

Turning Tender Petals into Sharp Protruding Thorns: Sexual Politics in Nawal El Saadawi's *Two Women in One* and *The Circling Song*

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Abstract

This paper examines the writing by Egyptian nationalist-feminist writer Nawal El Saadawi (1931-) as ways to create national identities, and also to resist the forms and positions of patriarchy adopted by the newly independent nation. *Two Women in One* (1985) and *The Circling Song* (1989) take up Egyptian women's biological, culture-reproducing and symbolic roles that the Egyptian nationalists employ to pursue identities as national boundary markers between the 1950s and 1970s. Facing Islamic fundamentalism as the increasingly dominant voice that demanded the return to traditional values after the 1970s, El Saadawi demonstrated that Islamic feminism is not a homogeneous term and that the Islamist call for the return to home she opposed is not traditional but the result of complex cultural amalgamations. To tackle Egyptian women's issues on feminine honor and female genital cutting, El Saadawi's FGC discourse, which has multiple origins, both engages with and troubles Western feminist theories, including gender construction, radical feminism and psychoanalysis, and is imbued with the notion of women's rights. She complicates penis-envy theory in feminist sexuality theory to explain the health and sexual issues on FGC, a custom to ensure virginity, in her writing. Exhibiting cultural inter-mixture in her approaches, El Saadawi both troubles the Eastern and Western cultural boundaries and calls for cultural and historical particularities in treating the FGC discourse. Meanwhile, this paper also analyzes the drawback in El Saadawi's writing for not being clear about whether female sexuality is a result of biological determinism or cultural dichotomizing effect in her conceptual framework. The juxtaposition of the two novels demonstrates how her middle-class position has impacts on her sexual politics.

Keywords: female genital cutting, Islam, nationalist-feminism, Nawal El Saadawi, patriarchy

化玉帛為干戈：
納瓦勒·薩達維的《雙面女郎》和《圓圈之歌》與性／別政治

摘 要

本文檢視埃及民族主義女性主義者納瓦勒·薩達維(Nawal El Saadawi, 1931-)以書寫做為創構國家認同的方式，她的書寫位置與男性民族主義者既合作又抗拒。《雙面女郎》(*Two Women in One*, 1985)和《圓圈之歌》(*The Circling Song*, 1989)論及在上世紀五十至七十年代間，女性被國家用來標舉文化疆界的角色，兩部小說皆論及埃及女性的生物、文化複製和象徵性的角色。而兩部小說的對照，可以看出薩達維的中產階級傾向。從某種程度來說，身為精神科醫生，納瓦勒·薩達維處理女性榮譽和女性割陰的議題，使之與西方女性主義和人權議題產生複雜關係。割陰和女性貞潔實有分不開的關係，而西方精神分析一直以來都扮演著西方霸權注視的角色。薩達維的性/別政治攪擾西方性/別建構理論、精神分析和基進女性主義，而陽具妒羨的理論則被用來說明女性割陰的多重脈絡。她對西方論述的挪移一方面擾動挑戰東西方文化的界線，一方面則呼籲女性割陰必須被置放到特定歷史和文化脈絡。納瓦勒·薩達維書寫時刻正當上世紀七十年代後回教基本教義派逐漸熾烈之時，回歸傳統的父權制甚囂塵上，本文一方面討論納瓦勒·薩達維攪動西方女性主義的多元混雜論述形構，成為她抵抗割陰習俗的論述的一部分，一方面指出回教基本教義派之家庭回歸並非傳統，而是東西方文化混雜的結果。另一方面，本文亦指出，納瓦勒·薩達維的論述架構隱含生物決定論抑或社會二元建構論的含混矛盾，她的本質主義是她女人性/別的流動越界揮之不去的假設和限制。

關鍵詞:女性割陰、伊斯蘭教、民族女性主義、納瓦勒·薩達維、父權

I. Introduction

As an Egyptian nationalist feminist, El Saadawi assumes a secular position, denounces the link between feminine virtues and traditional values in Islamic fundamentalism. She comes up with female masculinity as a correction to Egyptian women's domestic entrapment. Born in 1931, Nawal El Saadawi is a writer, doctor and women rights activist in Egypt. Growing up in the small village of *Kafr Tahla* by the Nile, El Saadawi gives particular attention to peasant women in her writing through the middle-class lens. Addressing such issues as female genital cutting¹ and the wide gap between the poor and the rich through a peasant girl living in Cairo, *The Circling Song* was written in Arabic in 1973, right after Anwar Sadat won the military victory in the October War. The removal of clitoris is directly related to breaking the hymen in the FGC custom in Arabo-Islamic culture. As Abdelwahab Bouhdiba points out, FGC is a solemn festival with its importance second only to breaking the hymen on the wedding night (177). *Two Women in One*, published first in Arabic in 1975, dealt with a middle-class woman who strives for her political rights and unmask in an implicit manner her thoughts about FGC.

These two novels, emerging in Arabic in the 1970s, attested to El Saadawi's unswerving critique of the fundamentalist resurgence, the widespread consumerist culture and the reviving traditionalist views that continued to disempower Muslim women. Furthermore, the settings describe the socio-political background of *Two Women in One* and *The Circling Song*, the former Nasser's nationalism, and the latter, Sadat's pro-American policy. Published in English editions in the 1980s, these two novels echoed the ethos of the FGC eradication campaign, based overall on pro-sexuality thinking, after the UN Decade for Women between 1975 and 1985. El Saadawi was Egypt's Director of Public Health from 1965 to 1972, until she was dismissed from the position as a consequence of her political activities and her controversial book, *Women and Sex*, and afterwards she was imprisoned under Anwar Sadat due to her political views disliked by the authorities in 1981. The complex political and post-colonial implications complicate the FGC narratives that no simple dichotomies inherent in Western understanding of Islam can possibly grasp. Neither agreeing with traditions proposed by Islamist groups nor forgoing racism, El Saadawi's space-wrenching act is vital to building global solidarity among women from different camps and balancing national, transnational and feminist agendas. Her "multiple overlapping and sometimes contradictory allegiances" echo "Homi Bhabha's hope that new knowledge can be articulated by 'the minority that resists totalization'" (Cooke

¹ I opt for the term, female genital cutting, abbreviated as FGC hereafter, to extensively refer to different types of the practice, while avoiding the moral condemnation that the word, mutilation, used in the Western human rights language, connotes.

80). The purpose of the paper is to unravel the complex sexual politics behind the FGC narratives so easily turned against Muslim women under the Western gaze through *The Circling Song* and *Two Women in One*.

While forging sisterhood with the East, Western feminisms make FGC stand out as if it were the only issue of Islamic feminism, thereby ignoring what Nira Yuval-Davis carefully recommends about possibilities across differential positions and ideological identities of global feminisms (131). As women give birth to and nurture their next generations, they symbolize the guardians for the nation. The need to define identities based on religious, ethnic and national boundaries carries a heavy burden for real Egyptian women (2). This paper looks at El Saadawi's attempts to have a say on FGC to her multiple audiences around the world. She passionately advocates women's positive libido, while contending that FGC is not unique to Islam, as is often assumed by the Western media. This paper will engage in El Saadawi's take on gender and sexualities in an increasingly globalizing world, and examine how she deals with feminine honor and FGC. This paper starts with an overview of El Saadawi's multiple positions; subsequently, it investigates El Saadawi's shifting positions on FGC which transcends and manages national, cultural and community boundaries; toward the end of the paper, El Saadawi's problems, disruptions and limitations resulting from her middle-class position in her gender/sexuality politics are under discussion.

