

# Breaking the Silence: Glimpse of Feminism in the Works of Egyptian Writers

Rida Afreen

Aligarh Muslim University  
E-mail: afrenrida.09@gamil.com

---

**Abstract**—Since the birth of modernity in the European lands, the new wave of ideas rapidly spread among the other continents. It was a multi-dimensional phenomenon which developed different schools of thoughts by which the Arab as well as other lands also could not remain untouched. The era of innovations and progress ignited debates and challenges among the communities of the Arab women. The term Arab Feminism influence the roots of the women's movement which later developed into a dynamic spectrum of Third World Feminism.

The paper will highlight the genesis of feminist movement in the Arab world and will also try to highlight some important writers in this literary genre. The study of Egyptian Feminist movement which was led by Huda Sharaawi, later followed by others will be of primary focus. This paper will examine the role of women's literary works in providing a social infrastructure for the Egyptian women in their holistic development as well as becoming examples of modernity. This paper will also deal with few eminent women writers and activists of Egypt who wrote on the theme of feminism and nationalism. This paper will argue on the literary works of Egyptian women writers as being the guiding light for women empowerment, justice, freedom and national struggle. Despite of the fact that women were deprived in the Arab societies, the modernist women gave them a ray of hope in structuring a platform where women fought for their own rights in their society as well as breaking the gendered myths of being a weaker vessel in their traditional norms through the development of feminist discourses and Arab sisterhood.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The art of writing by Arab women embarked at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when Lebanon and Egypt became defenders of women's journalism, women writers from the Levant or the Arab Eastern world began to grow and rapidly spread all across the Arab lands. The style, quality and modes of expansion of the Arab women displayed an increasing professionalism in capturing and portraying social realities of greater complexity. In Egypt it was Huda Sharawi who paved the way for women's unions all across the Arab world and in Lebanon, it was Ibtihaj Qaddura, who is known to be the first Eastern Arab women's voice on behalf of women's rights. The period of consequent growth of Arab literature was the post-colonial era, in which women amplified their voices and sketch their issues in their writings. However, the literary works of Arab women could not achieve international

attention as much as they ought to, nevertheless, it appealed scholars to begin their quest for knowing Arab women by large. The Orientalist's of view of Harems, fairytales and feminist writings became bygone and a new wave of Arab women's writings embarked on the shelves of literary genres.

## 2. BACKGROUND TO ARAB WOMEN WRITERS

Arab women writers have composed books, articles, verse, and non-fiction for quite a long time back. They stemmed their subjects and energy to compose from the rich legacy of writing that Arab Muslims have. Al Khansa' for instance was an Arab women artist and reviewer. She used to remain in Okaz showcase which was the world's reasonable of Arabic verse that time and condemn the work of her kindred writers demonstrating to them their benefits and negative marks.

Modern Middle Easterner women's composition begun as right on time as 1892, when a Lebanese young woman, Zainab Fawaz Al Amilyia composed a letter to American women who were assembling in a gathering and passed a determination expressed that women's place is at home where they can bring up their kids. Her letter asked the American government to be reasonable for ladies and to give them break even with political and social rights. She was the primary Arab woman author who distributed papers in the mid-1890s while additionally distributing in women's diaries and different periodicals. Her articles and verse were distributed in al-Ra sa'il al - Zaynabiyya (The Zaynab epistles, c. 1906). She distributed two books, Husn al-awaqib aw Ghada al-zahira (Good results, or Ghada the brilliant, 1899) and al- Malik Kurush awal muluk al-Fars (King Kurush, first sovereign of the Persians, 1905), and one play, al-Hawa wa al-wafa (Passion and loyalty, 1893).

Miriam Cooke battles that Zainab Faawz negates the conviction that it was just upper - class women who had entry to training and get to be scholars. Cooke discovered that Zainab Fawwaz went from Lebanon to act as a house keeper with an Egyptian family. Her courtesan found her ability in composing and chose to send her to class where she figured out how to use her insight. She composed verse, short stories,

and her most know gathering of papers al Rasa'il al Zaynabiyya (The Zaynab epistles).

