

## Arab Women Writers as Revolutionary Orators and Catalytic Agents of Emancipation

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**Safaa S. Nasser,**

**"Contemporary Egyptian and Palestinian Women's Writing as 'Committed Literature'"**

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**Abstract:** In her article "Contemporary Egyptian and Palestinian Women's Writing as 'Committed Literature'" Safaa S. Nasser discusses the role of Arab women writers whose works were harbingers of the Arab Spring of 2011. Nasser's analysis demonstrate that the majority of Arab women writers acted as agents of feminist action and social change through their critique of patriarchal, phallogocentric domination and through their call for a secular sensibility. Their works demonstrate the symbiotic relationship between political, national, and feminist struggle for equality between genders. To exemplify this revolutionary perspective, Nasser analyzes texts by Nawal El Saadawi, Ahdaf Soueif, Salwa Bakr, Saki-na Fuad, Mona Rageb, Amina Kazak, Samira Azzam, Sahar Khalifeh, and Fadwa Tuqan.

**Saafa S. Nasser**

### **Contemporary Egyptian and Palestinian Women's Writing as "Committed Literature"**

All over the Arab world, the recent tumultuous social and political upheavals have generated and generate changes in the minds of Arab writers and this results in writing we understand as "committed literature." New voices, with different accents and perspectives have been escalating for decades as harbingers of the Arab Spring of 2011. These voices fueled the dream of new writing giving voice to the expropriation of power and ushered in the birth of a new will to experiment and change. Along with political change, there surfaced new narratives following realities bearing witness to the veiled truth about society. Writers of these new narratives attempt to define the new experience and to reflect on new impulses. In the following I discuss contemporary Egyptian and Palestinian Women writers' texts which — although in some instances written prior to the Arab Spring and thus prepared the grounds upon which women's writing can and will, I posit — develop both the position of Arab women and the societies they live in towards a more equality based perspective and practice. Contemporary Arabic women's literature is characterized by personal engagement in and involvement with social issues and political struggles, the representation of social structures, political movements, and identities, as well the perspectives of contemporary realities. An examination of the creative production by Arab women writers verifies that they can be considered sibyls of democracy and change-makers. The immanence of politics has exerted a compulsive hold over the creative energy of many Arab women writers and the predominance of the sociopolitical themes designate their literary creation as a full-fledged, authentic, and politically committed literature. The awakening of a dissident spirit against corruption, misrule and injustice, and the sentiment toward liberation and autonomy are key motifs in Arab women's writings. As proactive catalysts of change, Arab women writers inveigh against obstruction and obscurity and strive to bring the collective voice of people together (on committed literature in Egyptian literature see DiMeo <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1875>>; on modern and contemporary Arab-language literatures in general see Badawī; see also Abdelfattah <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1481>>; Al-Debyan and Neimneh <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss3/10>>; Al-leithy <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1374>>; Masmoudi <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1600>>).

In the preface to her novel *The Fall of the Imam* Nawal El Saadawi's explains that the novel was inspired by her experiences such as Iranian rape victims and the Sudanese members of the *جمعية يدي أبا ي ع و ط ق م* (Association for People with Amputated Hands). El Saadawi's novel is a disturbing narrative themes of abuse of power by male officials, rape, exploitation, and the unjust punishment of women for crimes committed by men are examined. El Saadawi utilizes a pseudo narrative of the *Thousand and One Nights* to denounce tyranny and the brutal oppression of women. The novel's narrative revolves around the character of Bint Allah ("Daughter of God"), her persecution and assassination for crimes against God and the State, both embodied in the character of the Imam. In her Preface, El Saadawi explains that she delineates the Imam character because she: "could not allow him to exercise absolute power in my story, just as he had one in everything else" (xi). She then proceeds to expound her objective for writing the novel as follows: "at least where my novel is concerned, I should enjoy some freedom, exercise some control over the Imam, and not let him do just as he likes" (xii). In *The Fall of the Imam*, the political ingredient in patriarchy predominates in redefining the religious, the political, and the social. As a feminist dystopia, *The Fall of the Imam* offers a distinct vision because it carries optimism to counteract pessimism.