II. Nawal El Saadawi's Multiple Positions and Multiplex Strategies

This section first discusses the problems of cultural translations about the FGC surgery and El Saadawi's multiple positions strategies, that is, the intersectional position of her Islamic feminism. Nawal El Saadawi wrote and published *The Circling Song* (1989) and *Two Women in One* (1985) in Arabic in the 1970s during Anwar Sadat's reign. The English translations of these two novels appeared in the 1980s, when the fundamentalist revival was spreading like wildfire throughout Egypt, combined with the implementation of human-rights notion of women's rights during the UN Decade for Women. *Jihad*, an Islamic term referring to the Muslims' religious duty with an emphasis on traditions revolving around feminine modesty, was a lifestyle supporting religious inculcation and Islamic dress codes in urban Egypt and abroad starting in the 1980s. The call for restoring religious values in the increasingly secularized Egyptian society is far from a homogenous movement, although the full face and body veil, *niqab*, signifying feminine propriety, is pivotal to Islam (Mahmood 43). In 1977, as the result of the pressure from the International Monetary Fund, Sadat decreased governmental subsidies on bread and beans, and soon not only bread riot but also raging anti-Western sentiment broke out in the cities of Egypt (Alagna 86). Though

lifting the ban on the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood in the 1970s, Sadat signed the peace accord with Israel in 1978, thereby warranting his own death in the hands of Islamic fundamentalists in 1981 (Bruce 3).

The above is the context from which El Saadawi's sexual politics in Islam come into view in *The Circling Song* and *Two Women in One*. Bahiah Shaheen in *Two Women in One* is an 18-year-old medical university student and daughter of a prominent government official. For Bahiah, both her father and the male classmates are rough. Her father understands his daughter's need for education but gives no room for her to exercise her rights in terms of political engagements. One day, she encounters Saleem, her boyfriend, at her medical school, and that is the turning point of her self-discovery as a sexually liberated woman. Bahiah demands the right to choose her own spouse and refuses to submit to women's child-rearing role, which means she will be no one but her husband's virtuous wife and a good mother. Defying patriarchy from Egyptian nationalism, Bahiah makes it clear that a woman is not born a woman, but becomes one, and thereby El Saadawi echoes Western gender construction theory.

By contrast, Hamida and Hamido in *The Circling Song* are twins in the small village by the Nile, born from the same embryo inside one womb. They look exactly the same, when still inside their mother's womb. Hamida suffers from repetitive sexual molestation by neighbors and extended family members and becomes pregnant involuntarily. Hamida's mother sends her to Cairo to avoid repercussion as a result of her adultery in the village. Her brother, Hamido, is sent by the family to kill her and regain family honor. The twins search each other in the big city only to find an unbroken cycle of cruelty and corruption of all kinds in Cairo. The chase of the sister starts from the rustic village and extends all the way to Cairo where capitalism is to blame for economic and political unrest in Egypt. Along the lines of the two novels, El Saadawi reconstructs the FGC experience that remains relatively coded and subdued in the novels.

Nawal El Saadawi represented Egyptian feminism starting from the 1960s, the decade immediately following Egypt's independence in 1952 and Jamal Abdel Nasser's presidency. Bahiah in *Two Women in One* particularly reflects Sadat's policymaking in women's rights issues. Bahiah was empowered by Nasser's nationalization of women's rights during his service from 1956 to 1970 (Al-Ali 68-69). Nasser's policy of free education and employment opportunities for graduates nurtured the young middle-class generation from whom he in return received support and loyalty. The defeat in Palestine in the 1967 War, led by iron-fisted Nasser, dealt a devastating psychological blow to every Egyptian. Succeeding Nasser, Anwar Sadat launched the October War in 1973 in order to reclaim the Sinai lost to Israel in the 1967 War, which sets the scene for *The*

Circling Song.² Following the October War, Sadat introduced *infitah*, a pro-American and pro-capitalist economic policy to Egypt. The policy of *infitah* removed restrictions regarding investment in the private sector to encourage domestic and foreign investment. Affiliating with the United States was coupled with a break with the ally and aid of Russia. The *infitah* created the gap between the upper income and the lower income groups, and consequently, triggered the discontent at the government in an emphatically Islamist language.

At the early developmental stage of Egyptian nationalist-feminism, women's rights to education and work were rested on the individual interpretation, as the westernized, modernist intellectual, Qasim Amin argued, "How can a nation prosper in this life and the next when one half of its members are like beasts of burden, neglecting their duties toward God, themselves, and their relatives" (8)? Muslim women have come to be the marker of the national boundaries, their function differentiating between "we" and "they" with their emphasized feminine virtues presumably on an equal footing with men. Amin's ideas allowed Egyptian women to have the freedom to work outside, but they can do so, when continuing the caretakers of the family. They are equal to men, insofar as they manage households, serve as the soul mates of their husbands and educate their sons. In the 1930s, the Egyptian Feminist Union improved Egyptian women's roles in family in terms of not only the legal reform but also complementary roles between the sexes, and thereby incorporating the lower-class Egyptians into the nation, a project founded on universalism and modernity. As Lila Abu-Lughod suggests, Islamic fundamentalists' disapproval of women's sexual freedom and insistence on women's roles in the family are not traditional; rather, Western thoughts have influenced the definitions of Islamists' call for return to home as the domain of the inner and spiritual (263).

Under Nasser, university students wore jeans and tight jumpers, or even miniskirts, without their hair covered to manifest their secular identity (Soueif 271). Sadat's *infitah* led to a contradictory co-existence of Western designer fashion and *niqab*, a traditional and unadorned outfit which covered both the face and body of Muslim women, which is also the case of Bahiah and Hamida. As Ahdaf Soueif points out, the traditional dress code of Muslim women was not static (270). The full *niqab* did not necessarily signify a good Muslim woman only; it was also a statement of

² Taking place on the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur, the October War is also referred to as the Yom Kippur War. After Egyptians' successful start, the Israeli soldiers had a breakthrough and reached as close as Cairo and Damascus. Although Egypt suffered from a great number of casualties, Israel's confidence severely dwindled for being caught unprepared. Nasser closed the Suez Canal in 1967, which incurred tremendous financial loss. Sadat reopened the Suez Canal for the first time in 1975 since its closure. For the October War, please see Frank Mitch, *Understanding the Holy Land: Answering Questions about the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (New York: Viking, 2005), pp. 63-64. For re-opening the Suez Canal, please see Magdalena Alagna, *Anwar Sadat* (New York: the Rosen Publishing Group, 2004), p. 83.

religious faith at a time when the government arbitrarily arrested and tortured any suspects who seemed to involve in anti-governmental activities. In *Two Women in One*, girls dressed in modern outfits are still subjected to female circumcision:

They [her traditional classmates] walked like reptiles, legs together, and if their thighs happened to separate briefly, they would quickly snap together again. The girls pressed their legs together as if something valuable might fall if they separate. (77)

Also, for Hamida in *The Circling Song*, she changes into modern outfits in Cairo: “Hamida walked down the street, teetering on her high heels, her arms, thighs and throat bare, her dress cut low to reveal her breasts” (74). Islam is not uniquely misogynistic, while revealing outfits are no indication of sexual liberation.

