

Docile and Dissident Agencies: Female Authorship, Modernism, and the Nationalist Challenge  
in Post-independence Egyptian Literature

Hala Ghoneim, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor

Department of Languages and Literatures  
University of Wisconsin-Whitewater  
437 Heide Hall  
800 W. Main St.  
Whitewater, WI 53190

## **Docile and Dissident Agencies: Female Authorship, Modernism, and the Nationalist Challenge in Post-independence Egyptian Literature**

...the loneliness of the female artist, her feelings of alienation from male predecessors coupled with her need for sisterly precursors and successors, her urgent sense of her need of a female audience together with her fear of antagonism of male readers, her culturally conditioned timidity about self-dramatization, her dread of patriarchal authority of art, her anxiety about the impropriety of female invention – all these phenomena of “inferiorization” mark woman writer’s struggle for artistic self-definition and differentiate her efforts at self-creation from those of her male counterpart.

(Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* 50)

Ibn Qutaybah (d. 276 AH) recounts in his book *Al-shi‘r wa al-shu‘arā’* an encounter between al-Khansā’, the only pre-Islamic poetess whose body of elegiac poetry has been transmitted to us, and Al-Nābighah, a renowned poet who arbitrated poetry contests in the famous <sup>U</sup>Ukāz marketplace. Expressing his endorsement of her poetry, Al-Nābighah tells al-Khansā’ that she is “the most eloquent of those endowed with vaginas.” Flattered, or perhaps aggravated for one cannot tell, al-Khansā’ declares, “And those endowed with testicles, [too]” (Ibn Qutaybah 123). The exchange can be read as representative of the production and reception of female writing in pre-Islamic time and today: female authors’ achievements are either ignored or only acknowledged in relation to the achievements of other women. As a defense mechanism, many female authors insist that everything men authors can do they can do better. They, thus, write with men in mind: men whose approval they seek (critics, audiences) and men who they seek to challenge or outperform (colleagues). They often reproduce male-centered epistemologies they ought to resist and deconstruct.

Salma Khadra Jayyusi contends that the only reason why al-Khansā' poetry has reached us might have been "because she wrote in the same vein as her male colleagues: her elegies on her slain brother Sakhr are full of motifs of chivalry and manhood ... rendered in the elevated tone that has remained an outstanding feature of the poetry of male Arab poets right up to present time" (2-3). The same reason may also explain why the famous ten commandments that Umāmah bint al-Hārith gave her soon-to-be married daughter deserved to be transmitted by the renowned Ibn <sup>C</sup>Abd Rabbihi al-Andalusī (d. 940 CE) in his *Unique Necklace*. The commandments include being frugal, obedient, cheerful, and smelling nice (6: 83-4); they have been included in government textbooks in several Arab countries, and they are often recommended as guidelines for acceptable female behavior. In spite of his distasteful praise of al-Khansā', Al-Nābigha can still be considered more thoughtful than al-<sup>C</sup>Aqqād (b. 1889), who probably had the elegists al-Khansā' and Jalīlah bint Murrah in mind when he wrote "No elegy written by a woman in any language has ever competed with elegies authored by men" (8). It has not been uncommon for medieval and modern male authors, including some of the most progressive in their fields, to be self-proclaimed misogynists. Al-Ma<sup>c</sup>arrī (b. 973 CE), who promoted revolutionary ideals in politics, religion, and philosophy, was scornful and hostile towards women. He became a vegetarian as he could not tolerate harming any living-being, but strangely opposed women's right to education: "Teach them to weave, spin, and sew; and quit teaching them to read and write / Women's prayers are rewarded similarly whether they recite [shorter, easier Quranic chapters like] "Al-Ḥamd" and "Al-Ikhlāṣ" or [longer ones like] "Yūnus" and "Barā'ah"" (Luzūmiyyāt 52). Al-<sup>C</sup>Aqqād, al-Ḥakīm, and many others continued al-Ma<sup>c</sup>arrī's legacy in modern times. Female authored modernisms have had to simultaneously defy

hegemonic tradition and the equally hegemonic male-centered modernism that marginalized, restrained, or excluded women.