Bint Allah is presented as an authentic Saadawian rebel, with an uncanny ability for repeated self-resurrection and maintaining her identity intact. El Saadawi deviates from the "traditional feminist dystopian ... linear historical visions" (Malti-Douglas 112). The novel's rebellious and feminist impulses are emphasized through images of powerful, free-spirited women, even at times of suffering: "My body dies, but my spirit will not give up" (*The Fall* 8). The woman protagonist keeps her head "held upright and she smiles the smile of a woman who has lost everything and kept her soul, has unveiled the secrets of the world, and pierced through the mask of heaven" (11). She is a rebel with a cause:

"I shall live for the people of my land. Either complete independence for our country or death for the struggle for our land" (66). She refuses to relinquish her right to human dignity: "Why do you not kneel at my feet? Throughout my life I have not kneeled to anybody, I said. But I am not anybody, he said, and besides all women kneel. I am not any woman, I said ... [I am] a woman without name, without father, without mother, who can neither read nor write but does not love you" (122-23). The final paragraph of the novel is El Saadawi's proclamation of women's inextinguishable power: "If my body dies my heart will live but the last thing to die in me is my mind ... no one of you has ever possessed my mind ... She is in complete control of her mind and what she says is reason itself. And her reason to them became more dangerous than any of her madness and they decided to condemn her to death by a method that was more rapid than stoning to death so that she would not have the opportunity to say anything further. They also decreed that her trial should not be published ... and her file should be definitely closed and buried deep down in the earth forever" (174-75). El Saadawi attributes despotism and oppression to a great extent to people's impassivity, ignorance, and submissiveness: "But where have the people gone? ... I can see no one. The body of the girl has disappeared, and her assassins have left. Where have the human beings gone?" (6). In their ignorance, people misinterpret their predicament as God's wrath. However, "They do not know God's word ... God's word is written and they can neither read nor write ... all they know is to murmur, or applaud, or acclaim, or vociferate, or cry out, or shriek at the top of their voices" (6). El Saadawi's narrative in *The Fall of the Imam* reveals what Marianne Hirsch calls women's "emancipatory strategies." According to Hirsch, women writers usually resort to strategies such as "the revisions of endings, beginnings, patterns of progression" which provide what Hirsch terms "continued opposition, interruption, and contradiction" (102).

Writing of the deaths in *The Fall of the Imam*, Fedwa Malti-Douglas explains how the death of Bint Allah and the Imam are consistent with "emancipatory strategies" because "Each death is repeated obsessively throughout the novel in a complex cyclical pattern" and that El Saadawi's narrative is bent upon "continued opposition, interruption, and contradiction" (92). These "emancipatory strategies" are El Saadawi's method of exploring and challenging traditional Arab patriarchy. Another strategy she employs is ambiguity, contradiction, and the unsettling of the reader's expectations. This is achieved through the use of an atemporal present where one year revolves into the next and events intermerge. When Bint Allah enrages her persecutors by insisting that her "father" is the Imam and who is "God's heir and representative on earth" (*The Fall* 62) against whom any opposition or criticism is considered blasphemy, her persecutors condemn her "tongue be cut out of your head" (1). Although the next paragraph suggests that the sentence has been carried out, the narrator retains her ability to still "tell" her story after the mutilation. At the same time, the objects of men's brutality are often unclear whether it is Bint Allah, her mother, or a generic woman. This subversion of linear time and intentional vagueness are meant to build a space between author and reader and to place a share of the responsibility of the narrative on the reader's shoulders and thus an invitation to read the text for political and social change as committed literature.