Following the historical backdrop of women's written work, Buthaina Shaaban guarantees that Arab women had begun composing books two decades before men did. She fights that Arabs trust that the primary novel "Zainab" was composed by a man, Mohammad Hasanain Haykal, in 1914. In 1891, Alice Butrus al – Bustani, a Lebanese woman writer, distributed her novel Sa'iba. Shaaban then again, declares that in 1914 there were more than twenty books composed by women like Zaynab Fawas (1850 – 1914) and Afifa Karam. Afifa Karam, a Lebanese woman, composed the principal novel in Arabic in 1906. Fawaz's novel was Badi'a wa Fou'ad distributed by Al Huda Newspaper in New York. Mayy Ziyada (1886 – 1941) composed accounts of three women authors: Warda al Yaziji, Aisha al – Taymouriya, and Malak Hifni Nasif. For the most part, in 1940s, women authors from Iraq, Palestine, Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon developed. These women composed diverse types of scholarly kinds, for example, articles for daily papers and radio, verse, books, and short stories. Huda Shaarawi the Arab Muslim women's activist from Egypt showed up amid this period and kept in touch with a few articles and her prominent diaries Harem Years.

Arab Women writers handled diverse points in their compositions. Until the 1950s, women communicated their inward sentiments in writing. Middle Easterner women's writing amid that time portrayed women's tendencies and methods of feeling that men couldn't reach. Shaaban concentrated the historical backdrop of Arab women's written work and found that the themes that Arab women took care of in their compositions contrast as per the day and age they lived in. Widad Sakkakini for instance depicted the social also, Psychological environment in her first story accumulation "Mirrors". She later demonstrated the grievances of women which swings to a type of resistance when she kept in touch with her novel Arwa Bint Al – Khutub (Arwa the girl of changes). In her life story of Rabia Al Adwiya, Sakkakini tended to the treacheries which are arched on women by men who are created in the Arabic moderate society. Latifa Ziat, an Egyptian woman essayist, is another Arab Muslim author who appeared in her story accumulations Al Shaykhukha wa Kissas Ukhra (Old Age and Other Stories) demonstrated that women are fixated on satisfying the mothers blocks from any chances to acknowledge or satisfy themselves. Ziat stories intended to urge women to win ideas of women's bliss and effective accomplishments in their lives.

In 1950s, the Arab world saw the imaginative move of Arab women's writing in sorts of abstract classes. Amina al - Said kept in touch with her novel Al-Jamiha (the Defiant Woman). In 1958, Laial Ba'labakki distributed her novel Ana Ahya (I live). In 1959, Collette Khuri distributed her novel Ayyam Ma'ah (Days with Him). In 1960, Latifa al - Ziat in Egypt distributed her novel al Bab al Maftuh (the Open Door). In 1962, Laila Ussayran discharged her novel Lan Namoot

Ghadan (We Will Not Die Tomorrow), and in 1963, Emilly Nasrallah distributed Tuyur Aylul (The Birds of September). In Poetry, numerous Arab women artists rose amid every one of the circumstances that saw the presence of women composing books. Artists like Nazik el-Mala'ika in Iraq, Fadaw Tuqan, and Salma Khadra Jayyusi in Palestine.

This way it could be seen that women writers of the Arab world were very active in composing literary text dealing with varied themes. A glimpse of feminism and issues related to women's rights and equality can be seen in the works of Arab women writers. However the later section will focus on the Egyptian feminist writers and their writings. Few prolific novelist and activist like Nawal-El-Saadawi, Huda Sharaawi and Ahdaf Soueif were chosen to depict the use of feminist themes in their novels, Autobiographies, short stories etc. and also their involvement as activists in the Egyptian women movements. These writers bring along with them a ray hope for the Arab women to move toward a better future taking in consideration their issues and problems in their literary works which even male authors did not thought of talking about. These writers very well utilized their power of pen by depicting the image of Arab women in their writing and also sharing their own lives.

### 3. EGYPTIAN FEMINIST WRITERS AND WRITINGS

The literary history of Egypt was very vast and progressive. Many Egyptian novelists emerged but only few were recognized. Some of the prominent and active women writers will be discussed in this section.

