, she realizes that Saleem does not intimidate her because when he stares at her he lowers his look. The narrator describes their relationship from their own perspectives:

Then their eyes met and she realized that the secret behind this extraordinary face lay in the way his eyes moved. It was strange, different from the other male students. Their eyes seemed not see or do anything. They just opened like mirrors in which things were reflected. The eyes of the male students did not really see, or rather, they did not see things as they really were. When his eyes moved in front of hers, she felt as if he were seeing her. It was the first time she had ever been seen by any eyes other than her own. (35-36).

She draws a contrast between her perception of Saleem and the other male students which enables her to realize that Saleem is the only one who acknowledges her as an individual and does not objectify her as a sexual object and thus enhances her sense of self-worth. Saleem provides meaning and purpose in her life and prompts her to decipher her disconnectedness from her family and community. She realizes that he is able to penetrate her psyche and understand her true essence. For the first time, Bahiah experiences love, intimacy and respect. Through her relationship with him, she defies the religious cultural taboos that curb women's freedom to develop a relationship with a man outside the conjugal bond. It enables her to tear away "the membrane separating her from life" (75). She goes further in her relationship with Saleem. She visits him at home and sleeps with him. By doing so, she contravenes the religious taboo and flouts the social restraints that forbid women to sleep with men outside the wedlock. But she is anxious about her father's reaction to finding out about her visit to Saleem's house. The narrator reveals her anxiety, "Her mind balked at imagining her father's shock on seeing his polite, obedient daughter's body naked, not in her own bedroom but in a young man's flat" (63). She is concerned about people who read

about this shocking event in the morning paper, especially her father's superiors and subordinates at the Ministry of Health “who had been convinced for over thirty years that he was an efficient superintendent with close family ties and an honorable reputation, that his sons and daughters were diligent and well behaved, especially his hardworking medical-student daughter Bahiah ” (63). This indicates that Bahiah experiences a conflict that stems from the rift between the preordained restricted norms of her community and the demands of her emerging individual identity. Through Bahiah's relationship with Saleem, El Saadawi ”constructs the body as an instrument of female agency, where sex becomes an avenue for destabilizing male dominance over the female body within the bounds of contractual marriage” (Nkealah 236). She establishes a strong connection between the body politics and the female quest for self. In her article “Selfhood, Nation and Gender: The Psychic Roots of Sexism, Racism and Nationalism”, Elisabeth List asserts that “body politik” is inextricably linked to “selfhood and community” (31).

Saleem stimulates Bahiah to embrace political activism and develops a real allegiance to her beloved country. She participates in students' strikes and massive demonstrations and chants slogans against the corrupt authorities. She believes that initiating a change in her country expedites forging the national identity and leads to the development of the country. She further believes that extricating women from the manacles of sexism and subverting the traditional conventions and the despotic social institutions are indispensable elements for asserting women's identity and building a collective national identity. She asserts that patriarchy impedes reforming her nation. Chia-Ling She points out that “Bahiah holds the patriarchal ills accountable for the retardation of national rejuvenation ”

(Turning the Petals). Her staunch revolutionary fervor and her strong bond with Saleem bring her out of the cocoon of her old fragmented self and help her to come of age. The novel presents the evidence that proves Bahiah's bond with Saleem is indispensable to her search for a real self, emancipation and dignity. After she had been released from the prison, she broods over how long Saleem would be kept imprisoned. The narrative reads, "this is our tragedy, the secret of the sadness that envelops our joys and the indifferent merriment that surrounds our grief" (108). She is greatly affected by this forced separation that has no definite end. But she does not allow it to prevent her consuming desire to carve out an identity of her own. She continues devoting her life to Saleem. She runs away from the house of her imposed husband. But she is taken to the prison again where she reunites with Saleem and enjoys solace. She prefers imprisonment to living a life of bondage under the control of her husband. The narrative asserts the significance of Bahiah-Saleem relationship through ending its events with the image of Bahiah's arms stretched out trying to "embrace him [Saleem], but she could not reach and her hands trembled in the handcuffs" (124). The concluding paragraph is important to her struggle to reclaim her real self. The narrator describes the poignant moment when the police arrests her, "One of them locked the handcuffs around her wrist and put the key in his pocket. She walked briskly in front of them, her eyes darting, her feet searching among all these faces for the thin faces with the exhausted features burdened with the world's worries, for those eyes that could pick out her face from all other faces and distinguish her from among millions of bodies floating in the universe" (124). By empowering her protagonist to defy patriarchy and support Egyptian nationalism, El Saadawi makes it clear that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir 301) and thereby echoes Western gender construction theory.