A discussion of female-authored modernism is a complicated matter. At first glance, no apparent conflict between feminism and modernism seems to arise. After all, modernism's assault on tradition is perfectly congruous with most feminist agendas. But this accord on a theoretical level has not necessarily led to a cordial coexistence among female and male modernist authors, especially in the initial phases of any modernist enterprise. Male authors consciously or unconsciously try to limit the participation of women in any modernist project in order to maintain its virility and protect it from any vernacular sympathies women may introduce. In Europe, such male pioneers of modernism as Pound, Eliot, and Joyce gave female authors and editors marginal roles in the magazines they controlled: "One strand of modernism... deliberately presented itself as a men's club, whose members bonded together by the largely masculine experience of war, set about forging a radical new aesthetics appropriate to a turbulent new century" (Mullin 148). Female-authored modernisms, Mullin observes, either "evaded or were undaunted by misogynist proscriptions" and focused on the liberating effects of "the stylistic innovations of modernism" (148).

If we examine the interaction between modernism and feminism from a locational point of view, several other factors, besides gender, have to be considered. In an ultra-conservative, Arab-Islamic, and postcolonial setting, feminist views and practices can be (and have been) considered as transgressions against God, the nation, and morality and alliance with the former colonizer. Curiously, the tension arising among female and male modernist authors in Europe recurred in Egypt. Egyptian male modernist authors, with very rare exceptions, were at best

forgetful of and at worst hostile to the woman's question. Al-<sup>C</sup>Aqqād is known for being an outspoken misogynist. In his books, novels, and poems, he voices contemptuous pronouncements condemning women as inferior to men in every domain, even the ones that women are expected to excel in, like cooking, dancing, fashion design, and elegiac poetry.<sup>1</sup> Al-Ḥakīm supported the liberation and education of women but resented them for inherent qualities they possess and for their obstruction of men's (specially artists') freedom. When women speak or move, they disrupt the creative or productive enterprise of the male artist:

My hatred of this creature [woman] will not cease as long as I fear it. My animosity is nothing but self-defense; if woman were a silver statue on my desk, a flower bouquet in my room, or a record that I play or silence at will, I would have nothing but utter respect and valorization for her. Unfortunately, she is a talking, moving thing. At times, she is like a child who throws every valuable object out of the window, and then...laughs victoriously (197-8).

Al-<sup>C</sup>Aqqād and al-Ḥakīm's strong support for women's liberation and education did not prevent them from harboring strong misogynist views. This betrays that these views were adopted in sheer imitation of European male intellectuals' emerging support for women's rights, without an internalization of the philosophical basis of these rights: the equality of men and women. In other words, they gladly sought to make Egyptian woman the equal of European

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<sup>1</sup> See Ni<sup>c</sup>māt Aḥmad Fu'ād's response to al-<sup>C</sup>Aqqād in the fourth chapter of her book *Al-jamāl wa al-ḥurriyyah wa al-shakṣiyyah al-insāniyyah fī adab al-<sup>C</sup>Aqqād* [Beauty, Freedom, and the Human Character in Al-<sup>C</sup>Aqqād's Literature] (Cairo: Dār al-Ma<sup>c</sup>ārif, 1976) 109-33. Surprisingly, Fu'ād ends her eloquent refutation of al-<sup>C</sup>Aqqād by pleading with women not to be angry with him in view of his support of women education in 1912, the attention he gives to women (however negative), and the pain some women inflicted on him.

woman but considered her equality with (Egyptian) man inconceivable. By so doing, they were unknowingly positioning themselves in an inferior position to European intellectuals whom they might have successfully imitated but not fully comprehended. Al- Ḥakīm always commented on Egyptian women vis-à-vis French women; the superiority of (Egyptian) men over (Egyptian) women seemed to him to be a given. For example, he reprimanded Egyptian women for not having the same sophisticated taste for beauty and art French women have and blamed them for being the reason why Egyptian art and literature are lagging behind. It is because Egyptian woman does not buy paintings on canvas, flower arrangements, and books that Egypt is not counted among the civilized, art-producing nations of the world.

