

An Islamic Feminist Critique of the Work of Nawal El Saadawi

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Abstract

This thesis provides a critique of Nawal El Saadawi's writings regarding the issue of women's rights in Islam. The study's goal is twofold: 1) to examine how Muslim women's rights are viewed by Nawal El Saadawi, who is a prominent feminist scholar in the Middle East and is widely known for her fierce campaigns demanding equal gender rights in what she calls a male-dominated society, and 2) to discuss her arguments within an Islamic framework that includes two strands of interpretations of gender-specific verses of the Qur'an: traditional and modern. To this end, I use a content analysis approach to explore how the Arab feminist, Nawal El Saadawi, perceives five controversial issues -i.e., marriage, polygamy, and divorce, inheritance rights, and veiling- as opposed to the Islamic faith as presented by classical scholars (i.e., Muhammad ibn Jarir Al Tabari (839-923 CE) and Ismail ibn Umar Ibn Kathir (C 1300-1373) as well as contemporary Muslim feminists including Amina Wadud and Azizah Al Hibri.

Findings display that Nawal El Saadawi's arguments contradict the classical readings of the Qur'an as demonstrated by Al Tabari and Ibn Kathir on the one hand, and the views of some contemporary Muslim feminists on the other hand. While El Saadawi considers marriage in Islam, for example, as an oppressive institution that denies a woman's right to choose her partner and turns her life into a servant, traditional and several modern scholars' interpretations of the Qur'an disagree with her and assert the opposite. Findings also show that El Saadawi's claims not only contradict the views of classical and contemporary scholars, but also contradict each other. For instance, El Saadawi (2002) criticizes Islam for several issues such as marriage and divorce and accuses it of being behind the backwardness of Muslim women. However, she praises the

era of the Prophet Muhammad and his early successors, which she described as the best era in which Muslim women were treated fairly.

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A Note on Translation

This thesis is based on an analysis of some texts in Arabic. In order to illustrate and prove certain points, consequently, it includes various translated passages from primary sources, secondary sources, academic and newspaper articles as well as TV interviews. All of the translations from Arabic, whether from Classical/ Modern Arabic or colloquial Arabic dialects, are my own, unless otherwise indicated. For each Qur'anic verse discussed in this thesis, please refer to Appendix E for the Arabic text, and English translation.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The female is, as it were, a mutilated male, and the catamenia are semen, only not pure; for there is only one thing they have not in them, the principle of soul
-Aristotle¹

Made to feel guilty or 'unnatural' if they (women) rebel, many have been condemned to a restricted or mutilated existence in the name of religion.
-Mary Daly²

1.1 Overview

The question of women's rights has attracted scholars' attention worldwide for a long time. In many societies, women are marginalized in various economic, social, and political activities (Davis, 2006). That is, women are negatively viewed as second class citizens who are given fewer opportunities than men and are commonly seen as inferior beings (Anderson, 1997). Hence, many prominent Western thinkers, regardless of their philosophical backgrounds, have had a negative attitude toward women. The German philosopher Emmanuel Kant (1996), for example, believed that women were entirely disqualified for reasoning and moral responsibility. For the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1979), moreover, the role of women is only restricted to two main tasks: pleasing men and managing household chores.

By and large, a gender hierarchy has placed women below men, and deprived them of equal opportunities for education, freedom of speech, and voting. As a result, according to Nancy Mandel (1998), women's "voices, decisions, opinions, and critique are ignored by the men" who are commonly permitted to do what they like without any

¹ Horowitz, C. M. (1976). Aristotle and women. *Journal of the History of Biology*, 9(2), pp. 183-213.

² Daly, M. (1975). *The church and the second sex*. New York: Harper & Row, p. 53.

restrictions (p. 188). This issue is not only relevant to women but also to their children and societies at large.

Domestic violence against women continues due to prevailing social beliefs and values (Statistics Canada, 2019). According to Jacquelyn Campbell and David Boyd (2000), all women are either subject to or experience male violence that takes different shapes such as physical abuse, verbal and sexual harassment, stalking and emotional abuse as well. This can be seen, for instance, in the Montreal massacre that took place in 1989 at the University of Montreal in which 14 female engineer students were killed and other 10 women were injured by a young man with a rifle and a hunting knife (Rosenberg & Duffy, 2010). The police reported that the Montreal massacre killer, who was upset about “women working in positions traditionally occupied by men”, divided students according to their gender, forced male students to leave the classroom, and opened fire on female students while repeating the phrase “you are all a bunch of feminists, and I hate feminists” (Bindle, 2012).

In Addition, 71% of the victims of human abuse around the world are women and about 100 million females are missing due to murder, abortion, or negligence (Campbell & Boyd, 2000). In an attempt to change the current situation, however, a number of governmental and non-governmental organizations have established violence prevention programs that chiefly teach young boys and girls about gender equality and how to keep healthy relationships. Besides, most governments have passed laws that condemn gender discrimination and women abuse. The Canadian Human Rights Act in 1977, for example, prohibits all discriminatory practices based on sex, race, color, religion, gender, and sexual orientation.

Notwithstanding women's current gains, there are still areas of gender inequality throughout the world today and women still suffer from men's patriarchy including a wage gap between the two genders. For example, female engineers are not as welcome in the industry as their male counterparts and still earn less than their male colleagues (Fouad, Chang, Wan, & Singh, 2017). In the Canadian labor market, furthermore, there are fewer women employed full-time (58%) and part-time jobs (42%) than men (89% and 11% respectfully). Likewise, the annual income of full-time Canadian women accounts for 71% of the income of their male colleagues, and women still demand equal wages even in the most advanced countries (Statistics Canada, 2016). Hence, some women have taken matters into their own hands in some countries such as Iceland in which there is a gender wage gap of 14% and therefore Icelandic women decided to leave their workplaces 14% earlier which equals two hours and 22 minutes (Witw, 2016). In politics, additionally, many American citizens had a fear of the female candidate, Hillary Clinton, in the American presidential election in 2016 and consequently, according to the *Washington Post*, 52% of white men voted for the male candidate, Donald Trump, because they were principally unfavorable to a female president. Gender inequality is also evident with regard to divorce laws. Some women in different regions in the Middle East and South Asia, for example, cannot file for divorce without eyewitnesses to adultery; others have to repay their dowries in order to get a divorce and regain their freedom (Ahmed, 1993; Moghissi, 1999).

This is even worse for women of color who are paid less than their male counterparts. In the United States, for instance, Hispanic as well as African American women make 54% and 63% respectively of what white men make (Statistics Canada,

2016). Women of color also experience biases and microaggressions in the workplace in which very few of them take on leadership roles (Sanchez-Hucles, 2010). According to the U.S. Bureau Labor Statistics (2007) women of color hold only 2.5% of the top offices in the United States. The situation of Muslim women, however, is particularly dire. In Afghanistan, for instance, women are denied education and forced to wear burkas that are head to toe garments covering their clothes. Muslim men, by contrast, have no such restrictions (Rostami-Povey, 2007). Additionally, Iranian women must obtain written permission from their husbands, fathers, or male siblings in order to be able to travel abroad. A notable example of such practice is that of the Iranian women's soccer captain, Niloufar Ardalan, who was banned by her husband from attending an international tournament in Malaysia (Payne, 2015). A male guardianship system also exists in other Islamic countries such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in which this system controls all aspects of a woman's life from birth till death including education, marriage, divorce, and job (Alshahrani, 2016).

Besides, many Muslim societies allow female genital mutilation (FGM), honor crimes, and obligate women who are raped to marry their rapists in order to avoid social disgrace (El Saadawi, 1986c). In non-Muslim societies, however, Muslim women enjoy greater opportunities, but they suffer from a different type of discrimination due to their religious belief especially after 9/11 attacks despite the fact that freedom of religion is protected under national and international laws. According to El Mir (2016), for example, 69% of veiled women in the United States report at least one incident of discrimination compared to 29% of their counterpart women with no veil. As a result, there is currently a

worldwide interest in emancipating Muslim women from what secular feminist used to call discriminatory Islamic practices (Ahmed, 1993).

1.2 Historical Background

Islam is widely perceived in the West as a patriarchal religion that mistreats women who are claimed to be given unequal rights in comparison to men (Buehler, 2011; El Saadawi, 1997; Hashim, 1999). Many modern secular feminists argue that Islam marginalizes women, gives men privileges over them, and “the Holy Qur’an raises many problems and provides no means a simple and straightforward code of law” (Keddie & Baron, 1993, p. 59). For example, Kazemzadeh (2002) argues that Islam is the main cause of gender inequality in many parts of the Islamic world that “used and abused the tenets of Islam to perpetuate such inequities” (p. 137). Likewise, Ismael (2007) claims that Islam is the primary source of Muslim women’s oppression and cites a number of verses from the Qur’an to support his argument.

Numerous scholars, moreover, view *Shariah*³ as a stumbling block to Muslim women’s pursuit for gender justice (Alexander & Welzel, 2011; Inglehart & Norris, 2003). Islamic *Shariah* law not only degrades the position of Muslim women due to “its double moral standard” (Baffoun, 1982, p. 230) but it also imposes many restrictions on Muslim women, such as the practice of polygamy by men (Stowasser, 1998). In a similar way, Moghissi (2011) blames the Islamic *Shariah* law for not paying attention to gender equality and being in contradiction with the fundamental principles of human rights.

³ *Shariah* is an Arabic word that refers to Islamic law which governs religious rituals and all aspects of day-to-day life in Islam.

The mistreatment of women in various Muslim societies contributes to this negative perception of Islamic teachings. In many Middle Eastern societies such as Afghanistan, for instance, women are not allowed to work, and they are deprived of education as well (Jacinto, 2006). The extremist Taliban group, thus, attempted to assassinate a thirteen-year-old Pakistani girl, Malala Yousafzai, because of her objection to the militant's ban on women's education in Pakistan. The Taliban group considered Malala's advocacy for women's education as an anti-*Shariah* act that violates Islam's prohibition of the secular co-education system, and therefore planned to kill her (Walsh, 2012).

The implementation of the Islamic *Shariah* law in many Muslim societies is also viewed as a violation of basic women's rights (Alexander & Welzel, 2011; Al Hibri, 1997; Badran, 2006; Hwalla, 2006; Inglehart & Norris, 2003). For example, Amin (2000) considers the practice of veiling among Muslim women to be the clearest sign of Islamic backwardness and inferiority to the West. In contrast, other scholars confirm Islam's massive support for equal gender rights because Islam, they argue, aims at achieving women's advancement. For instance, Smith (1979) claims that "Islam provides women a position of honor and respect, with clearly stated rights and obligations" (p. 577). Similarly, Barazangi (2008) claims that Islam considers men and women as equal human beings with "different but complementary biological functions". In the same vein, Lemu and Heeren, (1978) affirm that seeking knowledge is an obligation for the two genders in Islam as is acknowledged by Prophet Muhammad who encouraged Muslims to "seek knowledge from cradle to grave" (p. 25). Similarly, Cooke (2000) affirms that the current

misery of Muslim women is due to “Islam has been misconstrued as repressive of women’s rights and aspirations” (p. 84).

In sum, the abovementioned discussion reflects scholars’ disagreement regarding women’s rights in Islam. While some scholars affirm the presence of equal rights between the two genders in Islam (Barazangi, 2008; Lemu & Heeren, 1978), others deny them and accuse Islam of mistreating women (Alexander & Welzel, 2011; Hwalla, 2006; Inglehart & Norris, 2003).

1.3 Statement of the Problem

The twenty-first century has extensively witnessed a rapid increase in the number of studies that address the issue of women in Islam in both Eastern and Western societies (Abugideiri, 2004; Ahmed, 1993; Badawi, 1995; Badran, 2009; Mojab, 1998; Mojab & McDonald, 2008). Nevertheless, the status of Muslim women and their roles are still hotly debated, and subject to conflicting arguments. In this context, some scholars notably display Islam as a male-dominated religion that mistreats women and denies their essential human rights (Moghissi, 1999, 2010; Mojab, 1998, 2001; Shaikh, 2004; Stowasser, 1998). Yet, numerous other scholars strongly argue that gender equality is integral to Islam (Barlas, 2002; El Guindi, 2016; Mernissi, 1999; Mir-Hosseini, 1999; Wadud, 2000).

The lack of consensus on the role of women in Islam indicates the need for more research to tease apart these arguments and provide new insights and thus a better understanding of the Qur’anic perspective on women’s rights. Within this realm, Nawal El Saadawi is a famous Egyptian feminist whose views are generally considered against

Islam. This study mainly focuses on analyzing her expository writings in relation to five major themes: marriage, polygamy, divorce, inheritance and veiling to contribute to the understanding of her views that were severely criticized in most Arab countries.

1.4 Purpose of This Study

The debate among modern feminist scholars regarding gender equality in Islam has swept across Eastern and Western societies as many regional and governments as well as international organizations presently attempt to promote women's rights and improve Muslim women's status. This study explores how the issue of women in Islam is addressed by a well-known feminist scholar, Nawal El Saadawi. The aim of this study is twofold: 1) to investigate El Saadawi's expository writing on five specific themes: marriage, polygamy, divorce inheritance rights and the veil., and 2) to analyze her views on these target issues in light of two interpretive lenses: the classical Qur'anic exegesis presented by Muhammad ibn Jarir Al Tabari (d. 923 CE) and Ismail Ibn Kathir (d. 1373 CE) and the modern one presented by Amina Wadud and Azizah Al Hibri. The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the growing body of knowledge regarding the issue of Muslim women's rights while addressing how this issue is understood by Nawal El Saadawi who is a contemporary secular scholar whose writings are widely read in many Western societies. Analyzing the related Qur'anic verses and *Hadith* passages, additionally, provides readers with a better understanding of the target controversial issues as addressed in Islamic textual resources and traditions. The findings of the current study help readers understand the tensions that currently exist between feminism and Islam and consequently comprehend the perspectives of both sides. More

importantly, it helps in understanding the current clashes between Muslim communities and Western governments such as the critical situation in Québec, for example, after passing the controversial Bill 62 that would compel Muslim women who wear the *niqab*⁴ or burqa to uncover their faces while using public services in the province such as hospitals, libraries, and public transportation.

1.5 Research Questions

The present thesis addresses the following two research questions:

1. How does the feminist scholar, Nawal El Saadawi, view women's rights in Islam regarding five main issues: marriage, polygamy, divorce, inheritance shares and the veil?
2. Do Saadawi's views on the five target issues conflict with the traditional and modern exegesis of the Qur'an?

This study primarily focuses on the contemporary writings of Nawal El Saadawi including novels, essays, newspaper interviews and TV shows. Her viewpoints concerning the target five issues are thoroughly discussed. By taking a critical look at her views, this study genuinely looks at how her feminist views contradict and/or agree with the Qur'an as interpreted by classical scholars as well as modern Muslim feminists. An important point that must be made clear is that this the critical analysis presented in this thesis aims for a position of neutrality between the stance of El Saadawi and that of the other Muslim scholars whose work is discussed. I hope that my work will clarify the

⁴ *Niqab* is an Arabic word that refers to a garment of clothing that covers the face which is worn by a small minority of Muslim women as a part of a particular interpretation of *hijab*.

differences between these two positions in order to contribute to contemporary scholarship about the portrayal of women and women's rights in the Qur'an.

1.6 Organization of This Study

This thesis aims at providing an Islamic feminist critique of El Saadawi's arguments regarding Muslim women's rights. Specifically, the primary focus is on five controversial issues: marriage, divorce, polygamy, inheritance shares, and veiling. There are six chief chapters in this thesis. Chapter 1, this introductory chapter, presents a brief outline of the issue of women's rights in general and as it pertains to Islam in particular, the thesis's main objectives, research questions as well as the study's organization. Chapter 2, furthermore, provides an overview of the scholarly literature about this study's topic. It first presents the Islamic feminist movement's clarifying definitions, principal goals, and main arguments. Then, it introduces a brief overview of the Egyptian feminist movement's underlining objectives, different waves and major scholars. In the end, it presents a brief history of the Egyptian secular feminist activist, Nawal El Saadawi, including a brief background on her personal life, her family, her education, her academic status, the social and political environments in which she lived, her imprisonment, her academic status, feminist writings and her reception in Egypt and the Arab world as well.

Chapter 3, additionally, introduces the present study's theoretical framework and methodology. The following two chapters, on the other hand, shed light on El Saadawi's main arguments regarding five different issues that are believed to inflict the suffering of Muslim women. While Chapter 4 is devoted to exploring the issues of marriage, polygamy, and divorce, Chapter 5 provides a considerable discussion of the issues of

inheritance rights and the veil. The first part of each chapter presents some contextual background on the issue in question. Then, El Saadawi's arguments regarding the target issues are provided followed by an analysis of her claims within an Islamic framework that discusses interpretations of gender-related Qur'anic verses as interpreted by two classical Qur'anic interpreters Muḥammad ibn Jarīr Al Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) and Ismail ibn Umar Ibn Kathir (AD 1300/701) on the other hand and modern Muslim feminists including Amina Wadud and Azizah Al Hibri on the other hand.