The ways in which El Saadawi understands FGC emphasize the intersectionality of the issue with culture, race and economics that traverse the spaces of the local and international. In her article “Imperialism and Sex in Africa” written in 2005, El Saadawi perceives FGC in terms of obscurantism, imperialism, Freud’s suppression of the clitoris, unnecessary nonmedical interventions, postmodern relativism and human rights infringement based on gender persecution (21-26). A case in point is the policymaking concerning FGC; in Egypt, throughout Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak’s rules, their attitudes towards FGC remained ambivalent, both succumbing to international human rights pressures and not putting the laws prohibiting FGC into practice for fear of conservative power and the individuals’ resistance against changes (Al-Ali 75-76). Furthermore, the Egyptian government had to cope with the human rights call for the FGC ban in return for subsidies from America.

In *The Circling Song*, Hamida expresses the pain of not having a language to relate to the experience: “Hamida stuck a small fingertip into the cleft; it came out wet with blood. She wiped it on the wall, imprinting her mark on the cement, like a personal signature” (68). FGC is easily caught in the imperialist eyes of the West and multiculturalism in which cultural others stand revealed to the West as known strangers, and thus differentiating the self and others either outside the Western and global communities or within them. Meanwhile, Hamida is subjected to the risk of disappearance in the face of the middle-class consciousness. The portrayal of the vulnerable peasant girls might be yet another mistaken stereotype, since not only uneducated women, but also the westernized city-dwelling bourgeoisie in Africa go through the surgery voluntarily (Packer 145). Importantly, the human rights-friendly discourse that the West adopts to help remove the practice, for instance, can be ineffective, particularly within the impoverished sub-Saharan African region (132). The

population in keeping with the old ways in the rural areas are simply too marginalized and economically disadvantaged to be compatible with the dubious values of human rights and sexuality-positive ideology (142).

To unravel the implicit manner in which the FGC surgery is voiced in *Two Women in One* and *The Circling Song*, one should take notice of how El Saadawi troubles the Eastern/Western boundaries with her strategies of contradictions, interruptions and unsettlement between the national and trans-national, if not totally without problems. El Saadawi enters the FGC debate by stating that this practice is not unique in Islam at all, but is also performed in Europe as medical treatment for women (*Hidden Face of Eve* 39). For instance, this surgery is known in nineteenth-century Europe for treating deviances such as masturbation and hysteria (Gruenbaum 11). El Saadawi protests Freud against curbing female sexuality: “Sigmund Freud promoted psychological circumcision of women when he formulated his theory that maturity and mental health in a woman required that orgasm related to the clitoris cease and be transferred to the vagina” (“Imperialism and Sex” 22).

For Miriam Cooke, 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). In this way, Cooke argues that El Saadawi utilizes her trans-national positions to re-examine the Quran, to rebuke the accusation of cultural betrayal and to create Egyptian women as subjects of history within their own religion (81). For Amal Amireh, it is difficult for El Saadawi to express her discontent at her religion in the face of the epistemic violence created by the stereotypical association between Islam and women in the West (65). Her feminism is easily reduced to a “persecution story about a feminist harassed by a patriarchy intent on subduing her,” or a “success story of the rise to prominence of a rural Third World woman” (51). For Chantal Zabus, El Saadawi emerges as a maternalist and documents the fall of matriarchies and the reign of all-encompassing oppressions of patriarchy (103). Both Daly and El Saadawi focus on the roles of Virgin Mary and Eve in the monotheistic religions, the former the clean vessel to bear Christ, the latter a seductress who leads Adam to sin against God.

Despite severe medico-physical consequences, the complex nature of socio-cultural effects of FGC has not yet received due attention in the host countries of the immigrants where the practice is retained (Lockhat 101-36). As names, the translations of FGC are full of problems and irreducible. The English terms, such as excision, infibulation and mutilation, do not exist in Egyptian and Arabic cultures (Zabus 10). The word, circumcision, however, cannot convey the different degrees to which the operation is carried out on women, especially the drastic one, called pharaonic

circumcision, in which not only the clitoris, but also labia minora and labia majora are removed with only a small orifice left for the urine and menstruation to pass (Ali 101). Clitoridectomy is ambiguous, since the operation involves not only cutting away the clitoris itself and the hood of the clitoris, but also excising part or all of the labia minora (Zabus 11; Ali 101). Mutilation, commonly referred to in the West, originates from Latin and has heavy legal and moral denotations that the practicing communities do not have (10). The most commonly used Arabic word for circumcision done on both men and women is *khitan*, literally means cutting away the prepuce of genitalia (Ali 103). The less popular word, *khifad*, comes from *khafd*, which means lowering the voices, is a specific word for female *khitan* only (Ali 103). *Tahara*, which means purification, carries the religious resonance of subduing the baser self despite genders (103).

In complicating Freud and Western feminisms, El Saadawi both associates with and distances herself from Western cultural hegemony. Moreover, the operation has no legal validity to resort to in the Quran. Since the Quran approves of women's sexual satisfaction in marriage, it can actually argue to the contrary that FGC goes against religious teachings (104). El Saadawi's heroines, Bahiah and Hamida, with their successful or failed images of the new woman, intervenes in the long standing history of the male-led nationalism that has put gender equality on the pedestal since the late nineteenth century, besides revealing the continuing commercialization of women's bodies and images in capitalist economy. As the paper will suggest, the narratives on FGC in El Saadawi's writing demonstrate the porous boundaries between the local and trans-national, as they show the unsettled and unpredictable contact with the Western history of psychoanalysis, their uneven relationships with Western discourse of sexual liberation and the human rights-oriented promotion comprising the rights of the child, the rights to sexual and physical integrity and the right to health.

III. Toward Discursive Shifting Ground: Egyptian Women's Liberation and Female Genital Cutting

El Saadawi does not treat religion in fixed terms, but rather, she believes that feminist interpretations of religious texts, including the Quran, can work toward the benefits of the FGC ban (Zabus 98). Her approach to religion is called *ijtihad*, or personal interpretation and reasoning, which is based on the changes of time and situation and mainly adopted by Islamic modernists. Though portraying Muslim men problematically as homogenous obstacles to Eastern women's liberation, El Saadawi disrupts nationalist men's perfunctory cry for gender equality, especially in the domestic sphere that remains overall unchanged after the national independence.