The narrative is deconstructive of conventional assumptions: the identity of the recurring "she" is seldom certain. Bint Allah is the "Daughter of God" and also the child of the Imam or perhaps some other earthly father who is less holy or alternatively holier than the Imam. El Saadawi uses the mythic, ritualistic cycle of the murder of the Imam and Bint Allah and the repetition is also evident in the Imam's strategy of "doubling" himself by using a decoy for protection. The narrative never establishes definitively whether it is the Imam or his double whose crimes and "fall" are played out. The insistence on repetition confirms the fact of the continuity of evil. *The Fall of the Imam* is an intentionally deconstructive narrative that subverts the logic of realism and this is El Saadawi's means of challenging and demolishing a "reality" she finds cruel and unfair to women: the tongueless yet "speaking" Bint Allah's becomes the mouthpiece of all those being stoned to death and silenced figuratively and physically. El Saadawi qualifies, then, as one of the "breakers of automatisms" one of those "peripheral figures no authority can ever subjugate" (Cixous 254). *The Fall of the Imam* combines myth and postmodern metafiction to question the patriarchal system that pervades Islamic religious traditions, as well as to condemn the coalition of political and religious patriarchy. The novel is an attempt to rewrite larger religio-cultural concepts. The locus of the narrative is dystopian where male patriarchy has the upper hand and where the belief that women are inferior dominates, since "the price of a female water buf-

falo in the market is higher than that of a woman. A man owns four women but has only one female water buffalo" (*The Fall* 5). The cannibalistic encounter when the Imam "devours" Bint Allah by "sucking her bones, cracking them ... and extracting the marrow from the insides with his tongue and lips" (123) is a potent and evocative interlude because as the Imam consumes Bint Allah, he is annihilated: "his belly was full up to the brim ... but she continued to hand him one piece after the other until she heard the sound of an explosion and his face fell to the ground" (123). This episode exemplifies the battle between patriarchy and the women whom he endeavors to eradicate and absorb within himself.

However, the novel resonates also with real-life facts. The most notable one is the reference Tahir Square (ريرحتلنا ناديم) in Cairo, the location of the 2011 Uprising. In an attempt to break boundaries in contemporary Arabic women writing, El Saadawi resorts to numerous gender-oriented textual manoeuvres such as coding and intertextual games and the misuse of religious heritage in order to explore intersections of gender and religio-politics contexts. An example of this is onomastic references to names of the characters which violate cultural rules and theological conventions. According to Malti-Douglas, El Saadawi "challenges the patriarchal tradition common to all three Abrahamic religions, but is not afraid to exploit it" (117). Further, in *The Day Mubarak was Tried* El Saadawi reiterates her warning against the danger of raising rulers to the status of gods. She recounts how after she published one of her plays, "the price paid for this publication was three miserable years in exile and forty-five more miserable years in marriage. A court case was filed against me to withdraw my Egyptian nationality" (*The Day* 6). El Saadawi won a verdict of innocence in two years time after her lawyer managed to prove that "his Excellency President Mubarak was no the god referred to in the play" (*The Day* 6). El Saadawi is determined to highlight and parody this notion again and again: "I try to look for his Excellency's face behind the bars, but like the gods he hides behind a white cloud or column of smoke, for gods don't appear to human eyes" (*The Day* 6). Mubarak is a "Pharaoh" whose "prestige requires him to turn into a soul that soars high above body, mind, and the five senses" (*The Day* 6). Rather than showing guilt or regret, his eyes have "the look of a god whose watchful eyes never sleeps, the god of good and evil, who wields death and life and gives to whomever he chooses and deprives others from the joys of this life and the hereafter" (6). El Saadawi reiterates her belief in the victory of the will of the people: "The revolution will succeed in spite of the hostility of the superpowers in heaven, beyond the sea, or inside our birthplace. The power of the organized millions will win as it had done before in Tahrir square. Could anybody have imagined then that the god would quit or resign?" (*The Day* 9).