Finally, Chapter 6 displays a conclusion to this thesis. It essentially exhibits a summary of the main findings of the present study and future research directions that stem from this research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

From the moment she is born and even before she learns to pronounce words, the way people look at her, the expression in their eyes, and their glances somehow indicate that she was born (incomplete) or with something missing. From the day of her birth to the moment of death, a question will continue to haunt her: why? Why that preference is given to her brother, despite the fact that they are the same or that she may even be superior to him in many ways, or at least in some respects.
-Nawal El-Saadawi⁵

Third world women have always engaged with feminism, even if the label has been rejected in a number of instances.
-Chandra Talpade Mohanty⁶

2.1 Introduction

The role of women in Islam is a hotly debated topic. Many scholars claim that the current status of Muslim women is inferior, and they blame for marginalizing the role of women and giving men privileges over them. For instance, Alya Baffoun (1982) explains that Islamic *Shariah* law is the main source of the current inferior status of women in the world today because *Shariah* “introduced Muslim Law and its double moral standard, found upon the repression and sexual control of women as well as the practice of polygamy by men” (p. 230). That is, *Shariah* is biased against women who are granted fewer rights than their male counterparts. Barbara Stowasser (1998) also cites numerous commentaries of the Qur’an that show many restrictions on women in Islam. For instance, she cites the Qur’anic verse 4:34 that describes the domestic relationship between husbands and wives and in which husbands are permitted to beat their wives in case of disobedience. According to Iman Hashim (1999), moreover, Islam supports “a

⁵ El Saadawi, N. (1982a). *Searching: Women in the Arab World*. Boston: Beacon Press, p. 12.

⁶ Mohanty, C. (1991b). Introduction: Cartographies of Struggle. In Mohanty, C. T., Russo, A & Torres, L. (eds), *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, (pp. 1-45). Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p.7.

segregated social system” that eventually results in marginalizing women economically and politically, and therefore it is reputed to be “anti-women” (p.7).

Furthermore, Haideh Moghissi (2011) argues that Islamic *Shariah* law pays no attention to gender equality which is not mentioned in the Qur’an and contradicts the basic principles of human rights. In a similar vein, Aysha Hidayatullah (2014) believes that the Qur’an is a patriarchal text that is difficult to understand due to its ambiguous language, and therefore, she proclaims that “the Qur’an itself must be held responsible for its sexist and harmful readings” (p. 174). In other words, if the Qur’anic language is not easy to be comprehended by ordinary people, Hidayatullah argues, it is the Qur’an to be blamed not humans who misinterpret its ambiguous language.

On the other hand, other scholars confirm Islam’s massive support of equal women’s rights because, they claim, Islam aims to achieve women’s advancement. For instance, Huda Shaarawi (1981) considers the life of Prophet Muhammad’s wife, Khadija, to be an example of Islam’s promotion of gender equality rather than stumbling it. Mohammed Arkoun (1994) also assures that the patriarchal reading of the Qur’an is expected because the holy scripture “has been ripped from its historical, linguistic, literary and psychological contexts and then been continually re-contextualized in various cultures and according to the ideological needs of various actors” (p. 5). Therefore, he argues, there is a misinterpretation of the meanings of the Qur’anic verses that promote gender equality.

According to Iman Hashim (1999), similarly, Islam is not oppressive to women and the Qur’an is not to be blamed but rather the misinterpretations of the Qur’an by uninformed scholars. In this sense, she emphasizes that the Qur’an offers major rights to

women who seem to be unaware of them. For Hashim, knowing the equal rights accorded to Muslim women in Islam is sufficient to improve women's current inferior status. In addition, Miriam Cooke (2000) argues that Islam puts the basics for an "ideal just society" (p. 149) in which Muslim women can freely practice their religion and play their equal roles in various ways. Cooke further claims that the Islam, like feminism, has "highlighted the role of gender in understanding the organization of society" (2000, p. ix). Furthermore, Victoria Brittain (2007) claims that despite the high position Islam gives to women, "over the years the patriarchal system and political power have marginalized women and made them invisible" (p. 29). Similarly, Nimat Barazangi (2009) asserts that "Islam regards men and women as created equal for different but complementary biological functions" (p. 417). To sum up, there is a disagreement among scholars regarding gender equality in Islam. Whereas some scholars emphasize the patriarchy of Islam that favors men and oppresses women, others assert that women's rights can be achieved through Islam.

This thesis critically analyzes Nawal El Saadawi's views regarding women's rights in Islam in relation to classical and modern interpretations of the Qur'an. To this end, five core issues are thoroughly explored: marriage, divorce, polygamy, and inheritance rights, and women's veiling. The following sections provide general background information on the topic. The first section provides an overview of Islamic feminism, central arguments, and critiques. Next, a brief description of the feminist movement in Egypt is introduced. The subsequent section portrays a sketch of the personal and academic life of Nawal El Saadawi, followed by a description of her reception in Egypt and the Arab world as well.

The final section of this chapter briefly describes El Saadawi's major writings and creative outputs.

2.2 Islamic Feminism

Islamic feminism is a relatively new term that was initially coined in the 1990s to represent an inter-Islamic phenomenon that is widely embraced in many settings within Muslim societies in the Middle East. The term Islamic feminism was first used by many scholars in the Middle East such as the Iranian Mir-Hosseini (1999) in a women's journal called *Zanan*, the Saudi scholar, Mai Yamani (1996) in her book *Feminism and Islam*, the Turkish Nilüfer Gole (1997), in her book *The Forbidden Modern: Civilization and Veiling*, and Miriam Cooke (2001) in her book *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature*. Today, nevertheless, "the geographic area of Islamic Feminism has expanded to include North America, and a number of Asian, African, Arab, and European countries" (Grami, 2015, p. 102).

2.2.1 Definition and Objectives of Islamic Feminism

Today, there is an intense debate about Islamic feminism and its major objectives.

Islamic feminism is "a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm" to improve traditional norms as well as rules and bring about societal-legal changes that empower Muslim women (Ahmadi, 2006, p. 35). According to Kandiyoti (1991), Islamic feminism is defined as "a progressive reading of the Qur'an, the *Hadith* and of early Islamic history" (p. 1). For Cooke (2000), however, Islamic feminism is "a double commitment: to a faith position on the one hand, and to women's rights both

inside and outside the home on the other hand" (p. 114). Therefore, Islamic feminism, as Cooke argues, is best described as "an expansion of women's faith position and not a rejection of it" (p.116).

By and large, Islamic feminism primarily aims at promoting equality between men and women in Muslim communities in both the public and private spheres through a gender-neutral interpretation of sacred texts (Coleman, 2006). The goal, according to Mir-Hosseini (2006), is 1) to improve traditional norms as well as codes, 2) to trigger legal societal changes that empower Muslim women, 3) to separate "patriarchy from Islamic ideals and sacred texts" and 4) to "give voice to an ethical and egalitarian vision of Islam" (p. 245). To do so, Islamic feminists use two classical Islamic methodologies: *ijtihad*⁷ and *tafsir*⁸ to provide a better understanding of the role of Muslim women in modern societies (Badran, 2002). Except for the early Islamic jurisprudence "fiqh", many Islamic feminists ignore the Islamic jurisprudence that was mainly created by male scholars in different time periods (Halper, 2005). Muslim feminists, therefore, advocate a feminist reading of Islamic sources that can provide a neutral interpretation and extensively challenge the prevailing beliefs and postulations of patriarchal and misogynistic interpretations in order to retrieve Islam's message of equality (Jacinto, 2006). That is, Islamic feminism is a tool of "stretching the limits" and preventing traditional male readings of sacred texts (Mir-Hosseini, 1996, p. 3). For example, Amina Wadud (1999) uses a hermeneutical method of reading which reviews "the words and their context in order to derive an understanding of the text." (1999, p.1). Unlike the

⁷ *Ijtihad* is an Arabic word that refers to independent analysis of religious sources.

⁸ *Tafsir* is an Arabic word that means an interpretation of the Qur'anic verses.

traditionalists' *tafsir*, this method primarily focuses on the context of the text, grammatical composition and how the world perceives it. Interestingly, the majority of Islamic feminist studies are produced in the West.

Islamic feminists strongly emphasize that “women are as human as men, and their rights and duties are complementary” (Halper, 2005, p. 131). Therefore, Amina Mashhour (2005), for example, believe that it is possible to find a common ground between Islamic *Shariah* law and gender justice even though patriarchal social customs do not cause any reconciliation between Islam and human rights. In this respect, Leila Ahmed (1999) claims that Islamic feminism is a subdivision of Western feminism that is based on Qur’anic concepts. Some secular scholars argue against Islamic feminism that they view as an equivalent to patriarchy striving to maintain the current status quo which is primarily characterized by female subordination and unequal power relations (Moghissi, 2011; Mojab, 2005). Conversely, other feminist scholars advocate for the significance of Islamic feminism that displays the consistency between Islam and Western feminism in terms of gender equality (Barlas, 2016; Wadud, 2008). They argue that there can be a common ground between Islam and secular feminism because both sides defend justice and gender equality (Mir-Hosseini, 2019; Tohidi. 2003). They are accused by secular feminists, as a result, of being apologists whose arguments are highly polarized and mainly aim at defending and proving the truth of their faith regardless of the objectivity of their arguments. The following section presents the main arguments regarding Islamic feminism.

2.2.2 Arguments Support Islamic Feminism

Many Islamic feminists argue that gender equality is a feature of Islam including Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Azizah Al Hirbi, Fadwa El Guindi, Fatma Mernissi, Riffat Hassan, and Ziba Mir-Hosseini. Wadud (1999), for instance, asserts that “the Qur’an does not deny a woman’s right to reject her husband. The Qur’an does not challenge the practice and imposes new measures to prevent men from abandoning or misusing women” (p. 112). That is, Islam grants women the freedom to choose their spouses and protects them from mistreatment and exploitation of their partners. Wadud (2000) also emphasizes that the issue of gender equality in Islam can be seen in the way in which the Qur’an shows how Adam and Eve were created. Unlike Judaism and Christianity, the Qur’an displays Adam and Eve to be created from a single soul unit at the same time, which, as noted by Wadud, is the basis of gender equality. For this reason, Wadud claims that it is men who disavow women’s rights and gender equality, not the Qur’an whose positive stance towards women needs to be fully understood. Hence, Wadud (2006) calls for a modern interpretation of the Qur’an that empowers Muslim women with the knowledge that helps them combat male domination. In this regard, Wadud introduces ‘gender jihad’ as a possible tool for interpreting Islamic doctrines in relation to four major areas (i.e., divorce, polygamy, obedience, and punishment) in an effort to stop male-dominated interpretations of the sacred scripture.

Along the same lines, Barlas (2002) does not support the borrowing of the term ‘feminism’ from the West. She also refuses to use the term ‘Islamic feminism’, which, Barlas argues, denotes ethnocentrism and has specific racial undertones. In other words, acknowledging the term ‘Islamic feminism’, according to Barlas, represents a passive

acceptance of Western hegemony that thwarts the intellectual contributions of non-white women. Yet, Barlas asserts that “the teachings of the Qur’an are radically egalitarian and even antipatriarchal” (2002, p. 93). She further describes the long-standing patriarchal religious traditions in terms of the gross misinterpretation of sacred sources that mainly sexualize God and refer to Him as a male. Accordingly, such a misinterpretation “underwrites male privilege” that causes the current subordination of Muslim women. Consequently, it is not surprising that Barlas has relentlessly criticized numerous translations of the Qur’an, accusing them of providing patriarchal interpretations of the Qur’an and offering various examples of inaccurate interpretations that, Barlas argues, contradict accurate interpretations. Hence, she emphatically calls for novel interpretations of religious sources because “we need to be willing to rethink our own knowledge of Islam” rather than being dominated by the oppressive readings of the religious clerics (p. 210).

In a similar vein, Mernissi discusses Muslim women’s rights from a contemporary and historical perspective that enriches her arguments. For Mernissi (1999), historians deliberately deny the high status of women in Prophet Muhammad’s early society. Furthermore, Mernissi provides evidence against the inferior position of women in the Qur’an. For example, women during the early Muslim community (i.e., during c. 570–632 CE) were allowed to participate in political and military affairs, discuss different issues and speak freely to Prophet Muhammad and his successor leaders. Women were also permitted to go to the mosque, debate with the male leaders, fight for their rights,

and were also consulted on different societal issues as well. Umm Salama⁹, for example, was one of the women who were consulted by the Prophet on “matters of vital concern to the community’ (Mernissi, 1999, p. 116). Surprisingly, such practices gradually became prohibited for women in later times (Ali, 2005).

In a similar vein, Saleh (1981) illuminates that "Islamic principles are compatible with feminine emancipation and do not exclude women from public activities as many European scholars have claimed." (p.16). In other words, there are no contradictions between Islamic traditions and secular feminist principles regarding women’s rights. Like secular feminists, Saleh argues that Islam permits the two genders to participate in different social activities. Similarly, Al Hibri (1982b) claims that the current patriarchal oppression experienced by Muslim women is the result of cultural practices rather than Islamic teachings. Al Hibri argues that the Prophetic period witnessed the right representation of Islamic values that were later misinterpreted by male scholars to serve the political and economic desires of male leaders. Al Hibri also argues that “many passages in the Qur’an were interpreted by patriarchy” to support a brutal male-dominated ideology, and “these interpretations were then handed down to women as God's revealed words.” (p. vi). As a result, as suggested by Al Hibri, women were hindered from their rights and forced not to participate in social affairs as was the case at the time of Prophet Muhammad.

The same idea is expressed by Najma Moosa (1998) who emphasizes the compatibility between Islam and modern human rights as declared by both the United

⁹ Umm Salama was Prophet Muhammad’s wife.

Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human rights. Likewise, Khaled Abou El Fadl (2005) argues that the current oppression of women in Muslim societies reflects a misinterpretation of the Qur'an rather than the core Islamic values that chiefly advocate gender equality. Similarly, An-Na'im (1996) illuminates that the potential differences between men and women, such as biological ones, "do not justify legal discrimination". In this regard, An-Na'im affirms that women's rights fall within the central liberal values of Islam (p.17).

2.2.3 Arguments Against Islamic Feminism

Despite the prevalence of Islamic feminism, it is strongly criticized by many secular feminists who distance feminism from Islam and also resist the inclusion of Islamic feminism in the larger body of feminist ideology. They fundamentally reject the religious framework of Islamic feminism (Moghissi, 1999; Tohidi, 2003). For them, religious truths and doctrines cannot be a sound basis for a feminist movement. Moghadam (2002), for instance, elucidates that Islamic feminism is an insignificant movement because theological arguments cannot guarantee women's rights in Muslim societies. alternatively, political and socioeconomic realities can lead to gender equality. According to Moghadam, moreover, "women's rights and human rights are best promoted and protected in an environment of secular thought and secular institutions"; however, it is not appropriate to reconcile a legitimate secular movement with Islam whose values, are inconsistent with the cultural and social conditions in Muslim societies (p. 1162).

Similarly, Moghissi (2011), rejects the term Islamic feminism because, in her opinion, it is imprecise to use religion as a category to classify women that intentionally

neglects the influence of other categorical factors such as social class, race, nationality, and ethnicity. Moghissi (2010), moreover, refuses the reference to Western feminism as “Christian feminism”, and argues that Muslim societies in the Middle East include secular non-Muslim women who are equally affected by societal constraints as Muslim women. Furthermore, Moghissi (2011) compares feminism and Islam stating that the so-called Islamic feminism constitutes an obstacle to secularists or reformists in their goal of dismantling the main Islamic religious principles. Thus, Moghissi (1999) calls for the separation of religion from the state and limiting the role of Islam to "mere spiritual and cultural affiliation" (p. 142). Like Moghissi, Arkoun (1994) argues that this separation is necessary for women in order to obtain their rights. In addition, Shahrazad Mojab (2001) asserts that Islamic feminism does not represent a challenge to patriarchy because it “lacks a theoretical framework of rights and laws whose discourses and practices appear like another copy of liberalism and legal positivism” (p. 139). In the same way, Hammed Shahidian (2002) portrays Islamic feminism as an oxymoron because, in her opinion, Islamic feminism can relieve patriarchal pressures, but it is insufficient to eradicate patriarchy and protect the rights of Muslim women.

Likewise, Rebecca Barlow and Shahram Akbarzaden (2006) proclaim that “Islamic feminism is a loose and ideologically elastic movement” that fails Muslim women. For them, Islamic feminism adopts a weak framework that cannot influence current misogynic societies and achieve gender equality. Even though Hassan (2004) rejects the allegations in support of the separation of human rights and Islam, she further underlines the importance of discussing human rights in a secular rather religious framework.

Nawal El Saadawi also criticizes Islamic feminism, proclaiming that its present marginal framework cannot alter the subordination of Muslim women. Furthermore, El Saadawi agrees that the current low status of Muslim women is not only a feature of Islam but is rooted in Islamic sacred texts as well. While many scholars have examined El Saadawi's fictional writings, her non-fiction work is barely examined. Thus, this study focuses on El Saadawi's expository writings. More specifically, it critically analyzes her arguments regarding five main themes: marriage, polygamy, divorce, inheritance rights, and the veil that are compared with classical and modern interpretations of the Qur'an. The following section initially provides a brief overview of the Egyptian feminist movement. Then it introduces El Saadawi's personal life, education, academic career, and central arguments. Next, it provides a description of her reception in Egypt in general and her place in Egyptian feminism in particular. Finally, it concludes with a summary of her writings and creative output including novels, essays interviews and TV shows.