Bahiah embraces feminist tenets as a means of resisting the prevailing cultural religious discourse that suppresses women's freedom. She develops a heterosexual fluid identity that enables her to become a nationalist feminist who is committed to demolish patriarchal standards and trigger political activities against the tyrant rulers. Judith Butler demonstrates that heterosexual identity coherence is “assured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender and sexuality” (23). This is what Bahiah has achieved. Bahiah's sexual frigidity spurs her to join the students' movement. Both Salem and Bahiah take an active part in students' strike against the corrupt authorities. But they are imprisoned. Bahiah's involvement in students' agitation shocks her family who had only seen her as an obedient lady. But she is indifferent to them. She feels that her life has drastically changed and she would never be Bahiah Shaheen again. She realizes that, “We never know the reality of things: we see only what we are aware of. It is our consciousness that determines the shape of the world around us – its size, motion and meaning” (58). This new consciousness helps her better understand herself and her surroundings and thus rebel against the disruptive forces of patriarchy.

As a political activist and an Arab feminist pioneer, El-Saadawi presents Bahiah as a harbinger of Arab women's struggle for freedom and equality. She represents Arab helpless women of the 1970s who yearn for emancipation and independence. Bahiah and Saleem represent Egyptians of 1970s who were eager to trigger real changes in their society. They widen the horizon of the novel through their political commitment to the cause of their oppressed society. In this manner, the novel can be read as political story that aims to mobilize readers to change their outdated androcentric practices and topple the despotic authorities in order to empower their nation to attain emancipation and dignity. The narrative reads:

People of Egypt! Awake! Throw open your windows, open your eyes and see the chains coiled around your necks! Open your minds and see that the sweat of your brows is being plundered. Your crops are stolen, your flesh devoured until you are left only skins and bones, queuing skeletons each leaning on the other. Your breath is torn by fits of coughing and blood pours from a deep wound in your chest. (116)

Dr. Alawi attempts to impede Bahiah's determination to defy gender rules and fight the pervasive corruption of the autocratic authorities through warning her that "There are eyes everywhere. All the authorities are against you" (110), but as an intrepid revolutionary, she pays no heed to his threat. She continues her struggle towards forging her real self and supporting her nation. She links her individual identity with the collective political identity of her nation. She concretizes her creator's conviction that the personal is political. One needs to assert here that through Bahiah's strenuous journey towards discovering her real self and supporting the cause of her nation, El Saadawi wants to assert the priority of "individual agency" and the importance of "collective resistance" to dismantle "patriarchy and its oppressive structures" (Hiddleston 95).

There is strong ground to deem El Saadawi as a sibyl of the revolutionary change that sweeps the Arab World during the Arab Spring. Saleem can be read as herald of the Arab youth who have ignited revolution against the despotic and corrupt regimes. Likewise, Bahiah forestalls the Arab women who actively participate in the Arab Springs uprisings in order to topple the despots and attain freedom, equality and dignity.

El Saadawi throws light on the predicament of Egyptian women in particular and Arab women in general and aims to empower them to attain emancipation,

equality and dignity. She “ has always been extremely critical of the longstanding oppressive system in which women in Egypt are trapped and her primary criticism is based on religion, culture, and politics” (Abd Rabouh 14-15). Through her protagonist, El Saadawai speaks for Arab women and unmasks the social injustices and cultural fetters that confine them to the domestic sphere. She struggles to disclose the truth about Arab Women. She states “... I am firmly convinced that real harm only comes from an attempt to cover up the truth ...rather than searching for it and making it known” (The Hidden Face 3) and pleads for a better status and future for women. She further asserts, “It is no longer possible to escape the fact that the underprivileged status of women, their relative backwardness, leads to an essential backwardness in society as a whole” (1)