The unfair treatment of women in a given culture inevitably infiltrates the aesthetic domain. In al- Ḥakīm's universe, thinkers and artists occupy a central position. They must not be disturbed by politics, which he describes as “the clamoring noise echoing in our ivory towers and disrupting our tranquility and meditation” (144), or by women. The wife of the artist is burdened by more responsibilities. She is asked to “give up her entire life for her husband's sake” and to “give [him] a beautiful, happy life so that he can produce and create” (202). Al- Ḥakīm defines production and aesthetic creativity as masculine, and, by extension, reproduction<sup>2</sup> and inspiration as feminine: “A real artist is an eccentric man who marries “Art.” Would this human being also be able to marry a “woman”? ... I personally believe it is possible only if the woman realizes that ... her life will be given up for no price for the sake of a man whose life is also given up [for the sake of art] for no price” (202).

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<sup>2</sup> Al-Ḥakīm's use of the verbs “produce” and “create,” which attributes creativity and productivity to men is reminiscent of Luce Irigaray's binary “production-reproduction” which I deliberately use here. *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985) 14. My discussion also foregrounds al-Ḥakīm's exclusion of women in the aesthetic domain. Creativity, which is production/productivity in the aesthetic domain, is a male rather than female activity in his opinion.

It is unthinkable for al-Ḥakīm to envision the reversed scenario: the female artist and the husband or to present his argument neutrally by using artists, spouses, or lovers - without being gender-specific - as examples.<sup>3</sup> Women, in art as in life, are either forgotten, silenced, or harassed. When they are remembered, nourished, or redressed, it is for the sole purpose of playing the role of helpers to men, the real achievers in every arena. Thinkers, who are by definition male in al-Ḥakīm's view, ideally operate in depoliticized ivory towers purged from the trivial concerns of the masses and the whining of women. The childless or ambitious woman has no value in a patriarchal society. And in the aesthetic realm, a woman's role is to inspire, nurture, and be selfless, invisible, and silent. Anything women have to say at best contaminates and at worst disrupts grandiose national, intellectual, and aesthetic ventures. A traditionalist religious discourse, which neither al-<sup>C</sup>Aqqād nor al- al-Ḥakīm questions, places women in the domestic and men in the public sphere. A naïve or prejudiced interpretation of biology, zoology, or history only emphasizes the male-centered pronouncements in the areas of religion, philosophy, and aesthetics. Women's occasional achievements are "the "exception" that holds within it the validation of the rule it counters" (Al-<sup>C</sup>Aqqād 9). Women's achievements outside the domestic sphere are never celebrated but condemned for their alleged devastating effects on their husbands and children. Accomplished women have to give up their normality for their achievements.

The male pioneers of Arab modernism, who relentlessly advocated transcending aesthetic traditions, created traditions and ideals which have been as difficult to dismantle as the ones they had destabilized. They thus unknowingly reinforced integral parts of the very system they sought

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<sup>3</sup> Al-Ḥakīm's reference to the artist's wife and to woman as a "statue," "flower bouquet," and "record" bring to mind Gubar's statement in her important article "'The Blank Page' and Female Creativity": "If we think in terms of the production of culture, [woman] is an art object: she is the ivory carving or mud replica, an icon or doll, but she is not the sculptor" (244).

to undermine. Their failure to situate their brand of modernism within a larger cultural modernity resulted in harboring ideals incongruous with their professed principles of modernization<sup>4</sup>. The later generations of Egyptian male authors, and many contemporaries of al-<sup>C</sup>Aqqād and al-Ḥakīm, were more sympathetic or less hostile to women. Many lacked consciousness about women's issues or simply did not wish to centralize them in their writing. Their solidarity with women has been sporadic and at times not completely unproblematic. The representation of women in Arabic literature, whether negative, disempowering, or non-existent has been under attack by women critics. El Saadawi's article "The Heroine in Arab Literature" in her important book *The Hidden Face of Eve* and Laṭīfah al-Zayyāt's *Woman's Image in Arab Stories and Novels* are cases in point. But what has been more detrimental to women's status than the negative representation of the female in male-authored literature is controlling or obstructing women's creative and critical writing. The stage has been set for Arab women authors to either write like men or not write at all.