2.3 An Overview of Egyptian Feminism

The Egyptian feminist movement has a long history dating back to the nineteenth century and was part of the liberal and nationalist movements (Cole, 1981). According to Badran (1995). "Egyptian feminism was not a subtext of colonialism or 'Western discourse,' but an independent discourse that simultaneously engaged indigenous patriarchy and patriarchal domination" (p. 24). That is, the growing gender awareness has attacked traditional and Western culture. Being influenced by both Eastern and Western cultures, the life of Egyptian feminist pioneers included mixed ideas and ideologies that reflected the two cultures. Margot Badran (1986) claims that the feminist movement in Egypt has

begun in the 1980s by Egyptian women's writings including memoirs, letters and essays that were not published. Badran also affirms that "historians have all missed women's hidden feminism, crediting Qasim Amin with founding feminism in Egypt" (p. 10). Yet the actual Egyptian feminist movement can be divided into three main phases. The first phase took place between 1923-1939 and was supported by the voices of men calling for women's rights such as Muhammad Abduh (1839-1905), Qasim Amin (1863-1908) and Ahmed Lutfi Al Sayyid (1872-1963) who identified themselves as reformists rather than feminists. Most of them studied in France for long periods and expressed their admiration of Western civilization and its secular values. For instance, Rifa'a Rafi Al Tahtawi (1801-1873) was a translator, teachers and one of the first Egyptian scholars whose writings aimed to reconcile Western and Islamic cultures. He founded the school of languages in 1935 and translated many European books into Arabic that contributed to the Egyptian Renaissance. For Al Tahtawi, education was the only means by which Egyptian women could be liberated and gain equal rights. He published two books, *Guide to the Education of Girls and Boys* (1872) and *A Summary Framework on Paris* (1902), that "are considered milestones as far as the cause of women is concerned" (El Saadawi, 1982a, p. 253).

Another prominent scholar was Qasim Amin (1863-1908) who was a lawyer educated in France and was the first to be identified as a feminist. For Amin, the status of women in society is closely tied with the nation's progress because women are "the foundation of the towering constructs of modern civilization" (2000, p.58). His two books were the main feminist books that discussed women's roles in Egypt. In his first book, entitled *Tahrir al Mar'a* (The liberation of Women) in 1899, Amin defended the

Egyptian values that Western scholars accused of being backward and added that “in reality, I do not see any difference between the situation imposed on European women and that imposed on Muslim” (p. 279). He further called for the emancipation of Arab women through compulsory education and changing laws related to divorce and polygamy. To support his arguments, he cited several Qur’anic verses that he claimed to be in favor of women but were deliberately misinterpreted. For example, he presented a new interpretation of the Qur’anic verse 3: 4 that clarified the verse's intent as encouraging only monogamy rather than allowing polygamy as has been traditionally interpreted. Polygamy, in Amin’s view, should be abolished because of not being an Islamic practice. He also claimed that Islam supported gender equality and if it “had power and influence over customs, Muslim women would today be supreme among women on earth” (p. 35).

In contrast to his first book, his second book, *Al Mar’a Al Jadida* (The New Woman), which was first published in 1900, abandoned the Qur’an and adopted the ideas of European thinkers such as Jean Jacques Rousseau. In this regard, Amin called for embracing Western science and technology to eliminate cultural superstition and liberate women and he wrote:

The New Woman is one of the fruits of modern civilization. It first appeared in the West as the result of scientific discoveries which released the human mind from the bondage of delusive fancy, suspicion, and superstitions, and delivered it to self-guidance and specified the path to follow. (p.1)

In this sense, Amin pointed out that marriage should be based on love that helps couples raise and educate successful children. In his opinion, the new Egyptian woman ought to

imitate the western women's style that enables her to get rid of the bonds of patriarchy. On the other hand, Amin (2000) noted that the veil constitutes "a huge barrier between woman and her elevation, and consequently a barrier between the nation and its advance" (p. 54). Besides arranged marriages, male guardianship of women, polygamy, and divorce practices, Amin (2000) argued that the veil causes the social seclusion of women. To free women, according to Amin, the veil and sex segregation are not required in Islam, should be abolished because they increase men's sexual desire rather than reducing it as was commonly believed in Muslim societies. He further rejected the claim that there are innate differences in personality between men and women and explained that current superiority of men in light of women's denial of equal educational opportunities for long generations. As a result, women were forced to "remain in a situation of degradation which varies in severity and moderation according to time and place" (p. 12). Although Amin called for women's education, he emphasized that only primary education was important for women to fulfill their responsibilities as mothers and wives. For him, a woman's "most important duty" is "to raise the children, attending to them physically, mentally and morally" (p. 159).

While some scholars support Amin's arguments, others strongly criticized him. For example, El Saadawi (1982a) believed that Amin was the true father of the feminist movement in Egypt whose two books are the two main texts dealing with the issue of women's emancipation in the Arab world. In contrast, Leila Ahmed (1993) asserted that Amin's accusation of the veil as the reason behind the country's backwardness was a Western claim that was used to colonize Muslim countries. Ahmed wrote:

Amin's book thus represents the rearticulation in native voice of the colonial thesis of inferiority of the native and Muslim and the superiority of the European. Rearticulated in native upper-middle-class voice, the voice of a class economically allied with the colonizers and already adopting their life-styles, the colonialist thesis took on a classist dimension: it became in effect an attack ... on the customs of the lower-middle and lower classes. (p. 162)

Ahmed also claimed that Amin's arguments did not comply with true feminism, but they rather established new patriarchal dominance. The same idea was confirmed by Mona Russell (1997) who described Amin to be strongly influenced by his foreign education and his upper middle class that viewed the West superior to the East. Thus, his views, according to Russell, were biased. By and large, Amin's books were accused of being Westernized and caused controversy because his discussions mainly focused on the middle-upper class women's interests and paid less attention to poor and lower-class women.

Another prominent proponent of women's emancipation in Egypt was Huda Shaarawi (1879-1947) who was an upper-class woman. She received elite education at home, learned languages such as French and English, and memorized the Qur'an in Arabic at a very early age. Shaarawi married at the age of 13 to her cousin, Ali Shaarawi, who was in his late 40s and was the vice president of the Wafd Political Party. Shaarawi and her husband supported Egypt's independence from Great Britain and they both participated in the Egyptian revolution in 1919. She was the president of the Wafdist Women's Central Committee (WWCC) that dedicated efforts to the Egyptian feminist movement. Shaarawi also founded many organizations dedicated to women's rights such

as the Egyptian Feminist Union in 1910, the New Women Society in 1919 and the Arab Feminist Union in 1925 that mainly focused on women's liberation in terms of clothing, voting and education. She further participated with Ceza Nabarwi and Nabawiya Mousa in a conference of the International Women Suffrage Alliance in Italy in 1923 and removed their veils in a Cairo train station upon their return to Egypt. The women who came to welcome them were shocked to see them doing so in public, but then they applauded, and they did the same. This was an important moment that marked the end of the harem era in Egyptian society, after which women stopped wearing the veil in Egypt for several decades. By doing so, they showed their opposition to the restrictions imposed on women. For Shaarawi (1986), "the veil and sex segregation were not required by Islam but were simply a function of patriarchal control. They also understood that they as women had rights with Islam which patriarchy withheld from them" (p. 7). Therefore, Shaarawi called for removing the veiling because it hindered women's public activities. Additionally, Shaarawi advocated for restoring women's political rights that were granted to them by Islam and exercised during the Prophet's era. Her social activity extended to include sponsoring a number of young feminists and activists. She also wrote her memoir under the name *The Harem Years* that was translated and published by Margot Badran in the 1986. The book is divided into different sections covering her family, childhood, education, marriage, separation and feminist activities. Due to her efforts to support women not only in Egypt but also in all Arab countries, Shaarawi was considered the mother of the Arab women's liberation movement.

Malak Hifni Nassif (1886-1918) was a middle-class feminist who was greatly affected by Amin's work that asserted the superiority of the West and the inferiority of

the East. She was one of the first Egyptian girls to graduate from an elementary school in 1901 and pursued her education until she graduated from the Saniyyah Teacher Training College. Although she taught for a couple of years after graduation, she was not allowed to teach after marriage. Therefore, she devoted her life to defending women's rights and founded the Women's Education Union, which brought Egyptian women together with their counterparts in Europe and other Arab countries. Nassif also co-founded the Ladies Literary Improvement Society that promoted Arab women's literary writings. Her early essays were published under a pseudo name Bahithat Al Badiyah (Searcher in the Desert) and addressed men's abuses of women in relation to divorce and polygamy. Nassif (2014) suggested adopting secular Western feminist principles in order to improve the status of women in Egypt,

Like Amin and Shaarawi, Nassif advocated for abolishing polygamy, but she did not support unveiling that she believed to be a personal choice. In her book *Nissa'yat* (women) (2014), she presented her views on different feminist issues such as education, marriage and divorce in various articles published in the Liberal Umma Party newspaper. For example, Nassif argued that the veil was a popular fashion in the East that should be respected. For women to be free and modernized, argued Nassif, they did not have to dress as Western women. By choosing to be unveiled, in her opinion, upper-class women imitated women in the West due to their obsession with the European fashion. Additionally, Nassif supported women's segregation and objected to Amin's call to include men and women in social activities, as this would corrupt the morality of women and society alike. She was also the first Egyptian female to publicly raise demands for women by presenting a ten-point agenda to the Egyptian Legislative Council that called

for raising the age of marriage to 16, expanding girls' education, and empowering women to initiate divorce. Although her demands were rejected, Nassif continued to promote women's rights with a primary focus on their physical and psychological health problem caused by men's violence. She aimed to end domestic violence against women in Arab countries rather than dressing them as Western women. To do so, Nassif (2014) called for teaching women "real knowledge" as well as "correct education" and to "improve the young generation and their morality" in order to achieve societal improvement (p. 28). She exerted a lot of efforts to convince Egyptian families to send their daughters to girls' schools. Both Shaarawi and Nassif positively contributed to the Egyptian discourse on women's rights, but their efforts lacked autonomy. They were mainly recruited by their male guardians to participate in national and social activities.

Another important Egyptian feminist was Nabawiyya Musa (1886-1951) who founded a woman's magazine called *Majallat al Fatah* (the young woman's magazine). Her published essays were later collected and published in a book entitled *Al Mar'a wa al 'amal* (The Woman and Work) in 1920. In her weekly column called *zikrayati* (my memories), she called for women's education, equal gender rights and an end to sexual violence.

The second phase of Egyptian feminism was marked by the end of World War II in the 1940s that witnessed the foundation of the first Egyptian women's party in 1942, headed by Fatma Neamat Rashed. The party called for equality between the two genders in terms of education, employment and political representation which helped Egyptian women gain the right to vote in 1956. Subsequently, the Daughter of Nile Association was established in 1984.

Doria Shafiq (1908-1975) was a well-known Egyptian feminist who led the feminist movement in Egypt during the 1940s-60s adopting a militant and autonomous approach. She received a scholarship from the Egyptian Ministry of Education to study in Paris where she obtained her doctorate in Philosophy. Shafiq founded her feminist journal, *Bint Al Nile*, in 1945 and a political party under the same name that advocated for gender equality in all aspects of life. As a politician, Shafiq led her party members in a number of demonstrations and strikes calling for women's political rights. Due to her protests and her rejection of the dictatorship of the Egyptian president, Gamal Abdel Nasser, Shafiq was arrested, her newspaper and party were closed down by the Egyptian police, and she was not allowed to participate in public activities. Shafiq published thirteen volumes of essays, memoirs and poems written in French and Arabic. She passed away at the age of 31 and her early death was described by Leila Ahmed (1993) to be one of the factors that resulted in “the emergence of the westernizing voice of feminism as the prevailing, uncontested voice of feminism in the Arab context in those early years” (p. 175).

Along the same line, Zaynab Al Ghazali (1917-2005) worked with Huda Shaarawi for few years and then separated from her because of her opposition to Saharawi's secular views. She founded the Muslim Women's Association in 1936 and joined the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood organization whose goal was to establish an Islamic state governed by *Shariah* law. She believed that Islam accorded equality to the sexes, and thus women did not need to be emancipated, rather there was a need to reinterpret Islamic texts. Yet Al Ghazali (1986) asserted that “[Muslim woman's] first, holy, and most important mission is to be a mother and wife. She cannot ignore this

priority. If she then finds she has free time, she may participate in public activities.” (p. 237). In her memoir, *Days from my Life*, published in 1986, Al Ghazali documented the torture of the Muslim brothers at the hands of the Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser. In her interview with Miriam Cooke (2001), Al Ghazali emphasized that women’s participation in public life should not be for the sake of their emancipation but rather for the establishment of a Muslim state. She was imprisoned for her political views with other scholars such as Nawal El Saadawi in 1981. For her, the true liberation of women lies in Islam and thus she explained the oppression of women in light of the violation of Islamic traditions. Al Ghazali argued that feminism was a secular movement that was associated with Western imperialism and contradicted Islam. Unlike Amin and Shaarawi, moreover, Al Ghazali promoted the veil and she herself was veiled.

The third phase was the contemporary one that started in 1970s and continues till now. It was characterized by the vital role of the Egyptian government in supporting feminism by founding the National Council for Women that promotes women’s rights in Egypt. The Egyptian parliament passed two significant laws. The first one was the law of *khul* that enabled women to initiate divorce. The second one was the law of citizenship that enabled women to pass on their citizenships to their children whose fathers are not Egyptians. One of the prominent feminists of the third phase was Amina As-Said (1914-1995) who was one of the early female journalists in Egypt and the first magazine editor in the Middle East. As-Said was mentored by Huda Shaarawi who funded her education at Cairo University in which she studied English literature. As-Said founded the first Egyptian women’s magazine, *Hawaa* “Eve” in 1954 that addressed women’s oppression in Egyptian society and called for women’s equal rights in education, economics and

politics. For her, the veil was a form of slavery and a traditional practice that impeded the progress of civilization and therefore she opposed it and refused to wear it. In contrast, As-Said (1977) believed that Islam freed women who were mistreated in the pre-Islamic era and she wrote:

Islam restored to woman her total humanity; it armed her with weapons of independence and freed her from the domination of the male by giving her (a) the right to education, (b) the right to buy and sell property, and (c) the right to hold a job and go into business. She was even drawn into participating in managing affairs of religion and politics. (p. 376)

She further criticized women's oppression in the Egyptian society calling for equal gender rights in education, politics, economics and all other aspects of life. Similarly, As-Said advocated for women's economic independence and their rights to have higher education.

Nawal El Saadawi is another famous Egyptian feminist in the modern age who was the first Egyptian woman to discuss the issue of female genital mutilation and its negative effects. Unlike other Egyptian feminists, El Saadawi rejects both Westernization and Islamization of Egyptian society and severely criticized the fundamentalist interpretations of sacred scriptures. El Saadawi states that the Egyptian feminist movement has been limited to a few women's organizations that make a small positive contribution because of their obedience to the government and religious authorities. In addition, she argues that men and women in Egypt "were born in fear, live in fear and die in fear" and therefore she was criticized because she was the model of the free human they failed to be. In an interview with Sarah Raphael in 2018, El Saadawi further adds

that “many Egyptian men- fathers and husbands- they do not like me because I make thier daughters and their wives rebel against them” and therefore she does not pay attention to their criticism. El Saadawi’s feminist arguments are the main focus of this thesis.

2.4 Nawal El Saadawi

El Saadawi is a well-known Egyptian scholar, novelist, psychiatrist, and feminist activist who is primarily described as “the voice of Egyptian feminism” (Cooke, 2015). Her writings mainly represent the challenges faced by Muslim women in the Arab world in general and Egypt in particular. According to El Saadawi (1997), “women were victims of a double exploitation: they shared class exploitation with men, but in turn they were subject to exploitation by men, to sex discrimination, to patriarchy” (p. 58). In her work, she always targets “people everywhere who believe in justice, freedom, love, equality, peace, and creativity” and explicitly links the Western colonization of Arab countries and the colonization of Arab women by Arab men (Newson-Horst, 2008, p.58). Thus, El Saadawi expresses her disdain for the traditional role of housewife, which she believes to be a sort of slavery. The goal of this section is threefold. Firstly, it introduces a brief sketch of her personal life including her family background, education, and early career contributions. Then, it provides a concise description of Nawal El Saadawi's place in Egyptian feminism and her reception in Egypt. Lastly, a thorough overview of her expository writings and creative outputs including novels, essays, interviews, and TV shows, is presented.

2.4.1 Biographical Sketch

El Saadawi was born in 1931 to a middle-class Muslim family in the village of Kafr Tahla in the Egyptian Delta. Her father was a government official in the Ministry of Education and came from a poor family, but her mother came from an upper-class family of Turkish descent. Although her mother did not go to school after the age of 10, she insisted that her children pursue their education. El Saadawi's parents strongly encouraged her to excel in her studies and therefore they paid her tuition fees which allowed her to graduate from the Faculty of Medicine at Cairo University in 1955 where she majored in psychiatry.