My second example of contemporary Arab women writers' counter narration is Ahdaf Soueif's *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution* in which she presents her first-hand testimony about Cairo and the Tahrir Uprising. The text belongs to the genre of *ديروث تاركلم* (revolutionary diary) as it presents Soueif's personal chronicle of the eighteen days of the Uprising with an epilogue inserted in the middle. Soueif's text includes her sentiments towards her beloved city Cairo, nostalgia for a glorious past, melancholy over a deteriorated present, and her yearning for reconciliation and optimism for a future. There is a palpable amalgamation between the narrator and her city personified as a motherly figure: "The city puts her lips to our ears, she tucks her arm into ours and draws close so we can feel her heartbeat and smell her scent, and we fall in with her, and measure our step to hers, and we fill our eyes with her beautiful, wounded face and whisper that her memories are our memories, her fate is our fate" (9). Soueif's jubilant and detailed record of the Uprising is juxtaposed to and intertwined with a depressing portrayal of Cairo under the despotic and corrupt Mubarak regime which "made Cairo into a clown" (43). Soueif's portrayal of pre-Uprising Cairo re-envisioning a cultural memory by documenting the events and quandaries which eventually led to the January 2011 Uprising: "Streets were dug up and left unpaved. Sidewalks vanished. Prime and historic locations became car parks. Streetlights dimmed. Nothing was maintained or mended. Old houses were torn down and monstrous towers built in their place" (43). Hence, one of the main projects of the revolution was to save the city that has been "degraded and bruised and robbed and exploited and mocked and slapped about" (45) and to "reclaim our country" (7). The narration of the eighteen days emphasizes the effect on her as a lifting off the burden of the sense of heaviness and loss which were as much part of the urban fabric of Cairo as a predominant state of mind the inhabitants of Cairo and so Soueif can write that "my city is mine again" (9).

What characterizes *Cairo* is the prevalent sense of intimacy and personalization and the emotional dimension. This Soueif achieves through the narration of memories and anecdotes in the context of the Uprising, for example her aunt's apartment now the center of the battle with state security forces, the place where she had her first job and other office buildings which were the "symbols of military and political power" (10-11) and that now are locations of battle. Partly a memoir, partly a chronicle of the Uprising, the text is both intimate and public. Soueif writes in her introduction that the book is "an intervention, rather than just a record" (xiv). Another distinctive characteristic of her narrative is that unlike traditional chronicles and similar to El Saadawi, she discards linear chronological narration: months leap forward and backwards and are inserted within each other. Stories are interwoven and times, places, and experiences are juxtaposed and the reader is invited to participate by evoking and his/her memories.

In the Preface to *Cairo*, Soueif poses the problem that might hinder any revolutionary writer endeavoring to revolutionize and write at the same time and she suggests that a "revolutionary" writer has to evoke the past while documenting a present that is "fast becoming the past" (xiv), as well as offer a glimpse of the future. According to Soueif, the difficulty lies in the fact that "a revolution is a process, not an event" and "writing" the "ongoing revolution" is a hard, and risky task (xiv). Soueif fulfills her goal by avoiding hyperbole, cynicism, and over-sentimental oratory. Despite the unforgettable impact of undergoing, first hand, such a life-changing experience, Soueif steps back to delineate the intricate mosaic of Cairo's contemporary political and social lives: Islamic fundamentalists and liberals, rebels and thugs, feminists and conservatives, the elites and common folk, etc., while adding her personal touch. Although politically charged, Soueif's prose is often humorous, for example when she recalls an episode when "A man pops out of a tree with branches tied to his arms and performs a tree dance. Another improvises a stand-up routine as 'the Indian Expert, Mr. Nana' coming to tell us how to run The Revolution" (57). Soueif's text is open-ended in that she ascertains the difficulty of the process of the transformation to democracy. She sheds light on events of the Uprisings by reminding us of the courage and determination of a people who have taken the choice to be silent no more and to shape a better future for themselves and society as a whole: "I believe that optimism is a duty; if people had not been optimistic on 25 January, and all the days that followed, they would not have left their homes or put their wonderful, strong, vulnerable bodies on streets. Our revolution would not have happened ... Our story continues" (186-94).