Modern male critics have established the rules of literary excellence in purely masculine terms. Some of the connotative meanings they managed to attach to the term "women's literature" include naivety, selfishness, sentimentalism, and insignificance. Women Literature has become a pejorative label which many female authors, like Laṭīfah al-Zayyāt, eject (Shaaban 1). Valued literature is one that primarily concerns itself with intense philosophical, aesthetic, or national questions. Female critics, like Bouthaina Shaaban, try to disprove the accusation that

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<sup>4</sup> I use Susan Friedman's definition of modernity as "the condition or sensibility of radical disruption and accelerating change wherever and whenever such a phenomenon appears" (503). I use her definition of modernism as the expressive or aesthetic mode of modernity, "a movement presumably centered around systematic philosophy, politics, ideology, or aesthetics" (498). Modernization "signifies a process, and evolution from one condition to another, with modernity as the condition achieved by modernization" (498).



female authors are unwilling to or incapable of writing the nation. Shaaban dedicates a chapter in her book *Voices Revealed: Arab Women Novelists 1898-2000* to that goal. She enlists and analyzes numerous female authors from a number of Arab countries who have centralized national or political questions in their novels. Shaaban did indeed convincingly argue that female authors are capable of brilliantly tackling the nation in their novels. But as cogent as her refutation of the arguments of male critics was, it still disturbingly accepted the criteria of literary excellence they have established. Shaaban should have challenged these criteria as naïve, narrow-minded, and sexist instead of painstakingly proving that female authors can do what male authors can.

Mastery of Arabic poetics has also been articulated by medieval Arab critics in purely masculine terms. The Arabic term for excellence in poetry is “*fuḥūlah*” [virility, the opposite of femininity] and a master poet is called “*fahl*,” or “stallion,” a symbol of masculinity and potency in Arabic culture. The term “*fuḥūlah*” does not imply that only men can be master poets. In fact, scores of poetesses have been included in the canon from pre-Islamic to modern time. However, one subtle connotation of the term is that the criterion whereby creativity is evaluated is masculine; poetesses may play the game only if they go by the rules of male-centered values governing the canon. Moreover, that the master poet “is a stallion (*fahl*) who opens a path and, in a word, deflowers the idea” (Kilito 19) reveals that whoever coined the term did not take women’s contributions into consideration. The stallion metaphor, with its penetration/defloration connotations, makes it unnatural for a poetess to be canonized. It immediately brings to mind

images of poets like <sup>C</sup>Antarah, Imru' al-Qays, and Zuhayr. Poetesses like al-Khansā', Wallādah, and Layla al-Akhyaliyyah remain the exception that validates the rule, as al-<sup>C</sup>Aqqād tells us.<sup>5</sup>

Al-<sup>C</sup>Aqqād also tells us that in order for women to do men's activities, like war, they initially have to renounce their womanhood. His evidence comes from the Greek myth of the Amazon women warriors, who cut off or burned their breasts to be more efficient with their bows and spears at war: "The meaning [of the myth of the Amazons] ... is that a woman cannot simultaneously [be or act like a man] and maintain her [feminine] nature; she [has to] renounce her nature, mimic men, and behave in ways unnatural to women" (31). A woman who succeeds in a domain other than the domestic domain is not a true representative of women. She is either an exception to the rule or an unnatural woman who trades her feminine nature for visibility in the public sphere. Women's disproportionate participation in the public sphere is interpreted totally differently from a female perspective. Luce Irigaray powerfully demonstrates how even the most well-intentioned historical documents, like The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, fail to address the specificity of women's needs: "‘Everyone has the right of equal access to public service in his country.’ Then why are so few women political leaders? Because they are not interested? Perhaps because they must shoulder the burden of ‘family’ responsibilities. So there is no real ‘equal access’" (*Thinking the Difference* ix).

Female authors of post-independence Egypt operated under circumstances hostile to women on many levels. They had to challenge forces excluding or banishing women into the margins of every domain of public life. Because the subjugation of women has become

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<sup>5</sup> In her article "Braiding the Story: Women's Eloquence in the Early Islamic Era," Muhja Kahf questions the existence of the term *balāghat al-nisā'* "women's eloquence," which has no counterpart: "men's eloquence". This, in her opinion, indicates the assumed rarity of such phenomenon. *Windows of Faith: Muslim Women Scholar-Activists in North America* (New York: Syracuse UP, 2000) 153.

completely institutionalized, female authors had to target the institutions promoting any forms of violence against women: religion, for placing “*qiwāmah*” [guardianship of women] in the hands of men (Quran 4:34); the colonizer, for promoting women’s liberation only to control men; the nationalist state, for suppressing women’s needs and foregrounding the nation’s; and male thinkers and artists, for defining aesthetic production and mastery in purely masculine terms. They strived to destabilize the image of woman as a weak creature which, like the land, has to be protected and defended, an evil or dangerous creature that has to be confined or controlled, or an inferior creature whose only chance for visibility is to give up its nature and adopt another. In the literary domain, many female authors have been distracted from these goals because of the pressure they have been put under to write within the acceptable parameters of androcentric creative and critical writing.