El Saadawi had five sisters, but she scarcely mentioned them. In contrast, she always complained during her childhood that her parents used to prefer her elder brother, Tala'at. Such treatment made El Saadawi begin at an early age to question the differences between herself and her brother who enjoyed extra privileges and more freedom than she did. She gradually began to criticize such discriminatory practices in her patriarchal society. More importantly, El Saadawi's work as a doctor in her hometown of Kafr Talha allowed her to learn about the hardships of rural women and the domestic violence against them that inspired her as a writer. El Saadawi later became the director of the Ministry of Public Health in Cairo. Due to her publications, societal criticism, and political activities, however, she lost her job at the Egyptian Health Ministry, which led to permanently ending her career as a doctor in 1972. Then she worked with the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA). She was also appointed as a senior program officer in charge of the voluntary fund for West Africa. After two years, El Saadawi left the UN and explained that by saying that there was "too much bureaucracy

and discrimination against women" and added that "they do not believe very much in creativity. They want people who just obey" (Graham-Brown, 1981, p. 25).

El Saadawi participated in publishing a feminist magazine entitled *Confrontation* and was the editor-in-chief of the *Health* magazine that was banned in 1973 due to its heated discussions of issues such as circumcision, female sexuality, and psychic illness in the Egyptian society. Furthermore, El Saadawi co-founded the Association of African Women for research and Development (AAWORD) whose goal was to achieve the emancipation of all African women. Following Huda Shaarawi's steps, moreover, El Saadawi founded a feminist organization entitled the Arab Women's Solidarity Association (AWSA) in 1982 and was elected its president. The AWSA primarily aimed at "lifting the veil from the mind" of Arab Muslim women to help them gain equal rights and fair participation in all social, political, economic and cultural aspects of life in the Arab world (Malti-Douglas, 1995, p. 11). According to El Saadawi (1986c), the AWSA supported the freedom of the Arab land and the freedom of the Arab women that were believed to be correlated. Due to El Saadawi's rejection of female genital mutilation and the revolutionary ideas of her feminist organization, the AWSA was banned ten years later, and the government shut down the *Health* magazine as well.

El Saadawi married three times and has a son and a daughter. Her first husband, the father of her daughter, was a medical schoolmate. Although her family did not like her first husband because of his political activities, she insisted on marrying him against her family's wish in 1955. Their marriage was very short, and they soon broke up because of her husband's drug addiction. Her second husband was a lawyer, and their marriage lasted a very short time as well. Her third marriage was the longest one and has

lasted for 43 years. El Saadawi's third husband was her co-worker at the Ministry of Health, and he was also a doctor and a writer. Despite the fact that her third husband, the father of her son and the translator of most of her books, was her favorite spouse whom she used to describe in her interviews as "the only feminist man on earth", they got divorced in 2010 because he cheated on her (Cooke, 2015). Unlike her divorcee who refused to say any detail about the divorce, El Saadawi did not mind explaining the reasons for ending her third marriage in several interviews. In an interview conducted by Magdy Samaan (2010), for example, El Saadawi said her husband's betrayal was not forgiven because, in her opinion, he "violated" her rights which she did not accept. She also declared that "a woman who defends her pride and freedom refuses to remain in a state that violates her principles" and added that nothing would force her to "live with a husband who violates" her rights. On a Lebanese TV show with Zahi Wahbi in 2014, El Saadawi further proclaimed that "after many years of marriage, I became sure that I was not born to marry because the institution of marriage is not suitable for a woman who thinks like me".

El Saadawi's life was full of challenges and troubles because of her controversial views and writings. For example, she was a prisoner of conscience for three months during the regime of the third Egyptian president, Anwar El Sadat, because of her political views (Powell, 2012). After years of political and military turmoil between Egypt and Israel, El Sadat favored peace between the two countries. Yet, his campaign for peace was rejected not only by all Arab countries but the Egyptian opposition as well. When a peace treaty was signed between Egypt and Israel in 1979, therefore, President El Sadat encountered fierce anger that resulted in political and economic problems. As a

result, El Sadat imprisoned 1,500 prominent opposition figures in August 1981, including activists, Coptic priests, journalists, Muslim sheiks, and prominent intellectuals. He saw them as a threat to his authority. El Saadawi was among those Egyptian figures and was detained without trial for 85 days for refusing his political and economic policies. When President El Sadat was assassinated by fundamentalist Muslims a month later during the annual victory parade that took place in Cairo, however, El Saadawi and others were released in November 1981. During her short time in prison, El Saadawi did not stop writing despite the fact that she could not find any pens or papers to use. Instead, she used toilet paper and eyebrows pencils smuggled out by female prisoners and prostitutes to write her memoirs. When she was asked about her time in prison, El Saadawi (2018a) said that it was “a good experience” and added:

Prison is like death, like exile, you face something horrible that you were so afraid of all your life- I was afraid of prison, and of death and of exile and of loneliness, of everything, but when I was in it, I lost my fear. You have to face these things to lose your fear. (p.4)

In addition, many lawsuits were filed against El Saadawi that accused her of several charges. For example, the pro-government lawyer, Samir Sabry, accused her of committing the crime of contempt against religion because of her progressive views regarding different religious practices and calling for the renewal of religious discourse. Another lawsuit was filed by an Egyptian lawyer called Nabih Al Wahsh to separate El Saadawi and her third husband on the ground of accusing her of apostasy. Al Wahsh based his accusation of El Saadawi on the statements of the Grand Mufti of Egypt, Nasr Farid Wasel, who condemned her for abandoning the teachings of religion. Furthermore,

Al Azhar institution accused her of apostasy and heresy because of the title of her play *God Resign at the Summit* that was published in 2006. Other lawsuits were also filed against El Saadawi to revoke her Egyptian citizenship, and they were all dismissed by the Administrative Court. Moreover, El Saadawi (2002) affirmed in a number of interviews that she repeatedly received several death threats during different phases of her life, and her crime was her desire to “think” and “feel”. Yet death threats did not prevent her from writing because she believed that writing is “like breathing in the air of life” and “it cannot stop” (p.54). She repeatedly emphasized that she was neither afraid of death nor imprisonment (Reuters, 2018).

El Saadawi was forced to flee to the United States in 1992 after receiving serious death threats by Islamic fundamentalists who accused her of apostasy. She spent eight years there in which she taught at a number of prestigious American universities such as the University of Columbia, Duke University, Florida State University, Georgetown University, Harvard University, Washington University, and Yale University. For her, the years of exile were very fruitful in which she met various people from different cultural backgrounds that inspired her and consequently helped her publish more books. She also admitted feeling safer in her exile than in her homeland, Egypt. El Saadawi’s writings made clear stance on various issues related to Islamic fundamentalists, their misogynistic views, and their biased interpretations of the Qur’an to serve their personal interests. More importantly, El Saadawi discussed various challenges that Muslim women encounter in the Middle East and North Africa region, such as female genital mutilation.

El Saadawi used to sign her books under the name “Nawal Zainab Al Sayed,” including the first names of her mother and father. She believed that the child’s name

should be attributed to his parents on the birth certificate and not just to his father. Because of her hard work and her various publications that have been translated into several languages, El Saadawi hoped to win the Nobel Prize in Literature that could inspire other Muslim women, but her dream was not fulfilled. Yet, she was awarded a number of prizes such as the International Generalitat Catalana Prize in 2003, the European Council North-South Prize in 2004, the Inana International Prize in 2005, the Stig Dagerman Prize in 2011, and Seán MacBride's Peace Award in 2012. Because of her struggle as a feminist to advance the status of women Nawal El Saadawi was chosen among the most influential women in the Arab world over the past 100 years, according to the American magazine "Time" in 1981. Besides, El Saadawi was awarded many honorary doctorates from different universities such as Université libre de Bruxelles, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, the university of York and the National Autonomous University of Mexico. Furthermore, El Saadawi was the central focus of Jill Nicholls's film entitled "She Spoke the Unspoken" which was broadcast in the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in 2007. Despite receiving various awards from all over the world, she did not receive any awards or honors in Egypt, and she was not even invited to attend any national conferences and/or Egyptian cultural events. Unlike Huda Shaarawi whose name is given to one of Cairo's main streets by the Egyptian government, El Saadawi never receives any official recognition from the Egyptian government during her lifetime.

Leaving a feminist legacy and controversial views, El Saadawi died on March 21, 2021, at the age of 90 at a Cairo hospital after a long struggle with illness. Interestingly, El Saadawi who spent all her life defending women's rights passed away on the Egyptian Mother's Day that was also the same the day in which the Egyptian parliament ratified the

harsher punishment for the crime of circumcision. Additionally, Egyptian President Al Sisi issued his recommendations to issue an independent law criminalizing the marriage of underage girls on the same day. Paradoxically, the rights of Egyptian woman that El Saadawi fought for all her life were turned into laws the day of her departure. Like her life, moreover, her death created a flurry of arguments and criticism in the Egyptian press and women's press around the world. Furthermore, various social media platforms were filled with millions of comments and discussions of her writings and arguments. Whereas some mourned her and her dedication to women's issues, others celebrated her death, wishing her the worst punishment in the afterlife for what they described as her "destructive thoughts" (Naoot, 2021). The head of General Syndicate of the Egyptian Writers Union, Dr. Alaa Abdel Hadi (2021), mourned the death of El Saadawi saying that she has been a defender of women's rights throughout her literary life and has left a group of outstanding creative works, which all future generations will benefit from.

2.4.2 El Saadawi's Reception in Egypt and the Arab World

El Saadawi enjoys a unique position as an Egyptian feminist writer whose writings present the struggle of Muslim women. Because of her bold feminist views on politics and gender, she is described as the “Simone de Beauvoir of the Arab world” (Batha, 2018). Even though her books are banned in Egypt and other Muslim countries, and she was prohibited from appearing on all Egyptian TV and radio channels, she remained one of the most influential women in the Arab World (Nicholls, 2017; Naoot, 2021). On the other hand, El Saadawi is positively received in the West rather than in Egypt and other Muslim countries. According to Ahmed (1981), El Saadawi is a well-informed writer

whose writings are not comparable to others. To confirm this idea, Ahmed (1981) writes that she knows “no other woman within her society who has attacked its patriarchal values-particularly those enshrined in such notions as that of honour or all importance of virginity - as openly, cogently, and uncompromisingly as she” (p. 750).

Amal Amireh (2000), moreover, illustrates that El Saadawi was a popular Arab feminist whose views have great credibility with a Western audience. Her writings, even fictional texts, were perceived as “windows onto a timeless Islam instead of as literary works governed by certain conventions and produced within specific historical contexts” addressing women’s issues in a frank and uncompromising manner (p. 240). That is, El Saadawi succeeded to get readers engaged in her writing worlds. In her explanation of El Saadawi’s popularity in the West, Amireh (1996) argues that “the western interest in her is not innocent, some critics believe. They argue that she is acclaimed not so much because she champions women’s rights, but because she tells western readers what they want to hear (p. 6). El Saadawi’s contribution to Arab feminism, moreover, is described to be “profound” and her publications are reported to be “the most widely read of contemporary Egyptian authors-male or female” as well (Smith, 2007, p. 59). Margaret Atwood also affirms, in an interview with Jill Nicholls (2017), that El Saadawi plays a significant role in promoting the issue of gender equality in the Middle East pointing out that, “her life has been one long death threat. At a time when nobody else was talking, she spoke the unspeakable”. Yet Egyptian scholars and writers have different views about El Saadawi’s writings. Whereas some writers accuse her of misrepresenting the real status of Egyptian women, others praise her writings. For example, the Egyptian journalist Abdelmonim Said (2021) asserts that El Saadawi is one of the most influential

feminists and writers in the Arab world in the modern era. He believes that her “views about women, their freedom, and their status in Arab states have always been a source of great appreciation, not only from intellectual and theoretical aspects, but from the perspective of human "progress" in general, and in Egypt in particular” (p. 25). In addition, Maher Hassan (2021) emphasizes that Saadawi is a controversial writer whose writings have formed an intellectual and rational stance in society that fundamentally reclassifies axioms and myths, which many consider absolute facts and not subject to debate or criticism. For him, El Saadawi’s problem lies in her description of men’s mistreatment of women as an embodiment of rulers’ control over their people and her use of symbolism to express her criticism of both men and governments. Fatima Naoot (2021) also admires El Saadawi’s role in spreading knowledge, enlightenment, and advancement of the human value in general, and the value of women in particular. She summarizes El Saadawi’s significant role as a writer by saying:

El Saadawi is an enlightened writer who has pushed a lot for human rights through her knowledge, money, comfort, and years of life. The whole world honors her and her "Egyptian colleagues" deny her. But not all Egyptians, only those who hear and do not see, and those who imitate and do not think, and those who are lazy in reading and are active in criticism. Only the rational intelligentsia of this country knows the value of that great lady, respects her, and goes where she goes to learn how to think outside the box, how to reject what destroys man and insults mind and body, and she is ready for it. Contributing to the Order of the Ancient Egyptian Progenitor: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. (p. 29)

Many scholars in the Arab world in general and in Egypt in particular, however, criticize El Saadawi and describe her as the Western voice in the Middle East whose views are believed to be controversial and tend primarily to address a Western audience rather than the Muslim public (Farraj, 1985). In Egypt, for example, the Egyptian novelist Ahdaf Soueif (1996) describes El Saadawi's fiction books to be "bad novels" that do not represent "Arab women's creative writing". Instead, Soueif argues, El Saadawi writes good research papers, and thus it is unfair to describe her novels as examples of Arabic fiction writings. Similarly, Gamal El Ghitany explains in an interview with Peter Lennon (1994) that El Saadawi mainly targets the West with her writings in the hope of winning a "Nobel prize", but she, as suggested by El Ghitany, "cannot feel the true problems" of women in Muslim societies (p.29). Sayed Ali, an Egyptian journalist, describes El Saadawi as a pathetic woman who seeks to gain attention not only by attacking men but also culture as well as religion. Ali believes that El Saadawi's fame is based on her description of women's bodies as merchandise for sale.

The same criticism is also repeated by other Arab writers. For example, Afif Faaraj (1985) criticizes El Saadawi's novels and describes her characters to be "empty board except for the ideological statements written in large type" (p. 320). In addition, Alia Mamdouh (1996) affirms that Nawal El Saadawi "does not present the true picture of the creativity of Arab women" rather she "turns creativity" into a lab "to show sick samples which are deformed and which she represents as generalized social types" (p. 12). In other words, she (1996) criticizes El Saadawi for including uncommon female characters in her novels as common examples of women in Muslim societies. As a result, Mamdouh has "large question marks about the West's celebration and focus on" El

Saadawi's work. On the other hand, Luma Balaa (2018) argues that El Saadawi's writing does not employ stereotyping, but she is "occupying a space in between, where at times she employs stereotypes but at other times challenges them" (p. 237).

George Tarabishi (1988) claims that El Saadawi's novels promote rare extreme cases and reject reality rather than trying to change it. In his opinion, El Saadawi embraces the male colonizer's ideology in describing her novels' female characters who are deviated from reality. She tends to present prostitution as a common behavior and therefore he harshly criticizes her writings. His severe criticism has triggered El Saadawi's response that is published in another edition of his book in which she says:

It is surely unjust to judge a revolutionary hero or heroine as psychologically sick or neurotic merely because we have not studied the social and political conditions which forged such characters, and which forced them to take the path of struggle and rebellion. (p. 201)

That is, according to El Saadawi, her female characters, who are subjected to prostitution and murder, are forced to rebel because of the social and political conditions surrounding them.

O'Keefe (2008) also affirms that El Saadawi's writings represent a rich source of denunciation of Islam and Eastern societies and are thus appreciated by the West. Her book *Searching*, which is well received in the West, is widely criticized in the East and is viewed, according to Amireh (2000), as "a testament to the progress that American women have achieved in contrast to their oppressed Arab sisters, supposedly still groaning under the shackles of Islam" (p. 248). Similarly, Fedwa Malti-Douglas (1995) points out that El Saadawi is a

controversial feminist scholar whose views result in intense public arguments as she writes “no Arab woman inspires as much emotion as Nawal El Saadawi. No woman in the Middle East has been the subject of more polemic. No Arab woman's pen has violated as many sacred enclosures as that of Nawal El Saadawi” (p.1).

For Malti-Douglas, moreover, El Saadawi’s fiction “has been castigated as mere propaganda, as tireless repetition of her radical message” in contrast to her non-fiction books that reflect the real oppression of women in patriarchal societies in the Middle East (p. 1). Hence, Malti-Douglas claims that El Saadawi has achieved her fame because of her focus on Western prejudices about Islam and, therefore, she is accused of being “a tool of Western imperialism” (p.14). Likewise, Amireh (1996) points out that El Saadawi is famous in the West not because she “champions women’s rights” but because she writes what Western readers want to hear about Muslim societies and their patriarchal practices against women (p.6). The same idea is emphasized by Nora Drosihn (2014) who demonstrates that despite El Saadawi’s opposition to neocolonialism, her writings merely reproduce the orientalist stereotype, which constantly proclaims the superiority of the West. Along the same lines, Ahmad Al Hamidi (1986) underlines that El Saadawi’s novels depict the current class struggle experienced by both males and females as a conflict between the genders, which is unfair to women.

Due to the severe criticism that El Saadawi has repeatedly received from various Arab critics, she constantly expresses her disinterest in what they write about her. In a number of her interviews, furthermore, El Saadawi affirms that her Arab critics are not as qualified as her critics in the West, whose comments tend to be more objective. In her

interview with Adele Newson-Horst in 2008, for example, El Saadawi says that she writes primarily in Arabic to address Arab people because her goal is to address “people everywhere who believe in justice, freedom, love, equality, peace, and creativity”, and therefore she denied writing for the West (p. 58). Therefore, she is only interested in the writings of Western critics about her rather than the writings of Arab scholars.