Egyptian nationalist discourse starts as a self-consolidating identity going against exterior Western cultural hegemony, but turns out to be internally exclusionary toward its own women and distinguish between authentic and fake Egyptians. The intersection of Egyptian nationalism with western liberalism in the process of modernity reveals the instability of nationalism that contributes both to the dichotomous Muslim man and woman as respectively militant and veiled in trans-national Islamic fundamentalism and to the disclosure of instability of the national self-identifications. While drawing on Western liberal feminism that encompasses such questions as reproductive right, sexual harassment, suffrage, equality in education and work, etc., Egyptian nationalist-feminisms since the late-nineteenth century, defined against the West, have offered a view of Islamic traditions that is more universalist than native.

El Saadawi's nationalist-feminism is not a stable project, but occupies multiple, shifting discursive sites. For Moallem, it is precisely the common ground of equalitarian feminism and Islamism that gives rise to the transcendent, ahistorical and dichotomous Muslim couple of militant men and veiled women in local nationalism and global Islamic fundamentalism (342). The cultural relativist approach of the West misperceives the practice as mutilation senselessly endured by women in another culture simply as the return of conservative practices, and thus fails to look at the history of FGC, while admitting that masturbation has been a taboo in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century Europe, too, and the vulva maintains obscure as a sexual organ, or termed as vagina till today (Zabus 208). Suzanne Gearhart contends that including minority groups and minority cultures into the center should not be thought simply in terms of trans-nationality and trans-individuality but lies rather “‘within’ each nation, each culture, each ethnicity, each majority and each minority” (40). At a time of crisis in Egypt, the new woman model and the veiled sacrificing woman through FGC were two sides of the same coin to invent cultural pasts, both competing to stand for the newly-birthed Egyptian nation, which all the more exhibits identification as complex, liminal spaces. El Saadawi's nationalism not only shatters the myth of cultural relativism and the Western lens of cultural anthropology but also elicits modernist women that the nation defines against within its boundary, and thus disclosing the myth of the nation.

In contrast to the Western physical integrity approach which defines a complete woman, for the circumcised women, it is the sutured vulva that makes them complete as women (Zabus 149). For El Saadawi, phallus, rather than merely penis, should constitute the difference between men and women. In *The Circling Song*, the twins are born in one embryo and look alike even in the tiniest features or muscles before the FGC surgery (23). Here, El Saadawi stresses physical integrity as part of her campaign against the FGC practice. The double perspectives of sexual politics in and out of

Western disciplines enable her to address women's liberation issues across differentiated positions and identities fluidly and face multiple audiences simultaneously. What one should really caution against perhaps is not so much the grand histories of nationalism and fundamentalism merely that keep the disempowered peasant women underrepresented, but the hegemony of multi-culturalism in the current global village that silences the voices of non-upwardly mobile, rural peasants, created by the stasis between subaltern feminism and Western liberal feminism. After all, fundamentalism as trans-national movement is not necessarily exempt from Western imperialism; its geopolitical specificity requires different readings beyond the secular/religious divide (Moallem 322).

El Saadawi's anti-FGC campaign simultaneously challenges and complicates Freudian declitorization. Addressing monotheistic religious traditions, El Saadawi maintains, "God does not create the organs of the body haphazardly without a plan. It is not possible that He should have created the clitoris in a woman's body only in order that it be cut off at an early stage in life" (*Hidden Face of Eve* 104). El Saadawi endorses the human rights-based physical integrity of women's bodies, the unnecessary non-medical interventions in sexual organs and the transferal when the girl has to give up her bi-sexuality in Freud's theory. Bahiah expresses how she is not allowed to know about her clitoris or her body as a whole:

When her fingers approached her genitals while washing, she would jerk them away, as if her hand had touched an electrified or prohibited area. She still remembered the rap her mother gave her as a child. (74)

Her mother's anxious look at her sexual organ makes her feel that it is ugly: "she felt disgusted by the sight of sexual organs in the bath" and wondered why God created bad and ugly organs in the first place (97). El Saadawi's westernized background should not make non-Muslim readers ignore the local cultural context. Non-circumcised genitalia are considered ugly in Africa because a non-circumcised woman is androgynous and thus not feminine and unattractive (Zabus 150). Muslim men are subjected to gendering, when having to go through male circumcision as the rite of passage. The history of psychoanalysis is intertwined deeply with FGC as the object of its studies; an example of this is the phrase such as "psychic genital mutilation" used to refer to the neglect of the clitoris in the twentieth century (208).

El Saadawi engages and disrupts Freud's penis-envy theory, and thereby complicating the meanings of castration complex. In *The Circling Song*, not only Hamida but also Hamido has castration complex in the signifying system, but only man is granted the discursive-controlling desire of the phallus. Hamido has the Oedipal complex, when he is little. He likes to cling to his mother's body, but he eventually identifies with his father through the social dichotomizing power. It is Hamido's father

that gives him the knife to kill Hamida. Hamida's body is a text on which she defies the association of penis with the privileged phallus. In *Two Women and One*, Bahiah opposes femininity defined by penis: "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). El Saadawi emphasizes that the desire to have the phallus is a symptom of man's inability to control meanings through Hamida's shriveled penis.

As Chantal Zabus points out, El Saadawi's approach which invokes a spectrum of sisterhood and adopts a feminist, legal trend is characteristic of the late 1970s (122). This is not to suggest that El Saadawi is ethnocentric, when dealing with FGC in Western terms, but to clarify that her work on FGC cannot be understood without regarding contemporaneous Western feminist concerns. El Saadawi is notably compared to her Western counterpart of feminist theologian, Mary Daly, for her maternalist arguments and establishments of women pioneers in history despite patriarchal control on all fronts in society and history (103). To establish a history of matriarchy before patriarchal systems, *The Circling Song* attempts to dissociate the link of woman's natural traits with sexual sins: "For it is in the nature of things that private parts have a shape which inspires shame and offends honour . . ." (78). To use Daly's words about the divinity murder of FGC: "[T]his ritual spread rapidly over a large geographical area, involving the torture and maiming of millions of women, condemning them to a living death, deadening the divine spark of be-ing, the Goddess within" (153). The misogynistic thinking having been taken for granted does not only reveal the strict fidelity control of patriarchy but also the complicit roles that religion and psychoanalysis both play in excluding women as the humanity, or "planetary patriarchy," to use Daly's term.

Because women are excluded from the symbolic order, they can only figure as an absence, silence, lack or hysteria in language. Western concerns with female sexual satisfaction, which can be seen in the critique of Freudian focus on reproduction, have influenced African writers and activists for women's liberation (Zabus 208). *The Circling Song* revolves around the brother's repetitive murder. The twins lose and find each other again, each time as if it were the first time. This narrative pattern from a survivor of FGC demonstrates the desire to subvert the phallogocentric order with a body-based, neurological narrative pattern to compete with Freud, who assigns meanings to his women patients. Hamida's trauma, on one hand, and Bahiah's impossibility to have female libido, on the other, reconstruct stories of unrepresentable female sexualities by El Saadawi, particularly the rural, oblivious and underrepresented Hamida.