Female authors in the 1950s and 1960s faced many challenges: “They ... wrestled with the dilemma of how to live if there was no place in society where nontraditional women were fully accepted. Most of them paid a high price personally for pursuing writing careers. And still there remained the problem of harsh critics who attacked not only women’s writings, but the writers themselves in ways they would have never done had the writers been men” (Zeidan 6). Critics gradually accepted women’s writings, but they usually applauded writings that centralize political rather than personal issues, thus disregarding the entanglement of the public and private, the personal and the political and covering up their gross insensitivity to issues of representation. Focusing on personal or women’s issues is usually regarded as self-centered and apolitical. Aghacy criticizes Ghālī Shukrī as a representative of male critics’ tendency to conceive of male writing as normative; female authors are applauded for as long as their writings are in line with male writings:

He [Ghālī Shukrī] privileges al-Samman over other women writers whom he regards as interchangeable, each one being a “copy of several copies” (Shukri 1977, 79). He notes women’s general lack of experience (meaning political involvement) and maintains that women’s personal problems are not “the whole world” (1977, 80) but a small portion of a painful political and social reality that implicates both men and women, leaving ineradicable traces. Viewing male writing as the norm, he applauds al-Samman’s work for its “masculine” qualities... Accordingly, women writers must follow in her steps and shun the “literature of the harem” or “the literature of the *jawari* (female slave)” (1977, 185)” (12-3).<sup>6</sup>

It is interesting to observe that critics that reject the idea that male writing is the norm and condemn male critics’ harsh judgment against women writers do not necessarily acknowledge the existence of what Cixous calls “marked writing” (249), writing that inscribes masculinity (already dominant in all cultures, languages, and ages) or femininity (disappointingly rare).

Feminine writing is a theoretically slippery notion for the very critic who invented the term “écriture féminine” contends that it is impossible to define; it is not restricted to female authors; it overlaps with other brands of subversive writings, e.g., writings with strong racial or power-related subtexts; and, most importantly, that femininity is not “uniform, homogeneous, [and] classifiable into codes” (Cixous 246). Cixous goes on to say that it does not yet exist: “I say that we must, for, with a few rare exceptions, there has not yet been any writing that inscribes femininity; exceptions are so rare, in fact, that after plowing through literature across

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<sup>6</sup> Deniz Kandiyoti’s important article “Identity and its Discontents: Women and the Nations” discusses women’s unfair treatment within nationalist movements: “Feminism is not autonomous, but bound to the signifying network of the national context which produces it ( 380).

languages, cultures, and ages, one can only be startled at this vain scouting mission” (248). The term, therefore, does not *describe* practices as much as it *prescribes* them. It was introduced in what can be described a manifesto rather than a theoretical or critical article. What Cixous might be saying in “The Laugh of the Medusa” is that if feminine writing does not exist (yet), it must be invented. It is described as “insurgent writing” (250), which liberates, transforms, destabilizes traditions, breaks the “codes that negate women,” inscribes the body, gives women their rightful place in every “symbolic system” and “political process,” and creates a language outside the language of man, his discourse, and his grammar. In short, it enables self-expression and seeks to destabilize hegemonic political, linguistic, and social orders.

Cixous’s concept of feminine writing thus intersects with Kristeva’s “semiotic.” The semiotic is the infantile pre-Oedipal, pre-linguistic, chaotic, instinct-controlled domain, contrasted by Kristeva with the symbolic, the domain of language, order, separation from the mother, and the law. In literature, the semiotic privileges sense (color, smell, music, meaninglessness, etc.) over signification. It concerns itself with the representation of the unrepresentable, unconscious, or preconscious emotions. The semiotic predates but also coincides with the symbolic, which it always threatens; the semiotic is feminine, according to Kristeva, but it is available for both sexes. Poetic language (and the language of avant-garde literature) transgresses the symbolic order and writes the unconscious.<sup>7</sup> According to Kristeva, literary texts are transformative, confrontational, and violent:

If there exists a “discourse” which is not a mere depository of thin linguistic layers, an archive of structures, or the testimony of a withdrawn body, and is, instead, the essential

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<sup>7</sup> See Section I entitled “The Semiotic and the Symbolic” in Kristeva’s book *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) 19-106.

element of a practice involving the sum of the unconscious, subjective, and social relations in gestures of confrontation and appropriation, destruction and construction – productive violence, in short – it is “literature,” or more specifically, the *text*. (16)

Elaine Showalter goes further than English, French, and American feminists who are concerned about (respectively) oppression, repression, and expression (186) by centralizing cultural specificities and differences in theorizing about female writing. She argues that “[t]heories of women’s writing make use of four models of difference: biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic, and cultural. Each is an effort to define and differentiate the qualities of the woman writer and the woman’s text; each also represents a school of gynocentric feminist criticism with its own favorite texts, styles, and methods” (186-7). She favors theories of women’s writing anchored in women’s culture as they can provide “a more complete and satisfying way to talk about the specificity and difference of women’s writing than theories based on biology, linguistics, or psychoanalysis. Indeed, a theory of culture incorporates ideas about woman’s body, language, and psyche but interprets them in relation to the social contexts in which they occur” (197).

The incorporation of culture in gynocentric criticism does not only fill the gaps within monolithic feminist theories but also allows theorizing about the “important differences between women as writers: class, race, nationality, and history,” (197) factors which determine literary production as much as gender does. It also allows theorizing about both men’s and women’s (dominant and muted) cultures, because women’s writing is “double-voiced,” simultaneously *inside* both traditions (201-2). Showalter maps out the tasks of gynocentric criticism:

...the first task of a gynocentric criticism must be to plot the precise cultural locus of female literary identity and to describe the forces that intersect an individual woman writer's cultural fields. A gynocentric critic would also situate women writers with respect to the variables of literary culture, such as modes of production and distribution, relations of author and audience, relations of high to popular art, and hierarchies of genre. (202-3)

Gynocentric criticism must also revise the concept of literary periodization and theories of literary influence, show how women's tradition can either empower or inhibit women, and unearth the muted texts within female-authored texts.

Few Arab critics and theorists have started capitalizing on the findings of deconstruction and the so-called French feminism. Fewer critics have internalized the implications of the cultural turn for feminist criticism and theory. In the second half of the twentieth-century, most Egyptian male critics (who were neither oblivious nor hostile towards women's writing) simply generalized about women's style and language by unearthing metaphors and stylistic devices recurrently used by female authors, providing surveys detailing women novelists and short story writers, or discussing woman as a metaphor in Arabic literature. It was not uncommon for books on the Arabic or Egyptian novel to include no reference to a single female writer or any discussion of any feminist issue.<sup>8</sup> The label "feminist criticism," like the term "women's writing," is disowned because of the risk, thanklessness, theoretical slipperiness, and insignificance attached to it. Criticism is an academic activity in Egypt, and many critics believe

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<sup>8</sup> For example, Ṭahā Wadī's *Dirāsāt fī naqd al-riwāyah*, Shawqī Ḍayf's *Al-adab al-ʿarabi al-muʿāṣir fī miṣr*, and <sup>C</sup>Alī al-Rāʿī's *Dirāsāt fī al-riwāyah al-miṣriyyah*.

that gendering criticism would necessarily make it subjective and unscientific<sup>9</sup>. Fortunately, the rejection of the label has never meant refraining from the practice.

Feminist criticism produced by such Egyptian critics as Laṭīfah al-Zayyāt, Sawsan Nājī, Shirīn abu al-Najā, Iʿtidāl ʿUthmān, Samia Mehrez, Zaynab al-ʿAssāl, Lucy Yaʿqūb, and many others illustrates the increased and continuous interest in defining and theorizing about feminine writing. This is particularly difficult for a number of reasons. The lack of groundbreaking critical and theoretical works in the Arabic language necessary for the production of Arab feminist criticism and the short supply of translations are contributing factors. The most thoughtful and informed contributions usually come from critics who have access to European materials in their original languages as well as the sensitivity to isolate what is inapplicable or unproductive in an Egyptian setting. The achievements of African and other Third-World feminisms are not yet capitalized on by Egyptian critics. Moreover, the few valuable contributions on women's issues or feminine writing come from non-literary disciplines (philosophy, anthropology, jurisprudence, and sociology), making it unlikely for critics to incorporate them in their critiques. Interdisciplinary approaches to criticism are still not sufficiently emphasized. The intersection of religion, literature, criticism, and theory is a territory Egyptian writers fear to tread, although it is an area pregnant with possibilities.