2.4.3 El Saadawi's Feminist Writings and Creative Output

El Saadawi firmly believes in the power of writing, which she considers “a stronger weapon than medicine in the fight against poverty and ignorance” (1997, p. 2). For El Saadawi (2002), writing is a significant means that enables her to “to reach people” not only in her own country but also “in other countries of the world. It has torn down the walls of isolation” that alienated her from others (p. 10). Hence, El Saadawi (1983) confirms that nothing can stop her from writing. She writes both fiction and non-fiction texts addressing three chief taboos in the Islamic world: politics, religion, and sex. El Saadawi’s books have been translated from Arabic into thirty other languages including English, Finnish, French, Indonesian, Japanese, Persian, and Spanish. Her literary writings have primarily focused on various themes such as alienation, frustration, and the search for identity.

Her writings mainly advocate equality and fair treatment of all people everywhere and her books are banned in several countries in the Middle East including Egypt. In response to that and in support for El Saadawi, however, the Egyptian Writers Union has issued a statement in 1981 praising Dr. Nawal El Saadawi's status and her leadership in the creative movement in the Arab world, stating:

Because writing and freedom of expression are guaranteed in the constitution and the law, the Freedom Committee in the Writers Syndicate grieves over the return of the confiscation of literary books because the art of the novel can only be judged by those with experience and practice, whether in creativity or literary criticism.

The following sections describe her expository writings including fiction writings, articles, and TV and newspaper interviews.

2.4.3.1 El Saadawi's Fiction Writings

Her fiction writings included many short stories, plays, and novels, such as *The Fall of the Imam* (1988), *Woman at Point Zero* (1983), and *Zeina* (2009), which discuss the oppression of women in Muslim societies (for a full list, see Appendix A). Her first fiction work is a collection of short stories entitled *I Learned Love* that is published in 1957. El Saadawi then publishes *The Absent One* (1969) that is one of her early novels in which she discusses the life story of an urban Egyptian scientist named Fouda and her struggle against all kinds of oppression in her patriarchal society. It is the first novel in the history of Arabic literature that explicitly depicts a female character subjected to sexual harassment.

Her novel *Woman at Point Zero* (1983) is the most popular one that is based on a true story of a murderess prostitute whom El Saadawi met in prison. Before the prisoner is executed because of killing her pimp, she has told El Saadawi about her childhood, and the marital abuse that led her to become a prostitute. After writing her story, El Saadawi is proud and happy because she feels that the book brings that woman back to life. The

novel is divided into three main sections: introduction, main narrative and an epilogue. In the introduction, El Saadawi describes her visits to *Qanatir* prison as a psychiatrist who is studying the influence of prison on female prisoners. While being there, she meets the prison doctor who tells her about a prisoner named Firdaus who is sentenced to death penalty, and she is waiting for her penalty to be executed. Even though the doctor believes her to be innocent and writes a petition for a pardon, the prisoner herself refuses to sign it. El Saadawi requests to meet Firdaus to listen to her story, but Firdaus refuses to meet her several times. Finally, Firdaus speaks with El Saadawi the day before her execution.

The main narrative, however, narrates the story of Firdaus who is a farmer's daughter living in a very small village in Egypt. Her parents beat her, and she is brought up to believe in the inferiority of women. In her childhood, she plays in the fields with a boy called Mohammadain the game "bride and groom" in which she experiences sexual pleasure for the first time. She is later circumcised and is not allowed to play with Mohammadain. After the death of her parents, Firdaus is sent to Cairo to live with her uncle who sexually harasses her. In this respect, she says:

I paid no attention until the moment when I would glimpse my uncle's hand moving slowly from behind the book he was reading to touch my leg. The next moment I could feel it travelling up my thigh with a cautious, stealthy, trembling movement. (p. 13)

She clarifies that her uncle's sexual assault reminds her of what Mohammadain does to her in the past, but she feels no pleasure because she is now circumcised. Firdaus also links the image of the holy book to sexual harassment. By describing these scenes, El

Saadawi expresses her criticism of religious men whose hypocrisy, in her opinion, is disguised. When her uncle gets married, Firdaus is sent to a boarding school. When Firdaus graduates, her uncle forces her to marry an old man, Sheikh Mahmoud, who repeatedly beats her. When she complains to her uncle, he responds by saying “a virtuous woman was not supposed to complain about her husband. Her duty was perfect obedience” (p. 47).

Due to her husband’s mistreatment to her, she escapes his house and met Bayoumi who pushes her into prostitution. When Firdaus fights with him, later, she runs away and meets with Sharifa who teaches her how to be a classy prostitute. Although Firdaus earns a lot of money, she stops prostitution and starts working as an office assistant. Although she falls in love with a co-worker, he ignores her feelings and proposes to marry the office owner's daughter. As a result, Ferdous decides to quit her job and return to prostitution but this time her pimp not only abuses her and takes all her money but threatens to kill her as well. To defend herself, Firdaus kills him and is sentenced to death; however, she does not wish to reduce the sentence because she is looking forward to living in a better place. She says that “the men who put me on trial saying, you are a savage and dangerous woman” but she replies that “I speak the truth. And the truth is savage and dangerous” (p. 110). According to El Saadawi, Firdaus believes that the male judges sentence her to death because they are afraid to hear her tell the truth, not because they are afraid of killing someone else. In the epilogue, El Saadawi describes her own feelings after hearing Firdaus’s story. She believes that Firdaus is braver than herself. Although all Egyptian publishers refuse to publish *Woman at Point*

Zero, the novel is initially published in Arabic in Lebanon before being translated into various other languages.

Another significant novel is *The Fall of the Imam* (1987) that discusses the figure of the imam who symbolizes political leaders who use religion to achieve political goals. The novel discusses the story of an unjust ruler who is assassinated while celebrating his victory anniversary. Many critics say that the novel is a depiction of Egyptian President, El Sadat. Although the novel is well received in the West, it is banned in Egypt and other Arab countries. Additionally, El Saadawi write several plays as well such as *God Resigns at the Summit Meeting* (1996) in which all prophets and great women gather to meet with God. Satan joins the meeting to submit his resignation, but none of the prophets including Jesus, Muhammad, Moses is willing to replace him. Finally, God himself surrendered and resigned. Because of the religious reference, different religious and political institutions in Egypt accuse El Saadawi of insulting God and demand that her books be destroyed.

El Saadawi is one of the first Arab female writers to write her autobiography that is published in a number of memoirs detailing her life story, struggles, successes, and failures. According to Badran and Cooke (1990), “personal memoirs can offer special insights into the workings of patriarchal institutions and ideology because they can show how their imperatives are internalized and suppressed or how they cause conflict and inspire attempts to escape from their control” (p. 41). This emphasizes the significance of memoirs as sources of knowledge. El Saadawi’s *Memoirs from the Women’s Prison* (1986), for example, documents her experience in the women's prison in 1981. Not only does it portray the inhuman conditions that she has witnessed and lived with other

prisoners, but it also displays the violence of the Egyptian police as well. El Saadawi also describes all prisoners around her such as religious prisoners who are depicted as follows

I heard from Budur nothing but the word "Haram I" (Forbidden!).

Everything to her is Haram including physical exercise, since a woman should not shake her body. Laughter too is Haram since a verse in the Koran says that "Indeed God does not like the joyful people." I saw her once laughing unconsciously, but then she lifted her hand quickly over her mouth and, choking her laugh, she prayed: "May the greedy be reformed, oh, God. (p. 60)

The book also describes the miserable life of her mother and other women in the Egyptian society.

Another work is *Memoirs of a Doctor* (1989), in which El Saadawi recounts her experience as a doctor in a small town in Egypt. The book reveals the miserable health status of poor Egyptian patients and includes what the poor can offer to the doctor who treats them in rural medical centers. She writes:

All the tragedies of the society enter into my clinic. All the results of disguise and swindle are exposed before me on the examination table.

The bitter realities which people deny come and lay under my hand on the operating table. (p. 86)

In these misogynist societies, El Saadawi argues, women are marginalized, sexually segregated and are not allowed to be seen or heard outside of their houses. The narrator is in search of her identity and independence as a free human, so she rejects marriage as the only way for women in her society to obtain protection and financial support. The

narrator intentionally violates all social and cultural norms imposed on her and expresses her disapproval of the patriarchal society. For example, She tends to go out without her parents' permission and cut her hair in protest of her mother's demand to comb it twice a day. To combat the concept of women's inferiority, the narrator denies her femininity and says:

I will deny my femininity. I will challenge my nature. I will carry on all my physical desires. I will confirm to my mother and grandmother that I am not a woman like them, that I will not live my life in the kitchen peeling onions and garlic, waste my life for the sake of a man who does nothing but eat. (pp. 20-21)

Furthermore, Her medical school education enables her to learn more about a man's body and realizes that men are not biologically superior to women. After her anatomy class, she asks herself:

Why did my mother put such horrible differences between me and my brother, and make the man a god over me that I spend my whole life cooking for him? Why does the society always try to convince me that masculinity is an advantage and noble, while femininity is a trial and weakness? Could my mother believe that I stand in front of a naked man with a lancet in my hand to open a man's belly and head? (Or the society believe that I can contemplate a man's body, and dissect it without any feeling of his sex?" (pp. 24-25)

Although the narrator chooses to be a doctor in order to gain the respect and admiration of others, she is treated like a nurse in her rural workplace which makes her angry. Thus, she asks:

How ignorant are those people! Those people who surrender their body and soul to me that I save them from unconsciousness and death. How can they make any protest against me? How can they even disagree with me? I am the one who directs them to what they must eat and drink. I teach them how to breath, sleep and live. Did they forget? Or do they think that when I take off the stethoscope and white gown, I also take off my intelligence and mind? (P.72)

Appendix A provides a list of El Saadawi's novels, memoirs, plays and short stories.

2.4.3.2 El Saadawi's Non-Fiction Writings and Memoirs

In 1972, El Saadawi published her first book entitled, *Women and Sex*, which was banned in Egypt and severely criticized by the clergy and religious scholars for focusing on controversial issues such as sex and religion. Therefore, she had to have it published in Lebanon. Her forbidden book presented a scientific study on the woman's body, types of hymens, and the effect of the concept of a woman's honor on her physically and psychologically. El Saadawi also criticizes the societal violence against women's bodies, such as FGM and virginity testing. Having the clitoris of a young female cut, El Saadawi argues, aims to reduce the sexual pleasure of women to humiliate them, which she describes as the essence of patriarchy. Like Simone de Beauvoir (1949) who condemns such brutal practice, El Saadawi underscores the significance of the body. Because of this

book, she has lost her job in the Minister of Health, and she is accused of apostasy. Her dismissal from her work as a doctor allows her to concentrate more on her creative writing that includes different genres. In her second book, *The hidden face of Eve: Women in the Arab world*, moreover, El Saadawi (1982a) describes her traumatic experience with FGM at the age of six. This experience not only makes her reject such violent practices towards male and female children, but she also protests against them in Egypt that is guided by religion. El Saadawi, therefore, criticizes religions saying, “Arab women are sacrificed on the altars of God and Money from the moment of birth to the hour of death” (p. 49). The book, however, is well received in the West and is described by Vivian Gornick (1982) in her online book review as:

a curious work. Written by a Marxist who has read Freud, in a country and for a people that require an educated introduction to the idea of equality for women, the book seems disoriented by the inorganic nature of its understanding.

In *Walking through fire: A life of Nawal El Saadawi* (2002), moreover, she condemns FGM and writes that “since I was a child that deep wound left in my body has never healed. But the deeper wound has been the one left in my spirit, in my soul” (p. 63). She further depicts the painful physical and psychological effects of FGM on young girls and blames its existence on empty religious and cultural slogans in many Muslim societies. In her third book, *The Nawal EL Saadawi Reader* (1997), El Saadawi documents her experience when she worked as a doctor in a small Egyptian village and witnessed different kinds of oppression against women such as honor killings. The book includes 20 essays addressing different issues such as sexual aggression against children

and women, girls' circumcision, lack of education, prostitution, marriage and divorce issues. One of the chapters discusses the role of pioneer Arab feminists who significantly contributes to the liberation of their countries. El Saadawi, for example, notes that "Gamal El Dine El Afghani was one of the notable pioneers and leaders of this awakening. Together with a group of his disciples, he played a prominent role in propagating progressive ideas on many important issues" (p. 253). She also asserts that women in the Arab world are victims of their patriarchal societies that "have ended up prisoners of the home, of the veil and of a system which prevents them from participating in the economic and social life of their society" (p. 197). See Appendix B for a list of El Saadawi's non-fiction writings.

2.4.3.3 El Saadawi's Press Interviews and TV Shows

El Saadawi's newspaper articles and TV interviews have addressed several controversial issues such as prostitution, domestic violence, and religious fundamentalism. This section mainly focuses on two central topics that she repeatedly discusses in her published articles and TV interviews. First, El Saadawi commonly talks about her childhood and the role of her parents in developing her personality and feminist's views. In her interview on Al Aan TV, for example, El Saadawi thoroughly describes the role of her father in developing her critical approach. To do so, as El Saadawi explains, her father advised her not to accept any ideas unless she was convinced and to argue with anyone, even God. Likewise, her mother encouraged her to write without fear of punishment, neither in life nor after death, because she assured her that there was no hell in the afterlife. El Saadawi says that her mother used to tell her, as El Saadawi mentions in Al

An interview, "there is no fire in the hereafter to burn you, Nawal. Fire is only mentioned in the Qur'an as a symbol, but it does not really exist."

Second, El Saadawi expresses her criticism of the Egyptian and American societies, accusing them of patriarchy and persecution of women. In her interview with Sarah Raphael (2018), for example, El Saadawi criticizes the Egyptian society by saying:

In Egypt, you find contradictions, because there is the Islamisation of Egypt, and the Americanization of Egypt. Nakedness and veiling so hand in hand. Some Egyptian women, like the Americans, show their breasts and wear miniskirts and a lot of makeup, and then other women are very veiled. In the middle you have women who accommodate Islamisation and Americanization, so they cover their head and their hair, but they uncover their belly with jeans that are very low, and the stomach is visible. So, in fact women are really oppressed by both Islamisation and Americanization." (p. 6)

In addition, she criticizes several Western politicians and feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir whom she criticizes in many TV interviews and newspaper articles. In her article, entitled *an hour of silence with the word maker*, El Saadawi mentioned her meeting with Simone de Beauvoir and Paul Sartre when they visited Egypt in the 1960s asserting that she did not like Simone de Beauvoir's personality because she seemed to be subordinate of Sartre. In 2018, she further added in another article, *Women's creativity and the imprisonment of the subconscious*:

Simone de Beauvoir, in my opinion, could have been a more important philosopher than "Jean-Paul Sartre", but she gave up her philosophy for

his sake and came to believe in him and his liberal socialist existential philosophy. Sartre overcame her intellectually as well as emotionally.

While Simon was living tears of single love on him, he lived multiple relationships, moving as he pleased among women, declaring that he had not shed a single tear on any woman.

El Saadawi underlined that Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir's life completely contradicted their writings. Even though Sartre was writing about the liberation of the black man from the white man's supremacy and the liberation of Algerian people from French colonialism, he used to exploit women and practice oppression on them. On the other hand, Simone de Beauvoir was writing about the liberation of women from political, economic and sexual oppression; however, she lived the humiliation of submission and subordination to Sartre.

In another newspaper article, El Saadawi (2018b) explains that Simone de Beauvoir lived her childhood under the control of her Catholic mother who strictly controlled her. As a result, El Saadawi suggests, Simone de Beauvoir hated her mother and was inclined to love her father, whom she raised to the highest divine level. El Saadawi further adds that "Sartre, her beloved, came to occupy the place of the Holy Father, and the ghost of the evil mother lurked in the subconscious, which appeared to her frightening in the dark, outside of time and space like the devil". Thus, she believes the writer of "Women and Sex" was not a role model in her life. Instead, El Saadawi explains, Simone de Beauvoir's life developed according to her personal accumulation of experiences, and her only ambition was to transcend her personal frustration. In contrast, El Saadawi expresses her admiration for powerful women in Egyptian history, from the

ancient goddess Isis to her illiterate farmer grandmother. For a complete list of newspaper interviews and Tv shows, see Appendices C and D.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Women do not need to eradicate difference to feel solidarity. We do not need to share common oppression to fight equally to end oppression. We can be sisters united by shared interests and beliefs, united in our appreciation for diversity, united in our struggle to end sexist oppression, united in political solidarity”
-bell hooks¹⁰

religion is a private matter. It has nothing to do with the state, or the laws or anything else. It is a very private matter. You are free to choose your own god, your own goddess; you are free to believe in no god – you are free. You pray at home, not in school, not in the state, not in the parliament, not at your work. There should be complete separation between religion and the state.
-Nawal El Saadawi¹¹

3.1 Introduction

Muslim Women encounter gender-based inequalities, domestic violence, and subordination in different parts of the world. Many Muslim societies, for example, still allow female genital mutilation and honor killings (Buehler, 2011; Kazemzadeh, 2002). In other societies, moreover, Muslim women suffer from sexual harassment, rape, and are required to marry their rapists (Moghadam, 2004; Tohidi, 2003). They are also marginalized and underrepresented in politics, and senior positions as well as in legislatures (Joseph, 2001; Howard, Allen and Saliba, 2002). This thesis provides a critical comparison of Nawal El Saadawi’s arguments regarding women’s rights in Islam in relation to classical and modern scholars' interpretations of the Qur'an. The purpose of this chapter is to explain the methodology I used to conduct my research and to provide a summary of the main sources of my research.