In *Two Women in One*, Bahiah finds it difficult to recover from the trauma after she witnesses her sister's operation. She feels men and sexualities repulsive. Sexualities become such a problem that she portrays Dr. Alawi, her westernized, wealthy lecturer

in anatomy in the light of the rapist. Bahiah even kicks her husband arranged by her parents, their trick to prevent her from further engaging in political activities against the government: “He was naked. His genitals were black and ugly. She glanced at them in disgust” (102). El Saadawi argues that FGC impairs women’s sexual relationship with men, but this needs further supporting evidence, as research has suggested (Gruenbaum 134). For instance, Ellen Gruenbaum argues that culturally FGC is expected to increase male pleasure, rather than the other way around (152). Gruenbaum’s view is that the responsibility that the amputated clitoris is expected to take for ruining sexual pleasure is inconclusive because sexual orgasm involves more than just clitoral stimulation and can involve other erogenous zones, including at least the Gräfenberg spot (151). El Saadawi’s theoretical position has been influenced by Western sex-positive feminism where orgasmic pleasure is taken as women’s claims to their autonomy (Zabus 159). However, it is still too early to affirm that declitorization totally deprives women of their sexual orgasm. For Gruenbaum, instead, the individualist values in human rights language and Western feminisms, such as “self-esteem” and “dealing with peer pressure” are untranslatable to the local custom (qtd. in Zabus 254). Furthermore, FGC should not be uncritically singled out for dealing with patriarchy because it is the result, not the problem (Gruenbaum 177).

For Ellen Gruenbaum, imposing the ethos of Western sexual liberation on FGC, the subjugated clitoris and sexual repression in Freud, is culturally hegemonic (qtd. in Zabus 160). Meanwhile, women feel the urge to win respect in the local practicing communities highly honoring women’s virginity and chastity. Thus, the widespread belief that FGC spoils female sexuality reduces the complexity as to why the women choose to be circumcised, despite the apparent physical and psychological traumas. Insofar as FGC is caught between health problem and cultural conventions, the framework invoked to deal with the practice conforms to Eurocentric perspectives (Lockhat 99). The voyeurism of the Western gaze under the guise of benign intention fails to grasp the pain of the uncircumcised women who are not assimilated into their communities. The voyeuristic gaze makes FGC as if it were a taboo, while it is not deemed a secret for those who carry out the convention in local Muslim communities.

El Saadawi neutralizes the gender binary of masculinity and femininity in *The Circling Song* by having Hamido notice that, like Hamida, he has a cleft between his legs. Hamido steals a glance at his own private parts and only to discover “a small cleft which reminded him of the cleft he used to see on Hamida’s body” (41). Hamido’s penis is so small that he is led to believe that he is mistakenly given a woman’s body (41). Hamido is terrified of his castrating father who he is supposed to emulate as a man (24). Hamido’s equally castrated genitalia bring up the issue of Muslim men’s circumcision, which is often taken as an unchallengeable religious obligation, compared to the outcry

of atrocity done to women. The sexual ambivalence of El Saadawi's characters spells out the Orientalizing tendency in Western gender/sexual studies and calls for taking another look at the equally atrocious surgery of male circumcision, the sexual re-assignment surgery and bodily modifications on both body parts and sexual organs in the West.

This paper suggests that the sexual ambivalence of the twins in *The Circling Song* problematizes body art, plastic surgery, female genital cosmetic surgery and sex re-assignment surgery in the West. FGC demands Western gender/sexualities studies to re-examine the inherent assumptions. While FGC is regarded as harm unlawfully and barbarically done to women, bodily modifications on various parts of the boy in the West are a means for women to decide what they like to do with their own bodies (Zabus 271). Meanwhile, FGC, as sacrificial acts of Muslim men and women, becomes a sexual taboo in the eyes of the West, whereas spirituality and transcendence of body art are too self-evident and assumed. Likewise, the clitoris-reducing surgery in the West is neither considered a psychic wound nor is it an issue of female sexuality and human rights infringement (273). While FGC is made illegal in the West, doctors are paid highly to perform plastic surgeries in the West. For instance, certain piercings done to the tongues, nipples or genitalia that provide pleasure are not free from self-harming and health hazards (271). Furthermore, FGC in *The Circling Song* cautions against the power imbalance between FGC as mutilation and sex re-constructive surgery as a medical issue: some men's support for norm-abiding gender boundaries is legal and medical issues, while others' morally, legally and medically condemned.

The non-linear, circular narrative pattern in *The Circling Song*, as this paper suggests, is a rebellious psychic representation of the trauma after the surgery is done in a society where women's anger and resentment are deemed inappropriate, that is, an alternative, feminine space different from men's sexual economy from fore-play to climax and then to ending. As Cathy Caruth suggests, the "traumatic neurosis" in the body recurs precisely because of the incomprehensibility of the event (92). For Caruth, trauma is the double telling of what cannot be known and the unbearable nature of the survival (102). Hamida is afraid to wake up to the reality that her clitoris has been removed. The haunting memory repetitively comes back to her because she cannot grasp the experience: "Finding no one there, she raised the *gallabiyya* from her legs. The familiar appendage was not there; in its place she found a small cleft, which looked just like that old, closed-up wound" (48). For Hamida, the haunting memory is precisely to experience it again and again, so much so that she feels that she dies and comes to life again in the story (72). Compared to Hamida's victimization, in *Two Women in One*, Bahiah does not have to transfer the erotogenic zone to vagina. Favoring her clitoris, she does not give up her phallic activity as an adult:

She [Bahiah] wrapped up the painting and went out the small wooden door, her tall body slim, her straight legs enveloped by her trousers. One foot trod firmly on the ground before the other, and her legs parted noticeably. The men of the neighbourhood gazed at her from the shops; the women stared through keyholes and cracks in the windows. Was she woman or man? (119-20)

For El Saadawi, political factors are far from inconsequential in playing a role in Bahiah's frigidity and Hamida's masochism, and thereby their impossibility to rise above patriarchal oppression. In *Two Women in One*, Bahiah has neurological reactions toward sexuality, even after she has narrowly escaped the surgery as a survivor: "Sometimes when she felt the need for it [sexual desire] she would try to summon it up, but it refused to respond and never settled in her body" (97). Disputing Freud's dichotomization of gender, El Saadawi criticizes local pseudo-liberated men simultaneously. Meanwhile, she reveals that the threat of the clitoris as dubious predates Islam and exists in various religions and races (Zabus 19-34). More importantly, the discovery of the clitoris-reducing practice in Africa gives European physicians a reason to legitimize clitoridectomy in the seventeenth century (25). For instance, the seventeenth-century European medical discourse is full of speculations of masturbation, same-sex sexuality and a hypertrophied clitoris (22). My question in the paper has been the extent to which Hamida's FGC is accessible under the heterogeneous, layered discourses between the East/West.