Language is a central issue to feminism at large, as it is viewed as representative of masculine domination thus obstructing or threatening women's ability to self-expression. In an

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<sup>9</sup> This statement is based on the testimonies of several prominent women authors and critics including Laṭīfah al-Zayyāt, Radwa Ashour, Sakīnah Fu'ād, Munā Abu Sinnah, Iqbāl Barakah, Iʿtidāl ʿUthmān, and others during a 1990 forum on women's writing and feminist criticism (Al-ʿAssāl 161-84). This unanimous agreement among the female authors is curious as four out of eight male critics (interviewed by Wijdān al-Ṣā'igh) acknowledged the existence and the distinctiveness of female writing. One of them still insisted that feminist criticism does not exist because criticism is scientific, and science may not be gendered (Al-Ṣā'igh 223-37).



Arab-Islamic setting, language is also symbolic of the religious and nationalistic discourses with which feminists (and modernists) take issue. The centrality of the Arabic language in Arab-Islamic culture has stipulated that any change or reform must include serious questioning of all accepted assumptions about language,<sup>10</sup> an analysis of how the structures of language affect – rather than simply reflect – intellectual processes<sup>11</sup>, or a call for rebellion against archaic grammatical rules<sup>12</sup>. Dissident and feminist authors have largely capitalized on the liberating effects of violating established linguistic codes, genre boundaries, and other formalistic aspects of literature.

In her brilliant article “Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival,” Saba Mahmood radically revises the definition of agency as formulated by Judith Butler and other Western theorists. Agency is typically understood in Western discourses as “a synonym for resistance to relations of domination” (203). In some non-Western societies, where woman’s subjectivity is constructed by a network of severely oppressive institutions, agency must be redefined as “a *capacity for action* that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create” (203, emphasis added). Mahmood uses her field-research on the Egyptian Women Mosque Movement to support her argument. These women occupy an awkward position in feminist scholarship as “the very idioms

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<sup>10</sup> As Ṭāhā Ḥusayn did in *Fī al-adab al-jāhili*: “Arabic language needs to free itself from sanctity” (Cairo: Maktabat Fārūq, 1933) 56.

<sup>11</sup> As Al-Jabri does in *Binyat al-<sup>c</sup>aql al-<sup>c</sup>arabī*: “the absence of interest in language’s relationship with thought is attributed to the absence of interest in the process of thinking itself independently from words and language” (Beirut: Markaz Dirasāt al-Wiḥdah al-<sup>c</sup>arabiyyah, 2007) 103-4. Also see the first chapter of Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd’s book *Dawā’ir al-khawf*, in which he discusses the parallelism between certain types of grammatical irregularity (feminine and foreign proper names) and the marginalization of the women, non-Arabs, and non-Muslims in Arab societies (Beirut: Al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi al-<sup>c</sup>Arabī, 2007) 27-51.

<sup>12</sup> As Shirīf al-Shubāshī does in *Litahyā al-lughah al-<sup>c</sup>arabiyyah: yasquṭ Sībawayh* (Cairo: Madbūlī al-Ṣaghīr, 2004).

[they] use to assert their presence in previously male-defined spheres [religious education in the public sphere] are also those that secure their subordination [the promotion of traditional religious values like shyness, modesty, and perseverance]" (205). While most "progressive" Western observers would hastily consider these women as vehicles of their own oppression, Mahmood insists that what they do is a "docile" form of agency, one that does not seek or result in radical change but "aim[s] toward continuity, stasis, and stability" (212).

Although the term "stasis" may not seem quite compatible with the exercise of agency, Mahmood's concept of "docile agency" is very useful in understanding the nature of one brand of reform that takes place within hegemonic regimes. It is seen when agents opt for gradual, non-confrontational reform through seeking opportunities for self-expression and visibility within these regimes rather than their replacement. The inclusion of both resistance and perseverance as acts of agency is key to understanding women's writing in Egypt today, as the two modes of agency are present in this writing. Women authors who conceive of the very act of writing, regardless of what is written, as liberating and those who conceive of it as a synonym of dissidence do possess agency. It is exceedingly difficult, however, to determine which camp is more advantageous (or harmful) to the Egyptian feminist enterprise.