¹⁰ Hooks, B. (1984). *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*. Boston: South End Press, p. 404.

¹¹ Smith, S. (2007). Interview with Nawal El Saadawi (Cairo, 29th January 2006). *Feminist Review*, 85(85), 59–69.(P. 61).

3.2 The Methodological Framework

I employ a qualitative methodology in my analysis of EL Saadawi's writings that relies on words and sentences to record information about the target issues. There are different designs for qualitative research such as ethnography, case study, and phenomenological study (Leedy and Ormrod, 2005). In this thesis, however, I use discourse analysis which is one of the most popular approaches in social constructivism and is described as an intertwined methodology (Jorgensen and Philips, 2002). More specifically, I use the content analysis approach to examine El Saadawi's viewpoint regarding the issue of women's rights and compare it to the traditional and contemporary understanding of the relevant Qur'anic gender verses. There are several definitions of content analysis. Krippendorff (2004), for example, defines it as a "research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts to the contexts of their uses" (p. 18). As a methodological approach, according to Leedy and Ormrod (2005), content analysis is a thorough and systematic investigation of the contents of "a particular body of material for the purpose of identifying patterns, themes, or biases" (p.142). That is, it aims to explain the main ideas, patterns, and biases in the target content.

In general, content analysis aims to interpret different types of texts such as "written transcripts of speeches or conversations, written documents (letters, personnel records, newspapers, magazines, textbooks" and "electronic documents (audiotapes, films, videotapes, computer files)" (Nelson and Woods, 2014, p. 109). In other words, the content analysis approach can be used to analyze many types of texts including oral, written, and visual ones. In addition, content analysis can be used both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Content analysis is commonly characterized by certain features that distinguish it from other methodological approaches. For example, it can be used to track specific data and detect changes in social phenomena and religious practices in particular settings over time. It can also be performed to display common features within certain texts or categories. Additionally, content analysis can be used to examine differences between certain groups or variables in different societies such as comparing the different roles of black and white families on different television channels researched by Abelman (1989). Moreover, researchers can conduct content analysis to assess communities' perceptions of specific groups. For instance, Ferré (1980) used a content analysis approach to investigate discrimination against certain religious groups such as Anglicans, Evangelicals, and Jews that have been documented and published in several articles in two prominent newspapers: the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*.

There are various advantages of content analysis that make it a useful practical approach. First, it examines available texts rather than producing new ones. Second, content analysis enables researchers to easily summarize a large amount of data, recognize patterns within a specific text, and, more importantly, “move beyond manifest content found in texts to latent content or interpretations” (Nelson and Woods, 2014, p. 116). In this respect, content analysis prominently displays how each text is related to others. Hence, it is a valuable method that helps in presenting clear interpretations of the target Qur’anic verses and prophetic sayings in this study and clarifies their underlying arguments and presuppositions. Third, content analysis assists researchers in comprehending religious concepts as well as theoretical principles, explore religion in media, and assess religion in culture and different types of institutions. Fourth, it enables

researchers to explain the embedded messages in the target texts and elucidate them in terms of their historical and social contexts.

Here, the analysis is deductive and focuses on evidence provided in the target texts. To perform content analysis, moreover, there are certain steps to be followed. The first step is to select relevant texts. Then the appropriate units of analysis are identified. Krippendorff (1980), for example, presents five units of analysis that can be used by researchers: word count, sentences, published articles, arguments, and themes. Next, researchers code messages in the units of analysis by placing them in content categories that are organized, according to Berelson (1952), into two main divisions: form and content. That is followed by the researchers' interpretation of the findings.

Following these steps, I firstly selected all relevant texts to my study from three major primary sources. I initially collected El Saadawi's major arguments regarding women's rights in Islam from various published books, articles as well as press interviews (See Appendices A, B, C and D for complete lists of all genres and interviews). Next, the related Qur'anic verses were collected from the holy book of the Qur'an (See appendix E for a full list of verses). I then checked their interpretations in two premodern Islamic sources. The first one is a prominent *Tafsīr* book entitled *Jāmi' al bayān 'an ta'wīl āy al Qur'ān* written by Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Jarir Al Ṭabarī¹² (839- 923 C.E.) who was a well-known historian and commentator of the Qur'an with extensive experience in Islamic jurisprudence and Qur'anic exegesis. The second one is

¹² Al Tabari was born in Iran in 839, lived in Baghdad and was famous for recording the prophetic ahadith and deeds. In addition to Qur'anic commentary, he wrote *Tarikh Al Rasul wa Al Muluk* "History of Prophets and Kings".

Tafsīr al Qur'ān al 'Aẓīm by Abu l-Fida Ismail Ibn Umar Ibn Kathir¹³ (1300-1373 AD)

who was a famous historian and Qur'anic exegete during the Mamluk Sultanate. The commentaries of Al Tabari and Ibn Kathir are chosen because they represent pre-modern Quranic exegesis, which is highly reliable and widely used in the field (Berg, 2000).

While Al Tabari's exegesis is described as the "summative repository of the first two- and one-half centuries of Muslim exegetical endeavor"¹⁴, Ibn Kathir's commentary is highly praised because it "extrudes the exegetical accomplishments and accretions of the intervening centuries" and disregards any "forms of interpretation which have been 'infected' by biblical narratives or other non-Muslim literary sources."¹⁵

Additional data came from available recent scientific studies published in the past three decades on target topics by two contemporary Muslim women scholars: Amina Wadud¹⁶ and Azizah Al Hibri¹⁷. These two writers are chosen because they apply a feminist interpretative lens to the divine text that presents a non-sectarian and non-sexist understanding of the Qur'an. While Wadud uses a hermeneutical approach that examines the context, grammatical and linguistic structure, and unity of the Qur'an as a complete

¹³ Ibn Kathir was born in a small village in Syria and was famous for his Qur'anic commentary that linked the sayings of the Prophet and his companions with the verses of the Qur'an. HE also wrote various other books focusing on the Prophetic *sunnah*.

¹⁴ McAuliffe, J. D. (2007). The Tasks and Traditions of Interpretation." In Jane Dammen McAuliffe. (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an*, (pp. 281-210), New York: Cambridge University Press. P. 192.

¹⁵ Ibid., 198.

¹⁶ Amina Wadud a professor of Islamic studies at Virginia Commonwealth University. Her book *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* is considered a prominent feminist interpretation of the Qur'an characterized by the interpretation of women-related verses in light of the entire Qur'an. She calls for the constant reinterpretation of the Qur'an to match the changes in our modern age.

¹⁷ Azizah Al Hibri is a professor Emerita of Law at the University Richmond who lives and works in the United States. She founded the organization KARAMAH: Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights that aims to help women interpret Islamic law. Her writings seek reform by rereading Qur'anic verses in the context of their revelation and the Prophetic *sunnah*.

text, Al Hibri applies a womanist approach that uses the principles of Islamic law to interpret Qur'anic verses. The data were classified into five themes, i.e., marriage, polygamy, divorce, inheritance, and the veil, which are thoroughly discussed in the following two chapters.

Chapter 4: Marriage, Polygamy, and Divorce

Can we be creative if we submit to the rules forced upon us under different names: father, God, husband, family, nation, security, stability, protection, peace, democracy, family planning, development, human rights, modernism, or postmodernism?
-Nawal El Saadawi¹⁸

just as Western women or white women cannot be defined as coherent interest groups; Third World women also do not constitute any automatic unitary group. Alliances and divisions of class, religion, sexuality, and history, for instance, are necessarily internal to each of the above groups.
-Chandra Talpade Mohanty¹⁹

The present chapter first introduces El Saadawi's views regarding women's rights in Islam in general, then it presents her controversial views about marriage, polygamy and divorce that are followed by an analysis of her viewpoint in light classical and modern scholars' interpretations of the Qur'an.

4.1 El Saadawi's Views Regarding Muslim Women's Rights

The famous Egyptian writer Nawal El Saadawi has written both fiction and non-fiction texts in which she has explicitly criticized the male patriarchal system in the Arab Muslim countries. In general, El Saadawi (1977) believes that "human nature is the same, whether it belongs to a man or to a woman" but it can only change in light of "the environment and society in which the man or woman lives" (p. 41). For her, in an interview with Sophie Smith (2007), women's oppression is "a universal phenomenon" that is not restricted to Muslim women who are as oppressed as other women by "class, gender, and religion" (p.68). El Saadawi (1977), therefore, affirms that when women are

¹⁸ El Saadawi, N. (1997). *The Nawal El Saadawi reader*. London: Zed Books. P. 158.

¹⁹ Mohanty, C. T. (1991b). Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism. In Mohanty, C. T., Russo, A & Torres, L. (eds), *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p. 49.

“independent intellectually and physically”, they will be equal to their male counterparts “in all-rational and psychological faculties” even though “there are facts, which confirm that woman is biologically superior to man.” (p. 42). To change their current inferior status, El Saadawi suggests that women should be economically and socially independent first (p.43).

Furthermore, El Saadawi asserts in an interview with Fariborz, (2014), that "the global post-modern capitalist system, which is supported by religious fundamentalism" is one of the core reasons behind women's oppression and describes religious leaders to be hypocrites as well as tyrants. El Saadawi also attacks Islam for different practices such as the practice of “Hajj²⁰” in which Muslims have to stone the devil using small stones and kissing the Black Stone²¹. In a newspaper interview with Lloyd-Davies in 2001, for instance, El Saadawi claims that the Islamic rituals of *Hajj* are pagan and subsequently asks “why do they need to stone the devil? why do they need to kiss that black stone?” (p.11). In this regard, El Saadawi blames media for not criticizing Islamic awkward religious practices depicting the lack of criticism of such practices to be “censorship” rather than “liberalism” (p.12).

Besides, El Saadawi (1982a) argues that God in monotheistic religions including Islam is male and favors men only at the expense of women who are not permitted, for example, to pass their names on to their children. As a child, moreover, this issue, in particular, used to upset El Saadawi who was annoyed with the fact that her brother was granted more privileges than herself. The burning question for her, however, was “why is

²⁰ *Hajj* is an Arabic word that means the annual Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca.

²¹ The Black Stone is a Muslim relic that is placed into the eastern corner of the sacred structure located in the center of the mosque in Mecca in Saudi Arabia.

this preference given to her brother, despite the fact that they are the same or that she may even be superior to him in many ways?” (p. 12). When her mother informed her that “God said so”, El Saadawi was angry with God who gave her brother more advantages than she had. Therefore, at a very early age, she angrily wrote a letter to God in which she asked why women are treated differently from men saying:

Yes, God. You are not just. And You treat me badly. And you treat my brother better than me though I am more intelligent than he is. And this is not fair! if you not going to be fair, I am not “ready” to believe in you. (El Saadawi, 2018a)

Even though El Saadawi waited to hear from God, she never received a response from Him and that was an eye-opening experience for her. In a TV interview in 2018, El Saadawi asserted that she was more aware of the gender inequality in her community when she first went to primary school and was asked by a teacher to write her name. As soon as she wrote her first name “Nawal” followed by her mother’s first name “Zainab”, the teacher crossed out her mother’s name and asked her to write down her father’s name instead. At that moment, El Saadawi fully realized that women are not only considered inferior to men before God but society as well.

El Saadawi, moreover, has different views regarding both secular and Islamic feminisms. For her, as stated in her TV interview to U.K.'s Channel 4 News by Krishnan Guru-Murthy in 2018, “feminism is not a Western invention. Feminism was not invented by American women, as many people think. No, feminism embedded in the culture and in the struggle of all women all over the world”. She believes that the term secular

feminism includes “social justice, political justice, sexual justice” that links different fields together such as history, literature, politics, economics, and psychology. To be a feminist and adopt feelings of women's liberation, El Saadawi argues, is a global matter and not limited to certain regions. In an interview with Krajeski (2011), El Saadawi emphasizes that the oppression of women cannot be understood in the absence of feminism which displays its significance. In another interview with Sarah Graham-Brown (1981), El Saadawi asserts that “the enemy is the same, but the struggle is different” (p. 26). Even though secular feminism has significantly helped women gain equal rights in the West, El Saadawi claims that Western feminists should not bother solving Muslim women’s problems. Instead, they should enjoy the rights granted to them by previous generations of secular feminists in their societies. On the other hand, El Saadawi (2018a) calls for separating feminism from religion because she is against mixing religions with social and political affairs. For her, religion is a private matter that does not affect individuals' daily lives, rights, and duties. El Saadawi further emphasizes in her recent online interview with Nicole Joseph (2021) that “women are oppressed within all religions, and you cannot really liberate yourself within any religion” and therefore she rejects Islamic feminism.

Likewise, El Saadawi (2002) blames Islam for the inferiority of women’s status. She believes that Muslim women are currently suffering because of the inequality of rights between the two genders in different Muslim countries which Christian women in the West have already challenged and gradually overcome. In her writings, El Saadawi (1980, 1982a & 1997) repeatedly describes Islam as a sexist religion that ignores women and their valuable experiences. She further says that “the oppression of women exercised

by the temple and the church has been even more ferocious than that in the case of Islam” (1997, p. 86). In addition, El Saadawi (2019) constantly questions the idea that the Qur’an does not mention any women’s names except for Mary, Jesus’s mother. She does not understand the reasons for ignoring women who have sacrificed their lives for the sake of Islam compared to the men whose names are mentioned in the Qur’an several times such as Abraham, Jacob, Yajuj, Zaid, Isaac, Lot and Maju. El Saadawi also claims that Islamic law and the male-oriented language of the Qur’an are the main reasons behind the subordination of women in all Islamic societies. In this respect, she wonders why God forgives Adam and does not forgive Eve as the Qur’an states “then Adam received from his Lord [some] words, and He accepted his repentance” (Qur’an, 2:37). The verse, according to El Saadawi, ignores Eve and does not mention anything about her repentance or God’s forgiveness of her like Adam. On the contrary, El Saadawi (1982b) reiterates that women in the pre-Islamic era “enjoyed a greater degree of liberty and independence” and they were able, for example, to choose their partners and had the right to divorce as well (p. 194). In addition, El Saadawi argues that women were granted more freedom of expression in the early Muslim community in *Al Madīnah Al Munawwarah*²² “The Luminous City” in the seventh century. Overall, however, El Saadawi’s writings condemn Islam concerning a number of issues related to women’s rights, three of which are discussed in the next section.

²² *Al Madīnah Al Munawwarah* was the city of the Messenger of God and the capital of Muslims during the Prophetic era that is now located in the Hejaz region of western Saudi Arabia, about 100 miles 275 miles from Mecca by road.

4.2 The Issue of Marriage

In Muslim societies, the concept of family is not only restricted to the nuclear family that includes parents and children, but it rather extends to include grandparents, maternal and paternal uncles, aunts, and cousins as well. Different family members tend to impact a person's life in relation to different aspects of life such as his/ her choice of education, career, and marriage (Naseef, 1988; Ramadan, 2005). It is only through marriage, moreover, that a Muslim can satisfy his/her natural sexual needs because dating is forbidden. Yet, the challenge is higher for women who, unlike men, are only allowed to get married to Muslim partners (Leeman, 2009).

Today, marriage is a problematic issue in most Muslim societies for various reasons. First, child marriage is a common social practice that threatens the lives of young girls in many poor areas of the Islamic world today. For instance, 37% of girls in Bangladesh marry under the age of 15, and 57% of Afghan girls marry before the age of 16 (UNICEF's report, 2014). Not only do early marriage and pregnancy affect the health of young mothers, but also their children. Second, the problem of late marriage is another challenge. There is a large number of highly educated women in many Islamic countries who are over the age of 35 and are still single without any sexual experiences. For instance, 45% of Saudi women and 60% of Emirati women are over the age of 30 and unmarried. To avoid negative societal judgment on them as spinsters, some have attempted suicide (Khan, 2011). The third significant reason is domestic violence against women by their male relatives such as husbands, fathers, and brothers, which causes health problems for them. All these problems are currently blamed on Islam. Thus, it is very beneficial to carefully examine this controversial issue.