Apart from sexual deprivation, the human rights discourse is problematic in that child abuse does not explain away the parents' hope to increase the daughters' marriageability and the daughters' willingness to conform to the cultural conventions which affirm their identities as women and clear any doubt about their integrity in the communities (119). Asylum seekers who attain their human rights against the persecution of FGC in a new country may also end up feeling detached from their communities at home where FGC is the norm by a predominantly Western language (233). Moral condemnation leads to misperceptions of cultural variations, or worse, subtle condescension. The FGC issue has become increasingly pressing, when immigrants, in keeping with this custom in the industrialized West, persist in carrying out the practice feel urged return to the countries of origin to have it done. Though protected by the law against the practice in the new countries, the lack of understanding about the psychological and cultural impacts concerning the surgery hampers adequate medical support for the circumcised who have suffered from deep physical and emotional pain (Lockhat 90). El Saadawi's boundary-troubling strategies of the Third

World women emanates from Egyptian nationalism which does not extend to less upwardly-mobile subjects.

IV. El Saadawi's Feminist Disruptions, Theoretical Problems and Limitations

In trying to speak for the peasants, El Saadawi reinforces her position as a middle-class intellectual central to the power regime of the postcolonial state. In general, El Saadawi targets the stereotypical image of the Arab man seen as “scarcely more than a neurotic sexual being,” and the sexually subservient stereotypes of Muslim women as belly dancers and battered wives in Western imagination (Said 315). As Gayatri Spivak suggests about the local intellectuals in post-colonial society, El Saadawi's role is similar to the mediating class between Western imperialism and the local indigenous class (*A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* 270). Spivak further specifies that inserting French avant-garde feminism into the FGC practice within international feminism neglects the very heterogeneity of the colonized subjects (“French Feminism” 134-35).

Two Women in One has an optimistic atmosphere as the result of the successful July Revolution that dismissed the hated King Farouk and drove British troops away from the Suez Canal region in 1952. Bahiah unites with her boyfriend in prison. Both are proud of standing up in the face of the government which leans towards the UK and the palace, but not the Egyptian people. By comparison, *The Circling Song*, written in Arabic in 1973 after the October War, is pessimistic. The peasants who seek job opportunities in Cairo suffer from severe hunger, compared with the wealth of their masters who they work for:

The plates before them were full, piled high, pyramid-like; gleaming knives were plunging downwards methodically over the pyramids, which dwindled regularly and very rapidly until they had disappeared and only crumbs remained in the plates. (49)

Children in El Saadawi's village, Kafr Tahla, would sing the song uninterruptedly in *The Circling Song*. The song not only elicits the war-ridden Egypt but also the peasants' stories, and hence her double vision within the nation as both bounded and boundless. Hamido and Hamida are so identical that they are indistinguishable from one another:

Hamido and Hamida had been one embryo, growing inside one womb. From the beginning they had been one cell, a single entity. Then everything split into two, even the tiniest features, even the minute, tiny

muscle under each eye. No longer could anyone distinguish Hamido from Hamida. Even their mother used to confuse them. (23)

Hamido has a wound between his legs just as Hamida's: "Hamido stole a quick glance between his thighs, but did not find the member in question" (41). From the deep cut, one might speculate that he is not only a symbol of postcolonial history but also has experienced a severe degree of male circumcision that cuts his fibula, and makes it impossible for him to erect at all; Hamido's cleft must be situated in its socio-cultural context: "When his eyes fell on that small narrow cleft, he thought himself Hamida; then, a stick held tightly in a huge hand [of his father] would swing down over his head, causing him to pull his *gallabiyya* hastily down over his body and cry" (24). Culturally speaking, the prepuce in a boy is feminine, and thus in order for Hamido to become a man, he has to cut off the feminine part (Zabus 28). Through the twins, El Saadawi re-enters herself into the debate of femininity as the inner space of the nation up against changes in every aspect of everyday life in nationalist discourse.

El Saadawi is involved in a modern reform of gender equality not free from the inevitable influence of Western modernity encroaching on practically all aspects of traditional lifestyle. In *The Circling Song*, Hamida thinks of her future child who is to be born and who has anything to do neither with pistols nor with dolls (62). Her child will be born "standing on two feet; scrambling among the piles of manure, by himself, he laughs" (62). In the new society, the children will be sexless and timeless, like the "ancient face" of the canal (10, 22). *The Circling Song* revolves around the folkloric song sung by Egyptian village children:

Hamida had a baby,
She named him Abd el-Samad,
She left him by the canal bed,
The kite swooped down and snatched off his head!
Shoo! Shoo! Away with you!
O kite! O monkey snout!
Hamida had a baby.... (12)

The child's name, Abd el-Samad, means "Servant of the Everlasting" and another form of the name, Sumuud, means "defiance" and "resistance" (87). *The Circling Song* partakes of the double narration of the nation, simultaneously creating the horizontal comradeship and disrupting ideas of cultural origins. If Hamida's sexually exploited body stands in for the traditional way of lifestyle, Bahiah's masculinity signifies the

inner core and authentic cultural identities for the devastated Egypt under colonial plunder.

For El Saadawi, phallic women, such as Bahiah in *Two Women in One*, become the symbol of Egypt: “People were always surprised by the way she walked, keeping a visible distance between her knees” (8). The polarity of modernity and traditions is a common literary theme characteristic of the post-colonial writing in Egypt, which fully captures the nationalist anxiety about the old and new order at times of crisis and political unrest, drastic social changes and wars (Hafez, *The Quest for Identities* 63). In *Two Women in One*, Bahiah holds the patriarchal ills accountable for the retardation of national rejuvenation. Her wish to compete with Egyptian male elite result from Egyptian nationalism which is emphatically a middle-class idea, albeit a modernist one than traditionalist:

She [Bahiah] wandered down al-Moski street, watching the women and girls as they walked with their closely-bound fat legs, pounding the street with their bodies, their bottoms visible under their glossy dresses. (121)

Bahiah embodies El Saadawi’s notion of what a new woman should be like by revealing the norm forced on Egyptian women by outdated patriarchy:

Their [Bahiah’s girlfriends’] defeated eyes made her angry, and she was sure that she did not belong to his 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. (76)

Qasim Amin, the Egyptian feminist founding father, advocates minds over bodies for modern women: “A woman’s life will be controlled by her mind, she will be able to choose the man to who she is attracted, and she will be committed to him through the marriage contract” (80). Hence, Bahiah resorts to the strategy of reversal, and thus resulting in her mother’s comment: “The girl is not normal” (98).

In the independence struggle, traditions kept Egyptian women in an inferior position and made them shoulder the representational responsibility for the nation (Stowasser 15). According to Barbara Stowasser, Egyptian women’s liberation movement has been deeply tied in with Egyptian nationalism; there have been three positions of modernists, conservatives and fundamentalists (3-5). Egyptian nationalists, in general, essentialized local culture as backward in opposition to Western modernity, but presented an idealized woman whose feminine virtues became the inner core of national identity to balance the modernization of political and economic project in the

public space (Hatem 86). Such views of modern Egyptian women as guardian angels of home are prevalent in the feminist discourse of Qasim Amin: “Women carry out these heavy responsibilities in all the civilized countries of the world, bearing children then molding them into adults” (71).