The first mode gives voice and visibility to women and cautiously incorporates covert criticisms of patriarchal institutions. Radwa Ashour describes writing as therapeutic and empowering, and defines it as a tool for the preservation of national history and collective memory. She writes: "because the free play of the imagination and the exercise of the power to create, to draw characters, to construct space and temporality, to effect shifts, transitions and changing time speeds, to manipulate words and sentences, is an appropriation of a threatened

geography and a threatening history. But more important, writing is a retrieval of a human will negated” (“Eyewitness, Scribe and Storyteller” 88). However, this mode of writing usually gives primacy to nationalist over feminist agendas, settles for limited achievements for women, and unintentionally or unknowingly endorses, tolerates, or overlooks oppressive practices targeting women. Laṭīfah al-Zayyāt, for instance, admits that when she wrote her autobiographical novel *Al-Shaykhūkhah*, she had been preoccupied with issues like absolute Time and human responsibility and that she had not been preoccupied with the liberation of women in particular but with “the liberation of human beings, regardless of gender” (138).

The second mode centralizes a feminist agenda and unapologetically exposes hegemonic patriarchal institutions and practices wherever they exist. It thus uncompromisingly targets religion and accepted social traditions, which often results in an irrevocable clash with and alienation of the very (female) audiences it claims to represent. Nawal El Saadawi is the most obvious representative of this mode of writing. She conceives of creative writing as a direct outcome of dissidence and rebellion: “Can we be creative if we obey others or follow the tradition of our ancestors? Can we be creative if we submit to the rules forced upon us under different names: father, god, husband, family, nation, security, stability, protection, peace, democracy, family planning, development, human rights, modernism or postmodernism?” (“Dissidence and Creativity” 158). Naturally, El Saadawi is ignored or ridiculed by most Arab critics, she is unpopular among Arab audiences (especially women), and she is on several “death-lists” of fundamentalist groups. Her emergence to visibility in the West, as Amal Amireh convincingly demonstrates, “has been overdetermined by the political-economic circumstances of first-world-third-world relations of production and consumption” (215). The consumption of her writing by a Western audience takes place “in a context saturated by stereotypes of Arab

culture,” which inevitably leads to “rewriting both the author and her texts according to scripted first-world narratives about Arab women’s oppression” (215).

The paradigm described above has similar implications for the form of feminine writing. The first camp usually chooses to challenge the patriarchs of modernism in their own terms: by mastering their tools, being their match, or outperforming them. The writings of authors belonging to that camp can be described as neutral and competitive: female authors write like canonical male authors, romanticizing the Arabic language and accepting the rules of good writing as prescribed by male academic critics. The second camp chooses to assert the uniqueness of feminine writing by embracing the stylistic innovations modernism and postmodernism offer: writing questions and assaults language, omniscient narrators disappear, fragmentation and episodic narration are emphasized, a female reader is deliberately posited, and genre boundaries are often overstepped. The first camp can be said to have internalized Shahrazād’s lesson: telling a story to appease Shahrayār (man, ruler, patriarch, canonizing critics, canonized men of letters) and save her (literary) life. The second can be said to have unlearned Shahrazād’s lesson: telling a story that taunts Shahrayār and risks her life as an individual and as an author. Shahrayār is not only taunted by challenging his authority but also by writing in ways that subvert the masculine language in which his authority is rooted.

It is very hard to decide which brand of post-independence female writing has been more (or less) beneficial in the advancement of an activist feminist agenda. Docile writing gives much-needed visibility to women in the aesthetic domain but allows them little room of their own. The imperative to conform with a nationalist agenda (that deems selfish any attempt to centralize women’s demands) and to the male-centered parameters of literary excellence (which block or

limit women's ability for self-expression) are preconditions for acceptance in the canon. After gaining acceptance into the canon, the female-centered criticism they can voice and the social change they can instigate is limited and slow. Dissident female writing, on the other hand, is relentless and unapologetic in voicing women's demands. But its overt assault on social traditions and religion makes it unpopular, especially among women, and, therefore, an ineffective and unconvincing tool for change.

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