4.2.1 El Saadawi's Views on Marriage

The significance of the family in Muslim-majority countries has been discussed by El Saadawi (1982a) who proclaims that “children were cared for and looked after by members of the extended family whenever work called their mothers to the fields or elsewhere” and the goal is “to alleviate the burdens of everyday life” (p 12). Despite stressing the important role the family plays in an individual's personal life, El Saadawi (2007) argues that marriage is a repressive institution that denies Muslim women's freedom and suppresses their sexual needs. She also states that her mother “hated marriage because her own mother hated marriage and cursed marriage as a cemetery for women” (1997, p.1). During her childhood, El Saadawi (1986a) explains, her mother used to repeat to her "your fate is bound to marriage. You have to learn cooking; your fate is marriage! marriage! marriage!" and thus she concluded that “the world of woman is limited and ugly and diffuses a garlic smell” (p.10). Not only did her mother's repetition of these words make El Saadawi dislike marriage, but it also led to her rejection of the traditional role of women in Muslim societies as housewives whose duties are mainly limited to caring for their families and managing household affairs. El Saadawi, in this regard, describes marriage as a form of slavery and views the marriage contract as a constitutionalized business. She thus sarcastically mocks the process of writing her second marriage contract by saying:

The old man with a big white turban on his head was looking at him [her husband] with all respect and listened to him. But he did not see me or listen to me as if my existence were not there before him. In his hand he had a pen and a big ruled notebook. (1989, p. 66)

Hence, El Saadawi (1980) blames both Islam and the society whose “rules and traditions make the man a guardian of his wife and make him dominate her body, thought, and her social, economic, and political activities” (p. 169).

To illustrate her point, El Saadawi provides a number of reasons. First, El Saadawi (1982b) claims that women are not granted the right to choose their spouses who are always imposed on them by their fathers or male guardians. She firmly believes that the family in Muslim societies is “highly patriarchal, both socially and legally” and the father’s authority “over his daughters is absolute” (El Saadawi, 1982a, p. 71). In other words, Muslim women are granted a small margin of freedom and do not have the fair right to choose their partners. Instead, the woman is forced to accept the man that her father or her male guardian chooses for her, whom she may not like.

Second, EL Saadawi (1983) rejects the expectation that Muslim women are always obedient and ought not to complain about their husbands who are allowed to beat them as well. More specifically, El Saadawi criticizes the Qur’anic verse 4:34 that states “those [wives] from whom you fear arrogance - [first] advise them; [then if they persist], abandon them in beds, but if they still persist [finally] strike them”, and renounces such violence against women. She also rejects the male guardianship system that includes the husband’s parental role in the family.

Third, El Saadawi (2007) argues that men “bind women in marriage and then chastise them with menial service for life, or insults, or blows.” and depicts women’s position to be worse than that of slaves or full-time laborers (p. 94). According to El Saadawi, a Muslim woman is typically expected to take care of her children, housework, jobs, and husbands as well. Nevertheless, the role of the husband is mainly restricted to

outdoor work. El Saadawi argues that these patriarchal roles of men as workers and women as homemakers are still dominant in Muslim countries, and thus are some of the main themes in her writings. Here, El Saadawi (1980) blames Islam for granting men additional rights in the marital relationship enabling them to control their wives who are accordingly forced to have a poor position in marriage. She further believes that such treatment is deliberately intended to keep women in a constant lower rank and is totally dependent on their husbands whom the Quran describes as their guardians. By doing so, El Saadawi (1997) concludes that “Islam is not exceptional in having transformed women into slaves of their men” and that both “Judaism and Christianity subjected women to exactly the same fate” (p. 86).

4.2.2 Analysis of El Saadawi’s Views on Marriage

The three main points of El Saadawi's critique of the institution of marriage in Islam are analyzed through two interpretive lenses of the Qur'an: traditional and feminist. Whereas Al Tabari and Ibn Kathir present the traditional interpretation, the modern feminist exegesis is represented by Amina Wadud and Azizah Al Hibri.

According to Al Tabari (2000), Islam pays much attention to marriage that is seen as a sacred contract and is considered one of the most virtuous and approved institutions characterized by tranquility, compassion, and love. The major purpose of marriage in Islam is to form a family that is considered the basic unit of society and therefore the significance of the marital relationship is highlighted by various Qur’anic verses such as the Qur’anic verse 30:21 which declares:

One of His signs is that He created for you spouses from among yourselves, so that you may seek peace and comfort with them. He has plant affection and mercy between you and them. In this, there are signs for people who think.

According to Al Tabari, The verse emphasizes two important things. First, it underlines the notion that men and women are created of the same source underlying the concept of gender equality that is introduced as the basis of marriage. Second, the verse highlights the significance of tranquility and compassion in the marital relationship in which the spiritual aspect, “mercy”, is listed as one of its primary elements. Therefore, argues Al Tabari, Islam asserts the concept of mutual love and respect between a wife and a husband that secures a relaxing atmosphere for Muslim spouses. Another objective of marriage, according to Al Tabari, is to produce a new generation that is also confirmed by another Qur’anic verse “God has provided you with spouses from among yourselves and, through your spouses, sons and grandchildren, and He has provided you with the good things. Would they then believe in falsehood and deny God's favors?” (Qur’an, 16:72). For Al Tabari, the verse displays the scope of marriage that includes emotional and sexual aspects on the one hand and gives birth to children on the other hand. Islam, Al Tabari (2000) claims, grants Muslim women the right to choose their life partners and reject any undesirable marriage proposals and God commands men to give women their dowries before marriage as an obligatory gift.

The same idea is emphasized by Ibn Kathir who argues that God made the children of Adam, including male and female. Then God mentions that from these wives He created children and grandchildren. For Ibn Kathir, moreover, it is God's mercy that

He made Eve of Adam's own kind and created love and kindness between them. If God had made all of Adam's offspring male, Ibn Kathir argues, and created the females from another kind, such as from Jinn or animals, there would never have been harmony between them and their husbands. Instead, there would have been revulsion and hatred. Ibn Kathir (2003) also asserts that a woman's consent is not only one of her rights in Islam, but it is also an obligatory condition for the validity of the marriage contract. He further clarifies that a women's right to choose her husband is confirmed in the *hadith* of the Prophet as well. For example, Ibn Kathir notes, when a Muslim young woman approached Prophet Muhammad complaining that her father forced her to marry a man without her consent, the Prophet gave her the right to annul her marriage. Yet, the woman gave her consent to the marriage saying "Now that I am free, I willingly consent to this marriage. I only wanted it to be known that men have no say over women in their marriages" (p. 468). Ibn Kathir also explains that a woman is given a dowry from her bridegroom as a free gift that can be waived if she desires, just as the Qur'an asserts to "give women 'you wed' their due dowries graciously. But if they waive some of it willingly, then you may enjoy it freely with a clear conscience" (Qur'an, 4:4). That is, a man is required to pay a dowry to his wife, and if the wife gives him a part or all of this dowry, then her husband may take it in this case as stipulated in the Qur'an.

Wadud and Al Hibri present similar argument. For example, Wadud (1999) asserts that "Within marriage, there should be harmony mutually built with love and mercy. The marriage tie is considered a protection for both the male and the female" (p. 78). Wadud (1999) also sees the dowry in Islam as an obligatory gift that the groom gives to his bride. Likewise, Al Hibri (2006) affirms that the Qur'an mentions a number of

verses such as 2:187 and 30:21²³ that represent “a reference to the fact that spouses are each other's sanctuary insofar as each covers the other's shortcomings and preserves his or her privacy; hence the tranquility” (p.5). Additionally, Al Hibri (2001) explains that the dowry ranges from teaching her some Qur’anic verses to enormous wealth and can be presented partially or in full to the woman in advance or postponed till a specific later time. A Muslim woman is also an "independent legal entity" who "keeps her name after marriage" as well as her "financial independence". If a wife, as Al Hibri argues, gives money to her husband for any reasons it is considered “a loan unless she specifies otherwise” (p. 47). After marriage, Al Hibri notes, the woman maintains the legal status that allows her to sell, buy, own, and rent without their husbands’ permission. Hence, Muslim women are accorded equal legal status with men that can be retained after marriage that is also confirmed by other modern scholars such as Maulana Khan (2011) and Fazlur Rahman, (1986). Thus, traditional and some feminist interpretations of Quranic verses about marriage, contradict the first criticism of El Saadawi.

The second criticism of El Saadawi is that wives must obey their husbands who are allowed to “strike their wives” (Qur’an verse 4:34²⁴). In this regard, Al Tabari narrates the occasion of the revelation of the verse when a woman came to complain to the Prophet of her husband’s violence against her. Upon hearing her complaint, the Prophet forbade such practice and allowed the woman the right to retribution that was later contradicted by the revelation. Hence, the Prophet said, “We wished something, and God

²³ See Appendix (E) for verses 2:187 and 30:21 and their English translation.

²⁴ The second part of the Qur’anic verse (4:34) states “those [wives] from whom you fear arrogance [first] advise them; [then if they persist], abandon them in beds, but if they still persist [finally], strike them”.

wished something else. What God wishes is best. And the retaliation was revoked” (p. 291-292). Al Tabari further adds that men are superior to women because they are expected to financially support their wives and accordingly men’s *qiwamah*²⁵ is restricted. Similarly, Ibn Kathir (2003) asserts that “Men are protectors and maintainers of women” and he provides two reasons for men’s leadership. First, “men excel over women and are better than them for certain tasks” and therefore, Ibn Kathir argues, prophethood is only restricted for men (p. 442). He further relates this reason to the exclusion of women from judicial or other leadership positions. Second, men have a degree of responsibility over women as men are directed in the Qur'an and *Sunnah*²⁶ to support women financially.

Regarding obedience, both Al Tabari and Ibn Kathir agree that if a woman disobeys her husband, he is instructed to advise her first. If she does not listen, he is commanded to abandon her in bed. In case she does not change, the husband is then advised to discipline her lightly using nothing bigger than a *siwak* “a thinner small toothbrush”. Al Tabari and Ibn Kathir believe that the three steps mentioned for dealing with the disobedience of wives are sequential and stress that the beating should be light. The aim is to discourage violence against women. Ibn Kathir (2003) cites the Prophetic *hadith* in which physical discipline is only permitted if it is neither “violent” nor “severe” (p. 446).

²⁵ *Qiwamah* is an Arabic word that literally means a male guardianship and refers to men’s authority and guidance in the family.

²⁶ *Sunnah* is an Arabic word that refers to the Prophetic tradition.

In addition, Al Qurtubi²⁷ (2018), a prominent Muslim scholar, asserts that the authority of a man in the family is based on his role as the breadwinner. Although a husband has no such authority (guardianship) over his wife when he is unable to provide for his family financially, Al Qurtubi notes, he is not allowed to beat her as the Prophet addressed men to “treat women well and be kind to them” because they are their partners and “committed helpers” (prophet Muhammad's Last Sermon Date delivered: 632 A.C). Al Qurtubi also mentions another example from the prophetic tradition in which in which the Prophet advised a woman not to marry a man who proposed to her because he repeatedly struck women. Taken together, this provides evidence of the Prophet’s denial of violence against women.

Along the same lines, the American Muslim feminist Amina Wadud argues the Qur’anic verse 4:34 that El Saadawi criticizes, however, does not refer to the wife’s obedience to her husband. According to Wadud (1999):

“The norm at the time of the revelation [of the Qur’an], no correlation is made that a husband should beat his wife into obedience. Such as interpretation has no universal potential and contradicts the essence of the Qur’an and the established practices of the Prophet. It involves a severe misreading of the Qur’an to support the lack of self-constraint in some men”. (p. 77)

Instead, Wadud argues, it “intends to provide a means for resolving disharmony between husband and wife” (p. 74). In other words, the sequential steps mentioned in verse 4:34

²⁷ Al Qurtubi is a famous Muslim jurist in the 13th century who is well known for his commentary on the Qur’an named “*Tafsir Al Qurtubi*”.

are mainly intended to assist spouses in resolving marital disputes. According to her, the goal is not to make the wife weaker than her husband but to help married couples improve their relations. Thus, Wadud (1999) rejects the interpretation of the verse as an encouragement for violence against women and writes:

The problem of domestic violence among Muslims today is not rooted in this Qur'anic passage ... The goal of such men [who strike their wives] is harm, not harmony ... they cannot refer to verse 4:34 to justify their action.
(p. 76)

Wadud further declares that “Any kind of strike, or any intention to apply the verse in that manner, violates other principles of the Qur'anic text itself- most notably 'justice' and human dignity” (P. 108). For her, the Qur'an aims to “lead humankind to establish a just and moral social order” (2000, p. 15). Wadud (1999) also asserts that the word *daraba* has different meanings other than “to strike” such as “to set an example”, “to depart” and “to prevent from danger”, which are mentioned in other Qur'anic verses (i.e., verse 16:75-76 and verse 66:11). In her opinion, after a husband blames his wife and abandons her then he is advised to “set an example” for her and thus the verse does not encourage violence against women, but it aims to restrict the existing permissible practices of violence against them. In addition, Wadud comments on the word *nushuz* that she does not think it means “disobedient to the husband” rather it means lack of harmony (p. 75). Following the same line of reasoning, Wadud (2006) rejects the idea that verse 4:34 encourages violence against wives “If the Prophet remains the best exemplary of Qur'anic meaning, then he should have moved from the separation to beating his wives” (p. 202). That is, the Qur'anic verse, Wadud argues, does not suggest beating wives because such

action was not practiced by the Prophet himself who was the first to obey God's commands of doing so. For Wadud (2006), Al Tabari's *tafsir* displays the Prophet's non-violent behavior that supports women's rights highlighting "the Prophet's response to this revelation was, 'I wanted one thing and Allah wanted something else.' He never implemented this text [this portion of verse 4:34] in his life. He never struck a woman or beat a slave" (p. 202).

Similarly, Al Hibri (2001) elucidates that violence against women was a common practice in the Arabian Peninsula before Islam that was a common practice in harsh desert life. Here, she cites the story narrated by Al Tabari who mentions the situation of the Prophet when a woman came to complain to him about her husband's violence against her. For Al Hibri, the Prophet Muhammad rejected any kind of violence against women, and she cites two of his *hadiths* denouncing spousal abuse. In the first *hadith* the Prophet asked, "how can one of you hit his wife like an animal, then he may embrace her?" and wondered in the second *hadith* by saying "How can one of you whip his wife like a slave, and he is likely to sleep with her at the end of the day?" (p. 61).

Al Hibri also explains verse 4:34 in terms of what she calls "the philosophy of gradualism" that aims at placing a restriction on wife abuse by providing several stages to overcome any problems they may encounter. Before Islam, Al Hibri notes, men used to beat their wives to death; however, Islam provides some steps that a man must take with his rebellious wife. The man, Al Hibri clarifies, is initially encouraged to advise his wife and explain the problem to her instead of arguing with her, which gives her the opportunity to respond and clarify her view. If she does not listen, he is advised to "forsake her in bed" which implies the possibility of giving his back to her in bed for a

while to show his irritation. By doing so, the Qur'an provide the two couples what Al Hibri calls "a gestation period" in which they have enough time for communication in order to achieve reconciliation. As such, this step is described by many scholars such as Wadud (1999) as a "cooling-off period" that enables both husband and wife to "reflect on the problem at hand" and retain the marital harmony (p. 76). If the previous steps fail and nothing changes then, the husband, according to Al Hibri, can use his regular approach of hitting which has to be in a gentle way like hitting her with the *siwak*, as Prophet Muhammad explained, that causes no harm. Al Hibri's discussion stresses two important things. First, it assures that hitting a woman is away from the spirit of the Qur'an that should be considered as one unit when discussing the issue of violence. Second, the permission for men to beat their wives in verse 4:34 is meant to reduce what men can do to them.

Saadawi's third critique focuses mainly on two main points: the superiority of the husband over the wife and the overburdening of women with housework. Her claim contradicts with Al Tabari's interpretation of the Qur'anic verse 9:71 that says:

The believers, men and women, are supporters of one another; they enjoin good, and forbid evil; they perform the Salah, and give the *Zakah*, and obey Allah and His Messenger. Allah will have His mercy on them.

Surely, Allah is All-Mighty, All-Wise.

For Al Tabari, both men and women enjoy the same duties and rewards. Al Tabari also explains that the same assertion is repeated in another verse in which the Qur'an states: "it is He who created you from one soul and (then) He has created from him his wife, in order that he might enjoy the pleasure of living with her" (7:189) which ensures domestic

tranquility. Al Tabari also points out that the Qur'an shows no differences between men and women in terms of rewards in the afterlife because it illuminates:

And whoever does righteous good deeds male or female and is a (true) believer {in the oneness of Allah (Muslim)}, such will enter Paradise and not the least injustice, even to the size on the back of a date-stone, will be done to them. (Qur'an, 3:124)

The verse, according to Al Tabari, indicates that all Muslims are rewarded similarly for their good deeds, regardless of their gender. Al Tabari adds that the same meaning is expressed in the following verse, which was revealed in response to a Muslim woman's complaint about the man's control over religious life, which his wife Aisha conveyed to Prophet Muhammad:

Truly, those who submit, men and women, those who have faith, men and women, those who are devout, men and women, those who are true, men and women, those who show patience, men and women, those who humble themselves, men and women, those who give in charity, men and women, those who fast, men and women, those who guard their chastity, men and women, those who remember God often, men and women: for them has God prepared forgiveness and great reward! (Qur'an, 33:35)

Al Tabari illuminates that the verse shows that males and females who exhibit good behavior and enjoy these virtuous qualities will be granted the same rewards and raised to the same rewards in Heaven for their loyalty, devotion, dedication, and good behavior. Here, the two genders are straightforwardly mentioned and repeated for every single act to underscore the notion of equality between them. Further, Al Tabari asserts that the

unique status of women in Islam appears in a number of the Prophet Muhammad's sayings. For example, Al Tabari presents the Prophetic *hadith* in which the Prophet said: "whoever brings up two daughters, he and I will come side by side in the Day of Judgment" (Narrated by Sahih Muslim, 1761 p.465). Another saying of the Prophet is that "paradise is at the feet of mothers" (Al Bukhari, n.d.). Unlike the arguments outlined above, some scholars, including El Saadawi, claim that the Qur'an supports the inherent superiority of men over women. This opinion is based on their understanding of the Qur'anic verse about *qiwamah* that Barabra Stowasser refers to as "the pivotal Qur'anic verse on gender relations" (1998:32). In this regard, Al Tabari elucidates that there is a law of maintenance in Islamic tradition that entitles a Muslim woman to be supported by a male guardian who can be a father, husband, brother, or uncle. In other words, men are described in the Qur'an as *Qawwamun* that means maintainers or protectors in the matrimonial relationship like the following verse which states:

Men are in charge of women by [right of] what Allah has given one over the other and what they spend [for maintenance] from their wealth. So righteous women are devoutly obedient, guarding in [the husband's] absence what Allah would have them guard. (Qur'an, 4:34)

Regarding household chores, Al Tabari (2000) mentions that when Aisha was asked "What did the Prophet use to do in his house?" She answered, "He used to keep himself busy serving his family and when it was the time for prayer, he would go for it" (p. 435). In this regard, Al Bukhari (2007) reveals that the Prophet said, "The best of you is the one who is best to his wife, and I am the best of you to my wives" (p. 632). Al Tabari (2000) also mentions that when Fatimah, the Prophet's daughter, complained to him

about housework and requested for someone to help her, the Prophet said “Shall I not teach you something better than what you asked for? When you go to your bed, magnify Allah thirty-four times, glorify Him thirty-three times and praise Him thirty-three times. That is better for you than a servant”. In his commentary of this *hadith*, Al Tabari says:

We may understand from this *hadith* that every woman who is able to take care of her house by making bread, grinding flour and so on, should do so.