The middle-class, modern systems of education and training are central to both modernist and Islamist groups. The change, starting as early as the turn of the twentieth century and focusing on maternity in both Europe and the Third World, was a means of spreading nationalist ethos (Shakry 127). The modernist and Islamist groups shared common set of assumptions about motherhood, child rearing and national progress (127). Ideas of maternalism, eugenics and household management expanded from the middle class to the lower-class population in philanthropy (151). El Saadawi’s sexual politics are part of the rise and struggle of the middle class between modernism and Islamism in post-colonial Egypt. Nationalist-feminism has been a marriage with the enemy, since feminists, particularly modernist-feminists were seen as the ploy of imperialism. Incorporating liberal feminism into Egypt, Egyptian women point out that modernist feminists exclude women’s rights from Islam. On the other hand, religious women activists insist on Muslim women’s priority at home over Western values of antagonizing men and individual freedom (Stowasser 25). The traditionalist revival in urban regions of Egypt in the 1980s spoke to the mechanism of “interior exclusion” that Etienne Balibar examines in the violence that nationalism has against those not belonging to national culture, or the westernized women in the case of Egyptian nationalism (qtd. in Gearhart 31). In other words, to exclusionary acts against westernized women depend on identifying the West as enemy, and thus disclose the vulnerability of traditionalism to create self-identities, and furthermore, the fragility of Islamic identity as authentic, unique and different as opposed to the West.

Calling for heterogeneity of subalternity, Spivak utilizes a deconstructive approach to grasp the majority of the people who are far from being the elite class (“Subaltern Studies” 203). In order to put forward her point of retrieving the voices of peasant rebellion assimilated into the nation under a transcendental consciousness of Western sovereign subjecthood, Spivak argues that subalternity is irreducibly unrepresentable (203). In *Two Women in One*, Bahiah’s equality in education and ability with her boyfriend has been part of the long history of Egyptian modernity and new heterosexual relationship, since the turn of the twentieth century. However liberating the elitist Egyptian nationalist discourses appeared, modernist-nationalist men, such as Amin, were neither more woman-centered nor addressed the need of the lower-class women. Bahiah competes with men in masculinity, and Egyptian men are represented as not spiritually fit to lead the nation. Likewise, Bahiah’s sexual politics

both shatters sexual dissymmetry in the private space and maintains the link between women's spirituality and cultural identities that nationalism espouses.

When Bahiah studies medicine at university, Dr. Alawi shows her how anatomy defines gender difference by showing her the asymmetry between womb and penis: “a small, pear-sized triangle of flesh soft on the surface and wrinkled within” as opposed to “a wrinkled piece of black skin like old excrement” (17). As a child, Bahiah has realized that gender identity is learned dependent on anatomical differences that ignore the clitoris completely:

Once, with a child's innocence, she told her mother that she had discovered she was a girl, not a boy—and undressed to prove it. But her mother slapped her hand, and told her ‘Promise me never to do that again’. . . . But Bahiah still would not open her mouth to promise never to do it again. (12)

By contrast, *The Circling Song* echoes the peasants' relation to land as mother: “He [Hamido] filled his nostrils with his mother's distinctive smell, blending into the odours of bread baking, the soil of the fields, and sycamore figs. He loved sycamore figs” (25). The insistence on feminine essences correlate with El Saadawi's middle-class position built around new heterosexual relationship in the private space. In *The Circling Song*, Hamida is juxtaposed with maternity and seduction simultaneously. El Saadawi's view of Egyptian women's liberation becomes conservative, when her heroines are either anti-male or victimized. Her advice for Egyptian women can sometimes be didactic. Hamida, who does not have education, is subjected to the vicious circle of patriarchy. Egyptian peasant women's virtues in El Saadawi's writing are idealized and they come to signify nature as opposed to men who create culture.

The Circling Song echoes the woman-identified-woman feminist discourse which aims at sabotaging the androcentric language: in Arabic, a dot or dash can practically change the meanings of the words, and “[m]ale becomes female because of a single dash or dot” (8). Mary Daly considers the practice simply a means to control women's sexuality and the term she coins for it is “sado-ritual” (159). According to Daly, the ritual deprives women of their creativity and makes women supine (154). El Saadawi's middle-class tendency also cautions her readers against the fact that the human rights-friendly approach, in tune with Western feminisms, reduces the complexity of the FGC custom in the local context. As a rite of passage, FGC symbolizes a woman's ability to fare well facing the difficulties of life and family. In return, she is blessed in her marriage for the pain and sacrifice. Re-infibulated widows appear more attractive to men and fare better (Zabus 150). If FGC only makes those

women suffer under patriarchy, there would be no reasons for the practice to perpetuate. Notably, FGC, its aesthetics of extremely small aperture, plays an important role in creating circumcised women's womb as oasis and the nest of fertility in African ontology and in the figure of Virgin Mary of Christianity alike (152).

Dealing with the fundamentalist revival, or the mosque movement in Cairo from the 1980s on, Saba Mahmood argues that the return to traditions is caught between resistance against the West and gender oppression in secular-liberal ethos (24-25). Drawing on Judith Butler's challenge to pre-discursive subjectivity, Mahmood contends that norms that Muslim women complied with were neither simply consolidated nor undermined, but were "performed, inhabited, and experienced in a variety of ways" within the operations of power (22). For Butler, there is no sexed body prior to language and it is within discursive conditions that a subject enacts and creates subordination (qtd. in Mahmood18). Following Butler's disclosure of the sex/gender dichotomy as fictive, Mahmood goes beyond the debate of true modesty caught between Islamism and liberal secularity and focuses on the bodily behavior within the structure of power instead (24). In so doing, she avoids situating Muslim women's autonomy and agency in pre-discursive utopia, but puts the issue under the scrutiny of the specific context, political interventions and colonial history.

El Saadawi's radical gesture against biological determinism, however, is once again restricted by her leaning back on the penis for gender intelligibility. As Judith Butler argues against biological determinism:

If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all. (*Gender Trouble* 11)

Butler powerfully demonstrates that science contributes to and, in the meantime, conceals the reproduction of heterosexual matrices in its allegedly neutral research (139). Despite looking the same in every way, Hamido and Hamida distinguishes from each other by the difference of the little dot. Treating biological construction as the effect, not the truth, of the cultural laws, El Saadawi nevertheless conforms to the dichotomous structure that she sets out to dismantle. Because of El Saadawi's tendency to takes a bearing on patriarchy, Sabry Hafez proposes that El Saadawi does not reflect the reality of Muslim women's position in society; even worse, her anti-patriarchal stance often translates into her heroines' anti-Islamic rebellion ("Women's Narrative in Modern Arabic Literature" 169). For Hafez, El Saadawi's problem lies in her

dichotomous framework between the sexes: “The inversion of an unjust order retains the inherent contradictions of its original system, albeit in a reverse form” (168).