To start with Nawal El Saadawi, she is a mainstream Egyptian woman's activist and essayist. She has strolled through flame to contact her objectives of freeing women in the Arab Muslim world. She composed books restricted in the Arab world, built up a women's activist association, and was detained, also threatened by Islamists, and was ousted. Every one of these troubles and difficulties have not prevented her from keeping on composing on many "unthinkable" issues like female mutilation, prostitution, women's sexual and physical treatment, and abusive behavior at home.

Her work has frequently been censured for not mirroring the genuine status of women in the Arab Muslim world. We can't shroud the way that El Saadawi has added such a great amount to the Arabic culture field by the rich writing and grant she has given to the Arabic library and history. As I would see it, her voice could achieve a great deal more clearer on the off chance that she composes using the Arab Islamic culture to persuade individuals regarding the need of changes she mean to in the Arab Muslim social orders. Likewise, she is awful in light of the fact that commentators dependably read her contrarily albeit some of her composition; A Daughter of Isis is a case, presents engaged female figures from the Arab Muslim world.

Nawal El Saadawi is still a questionable figure herself and regardless of the considerable number of troubles and difficulties throughout her life, her constant duty to woman's rights and women has proceeded significantly more grounded. She is founder and president of the Arab women's Solidarity Association. She has composed more than forty books and has discussed women's rights in the Arab society and inside the Islamic setting. She is a therapist, an author of women's activist stories, books, and papers. Notwithstanding the way that El Saadawi displayed Arab Muslim women's dim substances to the world, she pulled on the planet consideration for her braveness to discuss unthinkable issues in Africa by and large and in Egypt specifically.

El Saadawi keeps on composing, in spite of the dangers to her life; in spite of the physical ambushes, circumcision, she persisted as a tyke; and regardless of having developed. Taking after is some examination of her real work. The Hidden Face of Eve, Women in the Arab World is a book interpreted by her husband, Sherif Hetata. She composes this book as a storyteller of twenty articles that a scope of themes tending to issues from sexual hostility against female kids and the circumcision of young women, to prostitution, sexual connections, marriage and separation demonstrating obliviousness, absence of instruction, and religion error as variables behind all that.

El Saadawi clarifies in *A Daughter of Isis* that she writes it as her autobiography "the story of my life" at the age of over sixty and when she was in North California. Her autobiography covers her childhood and early adulthood back to 1940s. *A Daughter of Isis* reveals El Saadawi early signs of feminist consciousness and struggle to emancipate her sex through her power of words are evident in this autobiography. In *A Daughter of Isis*, El Saadawi reveals social and cultural practices among people in her society as an insider of that Arab Muslim society. She writes her autobiography reflecting her experiences and critical observations of hers and others' feelings and sufferings living in a patriarchal society that is dominated by misinterpretations of religion, colonization, and negligence. At the same time, she introduces positive figures for women who live, suffer, and were able to be national demonstrators who not only seek their countries liberation, but also theirs as part of the Nation's freedom. In *A Daughter of Isis*, El Saadawi explores different topics in her society like gender inequalities, education, nationality, resisting imperialism, and religion. She examines all the previous constructions in accordance with the fact that all of these are factors that participate in shaping the meaning of being a woman in an Arab Muslim world.

All through her autobiography El Saadawi shows a feminist agency through her capacity to act against all social constraints and obstacles. Fighting these constraints is what makes Arab Muslim women unique and empowered. El Saadawi walks her reader from the point where she was a poor female child within a large family of limited resources to a

strong woman who leads a national campaign resisting the colonizer. She shows the reader how she carved in rocks to reach where she is now at the time Western women might take what they reach for granted walking on a paved street.

Huda Shaarawi is another Arab Muslim feminist of Egypt. She was the first woman in the Arab world who established and led the first Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU) in 1923. After that, women movements in other Arab countries started to emerge taking advantage of Shaarawi's success.

Shaarawi is well known in the Arab Muslim world and may be in the West of taking off her veil on the running board of the train station in Cairo after returning from an international feminist meeting in Rome in 1923. Some of the women on the station imitated her act and took off their veils such as Saiza Nabarawi who accompanied her in Roma's feminist meeting.