Through the novel, El Saadawi struggles to empower Arab women to construct a distinctive identity of their own by restructuring the power relations in the Arab patriarchal societies. She gives voice to women who have suffered the devastating results of sexism and infibulation. Since El Saadawi herself underwent female circumcision at the age of six and was unable to resist it, “she lobbied against female genital mutilation for the rest of her life” (Al-Khateeb 10). She enacts a scathing critique of clitoridectomy that humiliates women and curbs their sexuality. She unequivocally rejects the phallogocentric culture that promotes and valorizes male domination and precludes women from entrenching an autonomous identity . Bahiah subverts the androcentric culture that accords men certain privileges at the expense of women and curbs women's sexuality. She embodies the new women whom El Saadawi aspires to create as representatives of Arab women in particular and women in the Third World in general. In this way, El-Saadawi “emerges as a revolutionary feminist whose primary concern is the

destabilization of patriarchal power and the restructuring of society on the twin pillars of equality and liberty” (Nkealah 236). She succeeds, to some extent in disrupting patriarchal hierarchy.

El Saadawi has an uncanny knack of narrating the heart-rending stories of the oppressed women in a way that they leave an indelible impact in her readers and thus galvanize them to register their protest against women's exploitation and dehumanization. She is able, to some extent, to surmount the cruel and atrocious conditions that impede women's march towards the goal of self-affirmation, emancipation and dignity. She conveys a stern message to women in general and Arab women in particular that women's solidarity and resistance are the most efficient weapons to eradicate exploitation and oppression meted out to them in sexist set-ups.

It remains to assert that some of El Saadawi's works have generated tsunamis of dissent and discussions across the Arab World. They engender a lot of controversies regarding her interpretation of the Islamic discourse vis-à-vis women, her espousal of western feminism and her alleged internalization of the American stereotypes of Arab Muslim women. Conservative religious figures have indicted her of contravening sacred Islamic scripts and teachings. They accuse her of embracing apostasy and flouting some Islamic principles pertaining to women. But a close scrutiny of her literary and critical discourse clearly shows that El Saadawi brazenly criticizes the misinterpretation of religion that contributes to perpetuating women's oppression. She does not deem Islam as the sole cause of women's oppression. She does not claim that it is Islam that oppresses women, but rather that it is the misinterpretation of Islam and the mélange of Islam, traditions, and superstitions that oppress women and perpetuate

their inferiority. Luma Balaa stresses that “It is not Islam that oppresses women but the hypocritical application, and misinterpretation of religion” (243). Rabab Obeid asserts “the practices in the name of Islam are oppressive to women” (6). She further asserts that “Many of the interpretations of religion are sexist and based on patriarchal misinterpretations made by men in power” (243). Miriam Cooke avers that El Saadawi has always addressed Islam and the religious authorities about how official historiography and hermeneutics have excluded women in the hands of nationalist men who promote gender equality in theory, while keeping women’s enshrined roles at home (81-82). Similarly, Adele Newson-Horst states that El Saadawi’s “critical examination of both the Islamic and Christian world offers insight to those who question women’s roles in religion”(55). El Saadawi postulates that women oppression is entrenched within the structures and the paradigm of religious and traditional discourses. She also contends that the numbing opiate of some concocted religious sayings and teachings should be exorcized from wo/men's mind in order to deconstruct the mysteries of religion often used to compel women into submission. She also ascribes women’s oppression and marginalization to economic and political causes. Hence, in her eyes religion is not the only culprit of women oppression. On the other hand, some Arab critics indict El Saadawai of harboring the Orientalists' stereotypes of Arab women. They claim that she portrays unrealistic picture of Arab women that presents them as helpless women, whose lives are vehemently controlled by their patriarchs, in order to approve the Orientalist depiction of Arab women. Leila Ahmed argues that El Saadawi's depiction of Arab women is based on Western ideas (in Saliba 137). Aml Amireh argues that El Saadawi is famous in the West not because she “champions women’s rights, but because she tells western readers what they want to hear” (Publishing in the

West). But a careful scrutiny of El Saadawi's oeuvre shows that she does not Orientalize Arab women but rather she aim to alter the horrible situation of the subaltern and at the same time challenge these preconceived images of Arab women. Luma Balaa aggress that " El Saadawi does employ stereotyping to a certain extent, but she is in fact occupying a space in between, where at times she employs stereotypes but at other times challenges them" (327). Perhaps El Saadawi paints an exaggerated pathetic portrait of Arab women because she wants to mobilize her readership and society to support women in their struggle for freedom and equality.