My third example is Salwa Bakr's *The Golden Chariot*, a novel about contemporary Egypt in which she criticizes oppressive mechanisms of control of family and society and Bakr assigns blame to the state's norms and institutions for the injustices and inequality inflicted on women. Bakr resorts to breaking various forms of representations and reversing the private and peripheral into the public and representative and thus she provokes the reader to rethink and redefine political, literary, and religious concepts and demonstrates the need for rewriting social norms. *The Golden Chariot* is about mad women prisoners from various social backgrounds who are employed as representatives of the Egyptian nation and their stories are used to direct a criticism towards the nation, the state, traditions, and oppressive and apathetic social and legal institutions. The protagonists of *The Golden Chariot* are all criminals, marginal, and some oscillating between sanity and madness. Yet those characters magnetize our sympathy as victims of society. For example, the protagonist Aziza can find virtuous qualities in thieves, drug dealers, and murderers who for her are "most distinguished and noble women ... really angels without wings" (24). The crimes and madness of the inmates are highlighted and vindicated as the result of being torn between an idealized image of family life, gender relationships, and the harsh realities of life: the "failure" of these women to articulate their oppression drives them to "the point of breakdown and to the brink of madness ... political, religious, scientific, and literary languages and forms of representation for hindering the inmates' articulation and she concludes that "isn't silence in a world ranging with nonsense a sign of ultimate sanity rather than madness?" (84-164).

Emphasizing the madness of the inmates is significant as representative of Egyptian society's problems and the state's psychiatric ward is the "stopping place for those who could not bear the inconsistencies and futility of life" (163). The inmates' lunacy becomes primarily an indictment of society since it is a "symptom of political impotence and cultural alienation" (Al-Nowaihi 79). Bakr emphasizes repetitively that the inmates' psychopathic symptoms are the natural upshot of the stagnant, apathetic world of oppression and injustice. This is demonstrated in the tendency of the inmates to

live in the past and the frequent "process of calling up old memories" which is associated with "all those other weak and feeble inmates locked behind the high walls and cut off from the accumulation of new memories in the outside world. In this respect it was as if they were dying, cut off from hope and unable to hold on to life, through regenerating the images in their minds" (76). The use of a cyclic, repetitive time sequence emphasizes this reflective, backward-looking quality.

In "Re-envisioning National Community in Salwa Bakr's *Golden Chariot*," Magda M. Al-Nowaihi considers the woman's prison to function "both as a microcosm of and an oppositional space to the nation" (78). The prison, with its panoply of social classes, languages, backgrounds, occupations, and affiliations is representative of the nation with its injustices, tensions, and strife. According to Homi K. Bhabha, the prison represents "the cutting edge between the totalizing powers of the 'social' as homogenous, consensual community and the forces that signify the more specific address to contentious, unequal interests and identities within the population" (Bhabha qtd. in Al-Nowaihi 79). The prison merges the public with the private and has the ability, through the permeation of intimacy, compassion, and rebellion, to disrupt the status quo and circumvent societal impositions and regulations. Aziza's golden chariot starts out as a figment of an unbalanced woman's imagination who insists that the "beautiful golden chariot with magnificent white, winged horses ascending to heaven should include only the most distinguished and noble women of the prison. For these women were really angels without wings who had lost their way to heaven and came instead to this awful, depressing solitary place from which she would rise with them, returning them to their rightful place above" (24). Later, however, the chariot becomes what Al-Nowaihi describes as: "a crucial oppositional space; one that is not juxtaposed simply to the prison, but also to the outside world where justice has failed, to the utopia" (78) of all who dream of justice, mercy, and equality. The golden chariot is the progeny of the dreams and hallucinations of the outraged and frustrated as they launch their rebellion against the government as well as, in some cases, god. The golden chariot symbolizes the desire for an aspired utopia and the vehicle of assessing and reaching: "that beautiful place in heaven where there is grace and favor, everlasting, supreme happiness and true, deep love between human beings" (191). It is the means enabling these women to "achieve justice and mercy" (134) which they cannot find on earth.