Huda Shaarawi was born in a wealthy, elite, and upper – class family. Her domestic life afforded her with the financial support which exhibits her power in supporting her national, feminist, and charitable activities. Her family also advantaged her through their connections with the elites and the royal family the time. Finally, their trust and confidence in her abilities to do what she is in regardless of the fact that she is a woman resulted in involving her in the political work they do like being a member in the Egyptian Wafdist Party and then as the president of the Wafdist Women's Central Committee (WWCC).

*"Sayyida Khadija impressed me because she used to sit with the men and discuss literary and cultural matters. Meanwhile, I observed how women without learning would tremble with embarrassment and fight if called upon to speak a few words to a man from behind a screen. Observing Sayyida Khadija convinced me that, with learning, women could be the equals of men if not surpass them"* (Shaarawi 1981, 42).

*Harem Years*, the memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist is the only published book that was written by Shaarawi which focused on her national, political, and feminism's activities rather than her own personal life. Her memoirs clearly depicts that the only reason she was married to a forty year old man was her mother's wish of keeping Huda's money within the family at the time where such marriages were not up normal and many young women used to get married to older women. Although she was only thirteen and out of her earlier feminist's consciousness, Huda Shaarawi refused this marriage in the beginning but it was impossible for her to refuse under the mother's wish and the logic of this marriage that the mother presented. She was separated from her husband for few years but decided to live with him later which was justified in her memoir because of the fact that her husband allows her to practice all her feminism and nationalism activities. Her travels, confere nces, and the support of her husband Ali Shaarawi were evident in the later stages of her life as being encouraged by her husband to pursue her activism, feminism,

and being the leader of the feminist movement in Egypt and the Arab world.

Arab Muslim critics of Huda Shaarawi believed that attending Western conferences assisted her to form the first Arab Egyptian Feminist Union in the Arab Muslim World which they think would never existed if her husband stood against her activities. However, reading Huda Shaarawi's memoirs showed how much these critics are mistaken. Shaarawi's consistence, determination, and belief of women's empowerment were behind her battle to liberate Arab Muslim women from harem life and encourage them to take part in their country's national, political, and social life. Huda Shaarawi was not the woman who would give up under her husband's pressure to leave her advocacy work and lived in harem despite the fact that she held respect for her society's traditions and culture. She is a woman who worked all her life to raise women's rights and believed in their equality with men, but never violated her culture's barriers as shown in her memoirs that reveals her respect to the separation between men and women in meetings for example.

Shaarawi died on August 1947 after an active life which is full of achievements and good deeds to help people and support women achieve their rights of justice and equality.

Another prolific writer Ahdaf Soueif was born in Cairo and educated in Egypt and England, where she examined for a Ph.D. at the University of Lancaster.

She is the creator of two accumulations of short stories, *Aisha* (1983) and *Sandpiper* (1996), and two books. *In the Eye of the Sun*, about a youthful Egyptian lady's life in Egypt and England, set against key occasions ever, was distributed in 1992. *The Map of Love* (1999), is the tale of a relationship between an Englishwoman and an Egyptian patriot set in Cairo in 1900. *The Map of Love* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize for Fiction.

The narrative of Ahdaf Soueif's prosperity is a captivating one, and taking a look at her work and profession we learn not just about her energetic territories of concern in Egypt, British writing, sexual discourses, governmental issues and the representation of the Arab world by the West – yet about how the Booker Prize can put a capturing voice in the spotlight.

In the meeting with Massad of the Journal of Palestine Studies, Soueif herself has ordered *In the Eye of the Sun* as a "traditional novel of training" (1999). The novel's primary subject, doubtlessly, is the transitioning of an excellent youthful Arab woman and her endeavors to make her reality significant.

This topic, combined with a large group of other related and gently treated subjects, keeps running all through the portrayal and produces a system of intriguing scenes in the life of a hero looking for joy. Issues of companionship, love, joy, women education and rights are among the most obvious themes Soueif touches upon through the depiction of her champion.