Replacing penis envy with vagina envy, El Saadawi presupposes a theoretical structure in which gender traits are in constant Manichean war of good and evil. In *Two Women in One*, for Bahiah, men fabricate the differences between men and women and should be held accountable for erasing women’s history. El Saadawi echoes Mary Daly, who applies the term, “Freudians,” to describe the circumcisers for transferring the erotogenic zone from the clitoris in childhood to vagina at puberty (468). Though El Saadawi deconstructs biology which treats women as having naturally-born passive traits, her dichotomous terms, based on the presence of the penis, suggest that she is not clear about whether biology or culture causes patriarchal oppression. El Saadawi’s psychoanalytic approach results in the critique against her reversal strategies: her vision of the world is the “result of her having identified with her colonizer and internalized man’s hostile ideology” (Tarabishi 10). Bahiah in *Two Women in One* is accused of wanting to live in her mother’s womb like a fetus without language, having Oedipal complex and split in personality (77, 85, 93).

Phallus provides El Saadawi with discursive power to bring forth men’s exclusive control on signifying systems. She agrees more with Jacques Lacan than Sigmund Freud, who views female sexuality merely as the props for men to penetrate (“Nawal el-Saadawi’s Reply” 198). The thwarted desires of language bearers who face the idealized mirror image in Lacan turn against the penis-envy theory in which Freud defines female adolescents in triangular relationships. For Judith Butler, Freud fails to distinguish between libidinal investment in pain as an unconscious drive prior to the existence of a body part and as a conjured, eroticized pain of the real organic illness (*Bodies That Matter* 58-59). Butler challenges Freud’s theory of the body parts as consciousness prior to the erotic investment (59). Afterwards, Lacan’s castration complex in the mirror stage replaces Freud’s assumption of genitalia (59). Replacing Freud, Lacan establishes the impossibility of linking the penis to phallus as the origin of the signifying chain (77). If Freud has to vacillate between the anatomical penis and the symbolic phallus, the penis functions both as a privileged signifier and as a failure to accomplish the symbolic ideal of the patronymic (61). In Lacan, the erotically and narcissistically imbued penis, as the organizing principle of significations, emerges as a symptom to overcome a decentered body in pieces in front of the mirror (81).

As El Saadawi’s pursuit of gender equality demonstrates, Egyptian nationalism has participated in the normalizing project of modernity shown in her portrayal of the new woman. As Gearhart suggests, national self-identities do not simply exclude Western culture externally, but has a dual relation to minority cultures (31). In El Saadawi’s writing, the mechanism of exterior exclusion turns out to include traditional

Muslim women as cultural differences and westernized modern women as unassimilated foreigners. Furthermore, Moallem questions the autonomous resistance of the veiled *Jihadists* (321). She contends that the trans-national of *Jihad* that supposedly includes traditional Muslim women outside the gendering project of the nation-states turns out assimilating them under the sign of otherness (327). Under this circumstance, including traditional Muslim women in the God's community repeats the mechanism of nationalism that includes Muslim women only on the condition of having virtues (328).

In *Two Women in One*, while Bahiah emphasizes her gender fluidity, she highlights the transcendence of her female masculinity defined against all men and traditions. As it turns out, her feminine masquerades espouse modernist agenda and the new women who are often unveiled, well-educated, upwardly mobile and adapts well in the public space. Under what might seem Bahiah's masquerades is the core identity of cultural difference. Here the progressive gender-neutral women and backward circumcised traditional women are two sides of the same coin that together exclude Hamida further way from global sisterhood. When grasping subaltern voices, Spivak cautions against the rise of the liberal, multi-cultural elite in academia that intercepts subaltern voices (*A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* 309). Equalitarian feminism, contributing to resistance/domination dichotomy, is complicit with muting the mosque goers in 1980s Cairo. Hamida's postmodern fashion, her modern dress and circumcision surgery, is assimilated into "we," the middle-class new women. She might have spoken about the presumably barbaric procedure that makes her less human, but it is at best a distanced hearing by another person.

The problem with the human rights-friendly language is that it further reproduces an anti-mom stereotype. In *The Circling Song*, harsh fingers grab Hamida's arms and legs, when having the surgery done:

Hamida did not feel the pain. Her eyes remained dry, and she abandoned herself to the dirt floor, lying there passively, while from beneath her thighs came a long ribbon of blood, its dark hue glistening in the sunshine. Ants appeared from nowhere to accumulate thickly over the blood-ribbon curved and inanimate like the back of a dead snake. (48)

Hamida searches her mother's eyes, but she "look[s] at her with alien eyes, with a look cold as a knife-blade" (47). In fact, the mother will be cut off from financial support, if she fails to take care of her daughter's circumcision, which is deemed her responsibility to have it done on behalf of her daughter's best interests. The *daya*, rural midwife, who is going to operate on Bahiah is tangential in *Two Women in One*:

The cries of her sister Fawziah still rang in her ears: there was a red pool of blood under her. Every day she waited for her turn. The door would open and Umm Muhammad would enter with the sharp razor in her hand, ready to cut that small thing between her thighs. But Umm Muhammad died and her father was transferred to Cairo and that small thing between her thighs remained intact. (97)

The portrayal of anti-moms leads to mistaken assumptions about the roles of *dayas* and mothers as objects of ethnographical studies. The money the *dayas* make from the operations often enhances the demonized image (Zabus 251).

Explicit women's self-writing about their FGC experiences just started to emerge in the past few decades in congruence with the human rights call for the ban on FGC. In *The Circling Song*, Hamida compares the wound between her legs to the slaughtering of the ewe prepared for a feast (47). In other words, she feels that she is physically and psychologically mutilated in celebration for the future promise of marriage. While slaughtering the ewe, Hamida recalls her mother's eyes which are "empty of fright, cool as a brackish lake, silent as the grave, staring fixed at her with the gaze of the dead" (50). Hamida longs for overcoming the gap between the trauma and the belated understanding. The repetitive dying and remembering suggest that those who look at Hamida's wound should pass on the story because she cannot do it by herself. The encounter with the wound entails an ethical relationship to access her blood that eludes us readers.

V. Conclusion

In *Two Women in One* and *The Circling Song*, El Saadawi demonstrates how social, cultural, economic and even political factors construct femininities in Islam. She tackles feminine honor and FGC on the local and global scene of feminism simultaneously. For her, being an Egyptian woman is not separable from the broader context of colonialism and Western feminisms. An analysis of femininities in Egypt should not ignore the complex aspects that give rise to the shifting and unpredictable meanings of femininities. El Saadawi's sexual politics shows that psychoanalysis has constituted the discourse of FGC in anthropology, medical discourse and gender/sexuality studies. By suspending the opposition between Islam and feminism, El Saadawi engages in the multiple strains of discourses on Egyptian women's rights. Even when she writes her novels in Arabic, she already anticipates her discourse to be situated squarely within the global context facing multiple audiences. *The Circling Song*

and *Two Women in One* give voices to an experience that remains, by and large, an unspoken reality for FGC sufferers all over the world. In El Saadawi's appraisal of women's neurosis, including sadomasochism and frigidity, FGC serves as a scathing critique to the limitation of psychoanalysis to apply to different socio-cultural contexts. By adopting reversal strategies, El Saadawi's own limitation, though, lies in her class-specific position, which results in her postulation of feminine essences, hidden behind Islamic inner cultural differences. El Saadawi takes Western dichotomous thinking to task for its inability to face its moral and eroticized gaze on the wound. FGC, in El Saadawi's strategic discursive contradictions, finds a new home of articulations.



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