Conclusion.

The select novel depicts the world from a female perspective and proves that Bahiah's quest for a real self is prompted by a number of events and experiences that have informed her past and present and spurred her to map out a path for her future destination. Her determination to search for an authentic self is further consolidated by her strong bond with Saleem, her father's decision not to allow her to pursue medical studies and to marry her off to a complete stranger for a trivial amount of money, her decision to abandon her husband whom she loathes and her political commitment to the cause of the oppressed people. It unearths the highly gendered power equations operative in marriage, family, and other social and cultural institutions and behavioral patterns, which are accountable for subordination, humiliation and marginalization of women. It questions the cultural conceptualization of femininity and masculinity and rejects the phallogocentric culture that permeates the Egyptian society. It gives its protagonist a vociferous voice with which to roar against sexism, the suppression of her sexuality and the political prevalent decadence of the Egyptian government. Bahiah has

encountered many impediments that deter her strenuous journey towards self-discovery, emancipation and dignity such as lack of communication and understanding with her family, her professor's equivocal attitude towards her which objectifies her as sexual object and propels her into the abyss of marginalization, the society's sexist attitude towards her and the role the society expects her to play, her tense relationship with her community, her confusion about her purpose in life and an aggravated sense identity crisis. She ultimately trounces the impediments and topples patriarchal forces. She comes to terms with events that had had an impact in shaping her character. She experiences an emotional and psychological transformation that yields to her epiphany, emerging as a new woman with an authentic self. She had been transformed from being marginalized, alienated, silenced and unrecognized to a new individual who finds her identity when she becomes politically and publically involved. She had been transformed from a fragmented self to an integrated self. She had woven her harrowing experiences and sutured her psychological wounds and emerged new and triumphant. She materializes El Saadawi's stipulation in her dedication of the novel through turning her tender potentials into sharp protruding thorns and surviving among hungry men. Her successful journey concretizes El Saadawi's aim to re-think the power relations in a male oriented culture in order to chisel an appropriate space for women to articulate their voices and entrench their selves. Moreover, Bahiah's unbridled sexuality reflects El Saadawi's revolutionary ideas of sexuality and presents her as a radical feminist who aims to empower Arab women to become sexually liberated women. El Saadawi aims to create a radical change in the established understanding of sexuality in the conservative societies of the Arab Muslim world. But it seems it is unattainable in the long run.

The paper reveals that introspection achieved through an appropriate mode of narrative is imperative and pivotal in the process of self-discovery. The act of writing by itself is an appropriate and effective mode to instigate introspection. It is an important element in Bahiah's quest for a real self. It accords her a great impetus to begin her struggle for self-realization and self-affirmation. Through the process of introspection and flashback, Bahiah is able to understand who she is, how to relate to others and how to rise above her current position. Looking inward triggers her to understand how her past events shape her present and accelerate her psychological journey towards building her real self. It helps her to create meaning out of the harrowing experiences she has undergone. It prompts her to negotiate her way between conforming to the constricted norms of her male dominated society and adhering to discovering her authentic self. It enables her to reject the duplicity of patriarchy that accords men untrammelled freedom and curbs women's freedom and imprisons them behind the four walls. Finally, introspection brings about a conspicuous transformation in her character that enables her discover her real self.

El Sadaawi's narratives grapple with battling with injustices and atrocities which Arab women endure in their dominated male societies in order to empower them to deconstruct the oppressive forces that hinder their struggle for emancipation, equality and dignity. In her fictional world, women do not accept their status quo as God-given; rather they challenge the in-built patriarchal underpinnings of the entrenched androcentric culture. They have proved their mettle in fighting on all fronts: social, religious, political, legal and the taboo fronts in order to overcome women's oppression. El Saadawi exhorts Arab women never to relent in their struggle to obliterate patriarchy and sexism. She vehemently criticizes the

misinterpretation and the monolithic reading of religion by men to perpetuate the oppression of women. She makes it clear that women should intensify the fight so that they can topple monolithic interpretation of religious discourse, particularly the erroneous sacred scriptures that fortify patriarchy and sexism, and gain more rights in all realms of life. She uses literature as a means to raise social consciousness and awareness around the plight of women in her society and the Arab World. She aims to raise public awareness and thus create a feeling of responsibility that leads to alter patriarchal thinking. Through presenting the issue of female genital mutilation, El Saadawi aims to demystify it and unravel its grave and devastating effects on the psyche of victims and thus combating and deconstructing it.