As a woman as a rule and as an Arab woman specifically, Soueif presents Asya as a character endeavoring to grapple with her common female motivations. In *the Eye of the Sun*, the focal character, Asya al Ulama, has a place with the post-provincial era. The novel maps her development from the season of her training at Cairo University onwards. The account covers her sentiment with Saif, and her ensuing development amongst Egypt and England, Beirut, Greece, Italy and it closes with her graduation lastly her life as a teacher back in Cairo. Soueif follows Asya's development and improvement from youthfulness to development against the socio-political foundation of Egypt and in addition the Arab world. Britain fills in as a figurative foundation for the working out of Arab neighborhood issues. Post-Suez Egyptian history: Abdel Nasser's and Anwar Sadat's periods, Sadat's visit to Jerusalem, the peace arrangements, the different Arab-Israeli showdowns (the 1967 war, the war of steady loss, Amman in September 1970, Beirut amid common war, and the 1973 war), shape the foundation against which the people in the novel play out their lives. The dialect of the writings proposes that the novel is attempting to grapple with Arab (all the more legitimately, Egyptian) history and culture and in doing as such, it underlines the inconsistencies: between both Westernization and secularism and customary culture and religion.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Studying the Arab women's writings and specially the Egyptian women compositions reveals the fact that they share a lot in common with the Western women's works. To talk about autobiographies the genre of women's autobiographies both in the Arab world and in the West has tackled similar topics like women's personal life, social and political obstacles before women, women's struggle and suffering. At the same time Western and Arab Muslim women differ a lot in the issue of subjectivity. The level of subjectivity may exists in a less degree in Arab Muslim women's autobiographies due to many obstacles that hinder telling the truth and being subjective when revealing a woman's personal life story in the Arab world. These factors start with the Arab conservative culture of the Arab society that treats women and anything belongs to them as if it is not supposed to be exposed publically. Also, the political situation and lack of democracy are other obstacles that hinder autobiography's work for both men and women, but women in a sever degree since the belief in the Arab world is that politics is a men's business. So, women sometimes do not dare to articulate governmental policies that deter women's forwardness and empowerment. Further, religious factors might obstruct women of writing on issues that contradict the religious beliefs whether it is Islam or Christianity. All the previous factors limit what women might tackle in their personal lives' accounts. As a result, fields like religious issues (changing one's religion, contradicting polygamy or divorce, etc.), sexuality related issues (sex, female and male body, gay's issues, etc.), and

political issues are still in the forbidden zone for women's writings and they do not usually come close to them. If some women do, and this is usually rare, these women sacrifice themselves to become subjects of attack by both Islamists and traditionalists. Although these hindrances prevailed in the Arab society the Egyptian women writers tried to tackle the issues which were new to the Arab world. These writers have provided a rich literary work to the Arab women taking into consideration the feminists discourse and the need for change.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Amin, Qasim, *The Liberation of Woman and the New Woman: Two Documents in the History of Egyptian Feminism*, American University in Cairo Press, 2000. Print
- [2] Ashour. Radwa, Ghazoul F. Jabouri and Hasna Reda-Mekdashy, *Arab Women Writers A Critical Guide 1873 – 1999*, p-5, the American University Press, 2008. Print
- [3] Ashour. Radwa, Ghazoul F. Jabouri and Hasna Reda-Mekdashy, *Arab Women Writers A Critical Guide 1873 – 1999*, p-7, the American University Press, 2008. Print
- [4] Booth. Marilyn, *May Her Likes Be Multiplied: Biography and Gender Politics in Egypt*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. Print
- [5] Cohen. M. Dalya, *Arab Women Writers: an Anthology of Short Stories*, p-3, Albany: State University of New York press, 2005. Print
- [6] Colley. Nawar al-Hassan, *Reading Arab Women's Autobiography*, University of Texas Press, 2003. Print
- [7] Cooke. Miriam, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature*, Routledge, p-445, 2001. Print
- [8] El Saadawi. Nawal, *A Daughter of Isis, The Autobiography of Nawal El Saadawi*, 7<sup>TH</sup> ED., Zed Books Ltd., 2007. print
- [9] Fawwaz. Zaynab. "Fair and Equal Treatment," translated by Marilyn Booth. In *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing*, edited by Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990. Print
- [10] Nawal, *Walking through Fire A Life Of Nawal El Saadawi*, Zed Books, 2002. Print. P-13
- [11] Sabbagh. Suha, *Arab Women: between deviance and restraint*, p235-38 Olive Branch Press, 2003. Print
- [12] Shaarawi. Huda, *harem years the Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist*, N. Y., the Feminist Press, 1986. Print