Bakr demolishes ingrained societal injustices, inequality, and oppression and to achieve this goal she resorts to what Al-Nowaihi describes as the "poetics of disorientation" (73). This manner of narration relies on a back and forth movement, concurrences, juxtapositions, and the oppositions of spaces, languages, and characters between the private and public, the marginal and central, the serious and ludicrous, and linguistically between classical Arabic and colloquial Egyptian. Thus Bakr breaks numerous taboos and similar to El Saadawi narrates rage, frustration, and rebellion. The taboos of incest and infanticide are also violated, as in the stories of Aziza and Shafiqah and the use of polyphonic narrative conveys the plethora of women's voices from various classes and affiliations. By selecting "inferior" subjects and then reversing this inferiority, Bakr succeeds in exhibiting empathy for the downtrodden and narrates "the tragic pathos of Egyptian daily life" (Al-Nowaihi 92).

My next examples are the short stories "Pharaoh is Drowning Again" by Sakina Fuad, "The Beginning" by Bakr, and "I Will Never Forfeit my Right" by Mona Rageb in which Egyptian women's attempts to deal with their destinies are narrated in order to redefine their familial relationships and conventional social institutions. The short stories are about contending and deconstructing the prevailing gender ideology and core values. The women protagonists — although presented as ensnared, frustrated, and suffering in abusive situations — suggest the necessity to rebel against patriarchal institutions, practices, and social norms. To achieve empowerment, women protagonists are heroes who occupy center stage, whereas men are demoted to the background and presented in a negative light. Personal experiences are interpreted perceptively and life realities are presented authentically. To augment the realism of the narrative, the language employed is direct, concrete, and detailed. There is a tendency to utilize the colloquial and vernacular dialogue and realism is meant to cast a biographical/autobiographical perspective on the narrative. Allegory is sometimes used to evoke social and political criticism, as for example in Fuad's poignant image of the male as omnipotent god/ruler: "Pharaoh is a god who rules by divine right. The queen ascends a throne of fog; a puff of air from the master's mouth blows the throne away" (168). In Fuad's "Pharaoh is Drowning Again" the heroine rejects the institution of marriage where: "everything is done by force of habit or through fear of him" (168). The husband figure is a "Pharaoh" who "runs his kingdom with great skill" (168), but with nei-

ther passion nor empathy. Marriage, based on possession, is doomed: "Ownership has corrupted everything. Sincerity has vanished, and relationships have lost their intimacy". Borrowing the biblical allusion, the heroine ultimately rebels: "I turn into a giant rebel, killing and burning" (168). She is triumphant: "The sea releases the breath it has been holding until we cross. Its mountains explode as raging waves, submerging Pharaoh and his armies" (168). In Rageb's "I Will Never Forfeit My Right" a wife's desire for self-fulfillment as a working woman is hindered by tradition and law and who has "chosen to use my mind rather than lose it" (211). In consequence, she pays for her courage and insubordination and loses custody of her child to her husband because she "said 'no' to him after I realized that the Middle Eastern man wants his wife to sigh rather than think" (211) and her pleas for justice and understanding fall on deaf ears. She is determined, however, not to forfeit her right to fight: "I won't be another sacrificial lamb that you offer to history, I won't hide my dignity in the bottom of the trunk, and I won't vanish like smoke in the wind. I will continue to cry out for prompt justice, and I won't rest until justice is done" (212). In "The Beginning" Bakr represents how the winds of change are altering traditional male-female relations and transform norms, attitudes, and notions. In this story, a husband's selfishness and insulting and domineering attitude push his wife, who is "fed up and exhausted" (283) to violence: "Recalling five years of marital repression" (283) the woman turns into "a wounded lioness" (283), who gives her torturer a taste of her fist, teeth, and nails. His defeat transforms her rebellion to disgust and she abandons him.