The study shows that El Saadawi is an extraordinarily gifted and versatile writer who is sensitive to the pulsations of other cultures. She shies away from dealing with fossilized ideas that confine her to particular cultural milieus. Her greatness rests in her caliber to deal with universal issues and values and in her exceptional ability to raise awareness round women's rights globally. Her works appeal to both the eastern and the western audience and echo global concerns.

Though the novel seems to have a heart-rending and pessimistic end which prompts its readers to believe that Bahiah's struggle to search for a real self ends in a fiasco as she obtains an inchoate sense of self and identity, Bahiah asserts her self because she refuses to embrace the life of bondage under the dispensation of her 'imposed' spouse and the patriarchal family who deny her fulfilling her dream -- constructing her authentic self and attaining freedom. She continues her crusade and ultimately comes to terms with her real self. She feels psychologically liberated though physically imprisoned. She enjoys being with Saleem, the only

one who understands her true essence and values her life. She chooses prison over the mundane life of patriarchy and sexism. She considers imprisonment as a form of liberation because it extricates her from the bondage under the control of her 'imposed' husband, domineering family and sexist society. In this way, she attains self-fulfillment. Whether she has partially or completely succeeded in her attempt to build her authentic self does not really matter. What matters is that the narrative ends with an unequivocal assertion that fulfillment is indeed possible. Bahiah enjoys a preponderant sense of satisfaction and fulfillment in her quest for a real self, emancipation and dignity. Moreover, she presents herself as a precursor who has paved the way for the coming generation of young Arab women to move on in order to reach the pinnacle which Bahiah had been trying to ascend. Though decades have passed, the vast majority of Arab women still attempt to reach to the same apex that Bahiah had attempted but partially succeeded. At the heyday of the Arab Spring Egyptian women participated in January's revolution and share the worries and the hopes of the revolution with their fellow men revolutionists. El Saadawi herself was a revolutionary icon in Tharir uprising who has participated in instigating the revolutionists to topple the despotic and corrupt Mubarak's regime. In this vein, the narrative proves El Saadawi to be a Sybil of women's right, change and revolution in the realms of politics and gender. She has inspired contemporary Arab women to play an active role in the Arab Spring uprisings. But Arab women are unable to attain complete emancipation, equality and dignity. Safaa S. Nasser points out that "Although contemporary Arab women writers have made great strides in freeing themselves from social and traditional bondage, the process of liberation is yet incomplete" (9). Similarly, contemporary Arab women are unable to get complete emancipation and egalitarianism. Maybe their dream will be fulfilled in the future through scions of Bahiah who will struggle to

empower them to obliterate patriarchy and sexism in order to attain liberation and dignity. The semi bleak position that still lies ahead for Arab women certainly will be changed. Bahiah stands as a permanent good portent of the coveted change that will ameliorate the miserable status of Arab women.

El-Saadawi inscribes herself as a revolutionist in different fronts. She advocates Egyptian people to extricate themselves from the iron grip of their rulers. She dedicates her career to empowering Arab women to obtain equality and emancipation. Bahiah and Saleem epitomize the revolutionary spirit that prevail her literary oeuvre. They revolt against, patriarchy and autocracy. Bahiah is a staunch revolutionist as she disrupts the patriarchal order that curbs Arab women's freedom and curtailed their sexuality. El-Saadawi's revolutionary spirit forestalls the revolutionary change that engulfs the Arab World during the Arab Spring. Saleem's revolutionary spirit anticipates and inspires the Arab youth who ignite revolution against the despotic and corrupt regimes. Likewise, Bahiah's revolt against male domination and political despotism forestalls the Arab women who actively participate in the Arab Springs uprisings in order to topple the despots, attain freedom, equality and dignity and change their society for the better.

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