Next, I draw on examples found in Palestinian writing: Amina Kazak's poems "Deportation" and "My Last Day with Aisha," Samira Azzam's "Bread of Sacrifice," Sahar Khalifeh's "Memories of an Unrealistic Woman," and Fadwa Tuqan's "A Mountainous Journey," texts in which a heroic vision, resilience, resistance, and hope are associated with the 1987 Palestinian Intifada. These authors act as spokespersons for their people, but by focus on women. Their works deal primarily with human suffering and struggle and what characterizes these texts is the refusal to resort to escapism or victimization. There is emphasis on women's self-discovery and self-realization and in which existential situations and questions of freedom, justice, and faith are suggested as redemption and solution. In her autobiographical narrative "A Mountainous Journey" Tuqan expounds her refusal of her father's demand to write political poetry: "How and with what right or logic does father ask me to compose political poetry, when I am shut up inside those walls? I don't sit with men ... I don't listen to their heated discussions, now do I participate in the turmoil of life outside. I'm still not even acquainted with the face of my own country as I was not allowed to travel" (713). Later, however, she declares her emancipation from the "harem" and her self-fulfillment: "The liberation came at last; I found myself merged with the "other", discovering myself through the compass of reality" (718). Tuqan's personal liberation is achieved through her involvement with social and political activity. Similarly, Azzam's "Bread of Sacrifice" offers a woman's experience where country and woman are merged into one entity: "Palestine was not only a sea with fishing boats, and oranges shining like gold, and not just olives and olive oil filling the big oil jars. It was Su'ad's black eyes as well. In Su'ad eyes he saw all of Palestine's goodness" (393-94). And thus Su'ad becomes a symbol: "She loved you and became a symbol for all of us" (397). Her story is one of "of the redemption of life by flesh and blood" (399) and her death takes the allegorical status of sacrifice and salvation.

In "Memories of an Unrealistic Woman" Khalifeh concentrates on both the Palestinian and the feminist struggle for liberation and emphasizes the close interrelation of feminist and political consciousness, issues of feminist aspirations and limitations. The free-spirited protagonist is condemned and accused of being "rebellious" (594) and the struggle against an apathetic milieu can only be won by "being realistic and unrealistic" (596). And in the poem "Deportation" Kazak represents the poets of the Palestinian diaspora whose situation expresses their constant yearning for their roots in and bond with their land. In "Deportation" the usurpers of the homeland succeed in depriving her of her land, her body, and her vision, but she maintains her voice "singing its song of love for my country / which they will never understand / never embrace and never possess" (354). The poem is a strong proclamation of freedom and transcendent power of a woman's voice. In this poem, as well as in "My Last Day with Aisha" both the poet and her city, although victims of oppression, are presented as paradigms of heroism and resistance.

The multi-faceted prism of Arab women literary output demonstrates diverse themes, approaches, and styles and it testifies to the new Arab woman's perspective towards social and personal relevance

in Arab society. Many contemporary Arab women writers abandon their assigned places to the periphery of public life in order to enter society as active members. These women writers narrate their people's existential battles for emancipation including the position of women and thus establish the foundations of feminism by connecting national progress with the emancipation of women. The traits of their "revolutionary" texts assign them as belonging to what Jean-Paul Sartre and later Jacques Rancière understand as committed literature that provides "a different community of sense and of the perceptible, a different relationship between words and beings, a different common world and a different people" (Rancière 6). The eloquence and relevance of committed literature arises from a "spirit of analysis and skepticism, separation of reason from myth and history from fiction, inventing this hermeneutics of the social body molding speech to carve up space and time, the visible and the invisible, speech and noise" (Rancière 7).

In conclusion, the impact and effect of committed literature whereby in the case of contemporary Arab women writers the political is joined with feminist perspectives results in the "equality of subjects and the availability of any word and phrase to build the fabric of any life, where the state is no longer based on divine right but on the rational needs of population management" (Rancière 8). My examples in the present study demonstrate that Arab women writers decided to be agents of feminist action and social change through their critique of the patriarchal phallogocentric domination and their call for a secular nationalist sensibility. Although contemporary Arab women writers proved themselves to be sibyls of democracy and change-makers and have made great strides in freeing themselves from social and traditional bondage, the process of liberation is yet incomplete. The struggle for freedom and equality is often hindered by hostility and resistance and at other times catapulted by solidarity and collaboration: "We are at the moment of beginning ... I will not return ... until the sea has swallowed all the Pharaohs" (Fuad 168).

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