It is not the duty of the husband if it is the custom for women like her to do this themselves. (p. 2727)

Ibn Kathir echoes a similar understanding by emphasizing that God creates Eve from the short rib to the left side of Adam, and therefore there is no intimate relationship between two souls like that between spouses. Ibn Kathir asserts that if Adam and Eve are created of a different kind, there will be no harmony between them. Furthermore, Ibn Kathir displays gender equality in another Qur’anic verse that states “whoever does righteous deeds - whether male or female - while he (or she) is a believer; then We will certainly give them a good life, and We will certainly grant them their rewards in proportion to the best of what they used to do” (16:97). Ibn Kathir also demonstrates that the same meaning is expressed in another verse that says:

On the Day you shall see the believing men and the believing women: their light running forward before them and by their right hands. Glad tidings for you this Day! Gardens under which rivers flow (Paradise), to dwell therein forever! Truly, this is the great success! (Qur’an, 57:12)

According to Al Tabari and Ibn Kathir, all the above Qur’anic verses and prophetic *ahadith* evidently show that men and women, who are similarly created, have the same duties, rewards, and punishments before God. This stance contradicts El Saadawi’s argument about this important topic

In her interpretation of the Qur’anic verse 4:34, Wadud (1999) says that the Qur’an describes men as *Qawwmun*²⁸ because, in Islam, men are financially responsible for the expenses of their wives. By contrast, women bear no financial responsibility for their husbands or any other family members and thus men are described as “maintainers”. Wadud adds that the man’s *qiwamah* is also related to their financial ability to support his family. Wadud argues that his failure to meet these two conditions illuminates a husband’s *qiwamah* over his wife. Hence, she clarifies that the verse "does not read 'they (masculine plural) are preferred over them (feminine plural)'. It reads 'ba 'd (some) of them over ba 'd (others)'" (p.71). For Wadud, this slight difference in verse is another evidence of the specificity of the verse to that context and she also asks:

What is the responsibility of the male in [his] family and society at large?... The Qur'an establishes his responsibility as *qiwamah*: seeing to it that the woman is not burdened with additional responsibilities [in the context of childbearing]. This ideal scenario establishes an equitable and mutually dependent relationship. However, it does not allow for many of today's realities...Therefore, the Qur'an must eternally be reviewed with regard to human exchange and mutual responsibility between males and females. (p. 73)

²⁸ *Qawwmun* is an Arabic word means “maintainers”.

Wadud further affirms the significance of the historical context in which the verse was revealed that argues that the Qur'an presents the reasons for men's *qiwamah* which she believes to be "a limitation upon the apparently general statement". She emphasizes the mutual responsibility between a man and a woman in the family and therefore opposes any interpretations of the verse that denotes the superiority of men over women.

Similarly, Al Hibri (1997) rejects the idea that men are protectors or maintainers. To be *qawwamun*, Al Hibri mentions two other conditions that men must fulfill. First, men should know more about the topic at hand so that they can provide "guidance and advice in those areas in which he happens to be more qualified or experienced" (p.30). Second, men should be the breadwinners for their wives. If a man cannot fulfill any of these two conditions, then he has no *qiwamah* over his wife (Keller, 1995). Interestingly, Al Hibri highlights the historical context in which the verse was revealed: "Because the Qur'an was revealed in a world that was and continues to be highly patriarchal, it engaged in affirmative action to protect women. The revelation about maintenance provided women against poverty" (p. 64). Thus, Al Hibri (2000) emphasizes that *qiwamah* is intended to protect women who were

financially dependent [upon some men]. In those circumstances ... God gave the man supporting her the responsibility (*taklif*, not privilege) of offering the woman guidance and advice in those areas in which he happens to be more qualified or experienced. (p.228)

That is, the historical context is important to comprehend the verse. Al Hibri (1982a) argues that the supremacy of men over women contradicts the following Qur'anic verse "The believers, men, and women are 'awliya'," in charge of one of another" in which the

Qur'an indicates that men and women are protectors of one another (9:71). Here, Al Hibri wonders "How could women be 'Awliya' of men if men are superior to women in ... physical and intellectual strength?" (p. 218). Thus, the verse denies the absolute superiority of men over women and proclaims the equality between the two genders who are supposed to help one another. For Al Hibri, the Qur'anic verse 4:34 also emphasizes that men are only *Qawwmun* in the context of marriage but not in general as it says: "abandon them in beds, but if they still persist, then strike them" (Qur'an, 4:34). That is, the notion of male guardianship is not broadly permitted for a man in all aspects of life, but it is only restricted to his personal relationship with his wife. This understanding strongly agrees with the following Prophet's saying that emphasizes complete equality between the two genders:

All people are equal, as equal as the teeth of a comb. There is no claim of merit of an Arab over a non-Arab, or of a white over a black person or of a male over a female. Only Godfearing people merit a preference with God' [emphasis added]. (Abdul-Rauf, 1977; p. 21)

Although these two conditions are directly referenced in the verse above, Al Hibri believes that men in patriarchal societies currently use them to claim that they have divine superiority over women which is not supported by any other sources. According to Hibri, however, the responsibilities of wives are summarized in this verse "Our Lord! Grant unto us wives and offspring who will be the joy and the comfort of our eyes and guide us to be models of righteousness" (Qur'an, 25:74), in which the two words "joy" and "comfort" are emphasized to refute any accusations of bias against women. The only

superiority of a human being over the other, however, is limited to being “more *muttaqi* (righteous)” regardless of one’s gender (Qur’an, 49:13).

With regard to housework, furthermore, many scholars of Islamic jurisprudence such as Imam Malik, Al Shafi’, and Abu Hanifa²⁹ assert that a Muslim woman is not required to serve her husband. Instead, it is necessary for the husband to assign someone to do all the household work for his wife who is not required to do it herself. Islamic jurisprudence scholars argue that a woman can voluntarily choose to do housework, and husbands are recommended to help them as Prophet Muhammad used to do so. In this respect, the Prophet’s wife Aisha emphasized that the Prophet “used to keep himself busy serving his family” doing several tasks such as mending sandals, patching garments and milking his goat (Al Albani, 2010, p.1183). Yet, this Prophetic *sunnah* is currently neglected by husbands in different Muslim societies (Al Hibri, 1982a). This is in direct contrast to El Saadawi’s third criticism of the burden of housework on wives, and strongly asserts that Muslim women are not intended to suffer in marriage.

4.3 The Issue of Polygamy

The word polygamy is derived by the Greek word *πολυγαμία* (polygamia) that refers to the practice of marrying more than one spouse. Polygamy is a highly provocative and highly criticized topic in the modern era, and it is one of the most controversial issues for which Islam is criticized. Yet polygamy is not a new system initiated by the Islamic tradition at first, but rather a well-known practice that had existed in ancient countries long before Islam. As stated in the Talmud, for example, “a man may marry wives, for

²⁹ Imam Malik, Al Shafi’, and Abu Hanifa are prominent sunni jurisprudence scholars.

Rabba saith, it is lawful to do so, if he can provide for them. Nevertheless, the wise men have given good advice, that a man should not marry more than four wives” (Hughes, 1935, p. 462). Many of the holy biblical figures in the Old Testament, moreover, had several wives and concubines at the same time. While Abraham had two wives: Sarah and Hajar, Jacob had two wives and two concubines. (Khan, 2011). David is also said to be polygamous too (Koltun, 1976).

The practice of polygamy was present in Judaism until the beginning of the eleventh century when it was strictly prohibited. Yet, the New Testament did not endorse polygamy as there is an explicit assertion that a man should marry only one wife:

Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said, for this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: *and they twain shall be one flesh?*”
(Genesis 2:24)

The prohibition of polygamy in Christianity appears in a number of passages in the New Testament in which, for example, a church leader is only permitted to be a “husband of one wife” (1Timothy 3:2, 1Timothy 3:12 and Titus 1:6). The same opinion is confirmed by Martin Luther in 1526 when he was asked about polygamy and said:

It is my earnest warning and counsel that Christians especially shall have no more than one wife, not only because it is a scandal, which a Christian should avoid most diligently, but also because there is no word of God here to show that God approves it in Christians. I must oppose it, especially in Christians, unless there be need, as for instance if the wife be

a leper, or be taken away from the husband in some other way.

(Doernberg, 1961, p.73)

In the Arabian Peninsula, furthermore, polygamy was a prevalent practice that allowed men to marry an unspecified number of wives at some time during the pre-Islamic era. The polygamous practice was explained in terms of the decrease in the number of men due to their participation in tribal fights and was encouraged by many Arab tribes (Ingrams, 1983). Hence, Arab men of the Peninsula did so because of their desire to have more children who could strengthen their families and tribes, which was a source of pride as well. Besides, men in the Arabian Peninsula used to marry a large number of wives from different tribes in order to increase the number of their tribal allies. A man from the tribe of Quraysh, for instance, had ten or more wives (Ali, 1970).

Besides, polygamy is practiced by many tribes in Australia, and it is a permitted practice in Hinduism as well (Abu Saud, 1984). In 1650, moreover, the German parliament allowed men “to marry up to 10 women” because “so many men were killed during the Thirty Years' War” (Vallely, 2010). More recently, polygamy was promoted by Mormons in the United States for years but was later outlawed in 1904. Nevertheless, 10,000 Mormons, according to the Salt Lake Tribune, were reported in 2005 to have polygamous marriages (Vallely, 2010). In addition, polygamy is widespread in different places in North, East, and West Africa. This shows that polygamy is not only limited to Islam and Muslim communities but also exists in other places and religions as well.

In the present age, moreover, polygamy is one of the problematic issues that humiliate women for various reasons. Firstly, it represents the patriarchal male domination of women that does not allow equal opportunities for women to have multiple

partners like men. Secondly, it harms both women and children which is supported by various studies' findings. For instance, women in polygamous relationships suffer from depression and low self-esteem in comparison with their counterparts in non-polygamous marriages and their children's school performance is lower than children in monogamous families (Slonim-Nevo and Al Krenawi, 2006). Thirdly, polygamy causes several catastrophic reproductive diseases such as the Human immunodeficiency virus infection and acquired immune deficiency syndrome "HIV/ Aids" (Siringi, 2010).

4.3.1 El Saadawi's Views on Polygamy

El Saadawi (1982b) blames the current unfair violations of polygamy on the Islamic *Shariah* law, which she describes as rigid and difficult to overcome. For her, permitting polygamy forces women to "compete for the favors of men and excel in subtle allurements to attract men towards marriage, love, and sex" (1982a, p.135). In other words, granting a Muslim man the right to marry more than one wife simultaneously shows women are merely a tool to entertain men even at the expense of their dignity. In addition, El Saadawi (2002) condemns the Qur'anic verses that promise every man to have seventy-two virgins in heaven compared to his wife, who "is promised no one except her husband, that is if he is not busy with the virgins who surround him" (p. 4). She considers it an invitation for men to marry more than one woman and an affirmation that polygamy is the ideal marital life model for men to follow in their lives.

Furthermore, El Saadawi (1997) underlines that it is not feasible for men to marry more than one woman and treat them with absolute equality. Even Prophet Muhammad himself, El Saadawi argues, did not treat his wives equally, and he preferred and loved

one of his wives -i.e., Aisha- more than the others. During his fatal illness, for example, the Prophet asked his wives for permission to move to Aisha's room in order to be nursed by her, this request indicates his love for her. The preference for one wife over another, as noted by El Saadawi, "in itself is sufficient to make equality and justice impossible even if the man were to be the Prophet himself" (p. 80). EL Saadawi also argues that the pre-Islamic era was a golden time for women in which they enjoyed more rights than later. She gave the example of the Prophet's wife, Khadija, who was a wealthy businesswoman and also a successful mother. EL Saadawi further explains that "kings before Islam were sometimes named after their mothers" such as "Umar Ibn Hind" (p.1997, 74).

4.3.2 Analysis of El Saadawi's Views on Polygamy

In order to understand the issue of polygamy in Islam, it is useful to review the historical background of this issue. Before Islam, there was infanticide of girls due to poverty or fear of shame to be captured as slaves during raids (Al Hibri, 1982c). Women were also sold in exchange for goods or animals like other material possessions (Ahmed, 1993). Furthermore, women were inherited and were not granted any rights to inherit any of their deceased family members' property (Mernissi, 1991). In contrast, the man was allowed to marry the number of wives he liked, but only his male siblings inherited from him upon his death. After the death of the father, moreover, the son could marry any of his father's wives who were seen as part of his property, and these widows had no right to refuse (Al Hibri, 1982a). These examples illustrate the abuse of women in that era, which is in direct contradiction to El Saadawi's claim that it was a golden period for women's

rights. Yet, the names of independent women that she provided were exceptional individuals belonging to wealthy tribes, however, the majority of women during that time were victims of the prevailing patriarchal traditions such as female infanticide (Al Hibri, 2000). Many modern scholars, however, claim that women in the time of the Prophet Muhammad enjoyed their full rights. According to Mernissi (1991), for instance, Muslim women were granted many rights such as “the right to enter into councils of the Muslim ummah, to speak freely to its prophet-leader, to dispute with the men, to fight for their happiness and to be involved in the management of military and political affairs” (p. viii).

Reviewing the Qur'an shows that Islam restrains the number of wives from an unlimited number, as it was in the pre-Islamic era, to four as described in the following Qur'anic verse that states:

If you fear that you might not treat the orphans justly, then marry the women that seem good to you: two, or three, or four. If you fear that you will not be able to treat them justly, then marry (only) one, or marry from among those whom your right hands possess. This will make it more likely that you will avoid injustice. (Qur'an, 4:3)

In his interpretation of the verse, Al Tabari emphasizes that the verse does not urge men to marry more than one wife. Instead, it aims to encourage men to treat orphan girls and their wives justly. During the time of revelation, Al Tabari explains, some male guardians did not fairly manage the wealth of young orphan girls. To control such mismanagement, the verse aims to allow them to marry those female orphans in order to improve the status of those little ones. By holding these male guardians financially responsible for orphaned girls, men's access to their wealth is reduced on the one hand, and the Qur'an limits the

unlimited number of wives that was a common practice in society during that period to four on the other hand. If a man is unable to be just to his wives, Al Tabari argues, he is not supposed to marry even one. To be eligible to marry more than one wife, Al Tabari says, a man must be financially able to provide good living and housing conditions. Al Tabari also asserts that even if men attempt to be fair to women, it is impossible for them to treat them equally that is clearly stated in verse 4:129. Like Al Tabari, Ibn Kathir argues that justice in affection and love is an obligatory condition for polygamy and he says in his interpretation of verse 4:129:

O people, you will never be able to be fair (equalize) among your wives in all aspects, because even if you divide their turn each night, but there must be a difference in the love (in the heart), the desire of lust in the intimate relationships, as Ibn ‘Abbas has described, ‘Ubaidah As-Salmaani, Hasan Al Bashri, and Dhahhak bin Muzahim.³⁰

For Ibn Kathir, the word *ankihu* “marry” in the above verse does not mean that polygamy is compulsory, but it indicates that it is permissible under certain conditions. Thus, the two classical scholars agree that the intent of the two Qur'anic verses is twofold. First, they assert that polygamy is not a privilege for men but a way to solve social problems such as the problem of orphaned girls. Second: It indicates the impossibility of achieving justice between wives. That is, the goal is to prevent polygamy rather than allow it.

³⁰ Kathīr, I. U. I., L-Mubarakfuri, S. R., & Al Atsari, A. I. (2006). *Shahih tafsir Ibnu Katsir*. Jakarta: Pustaka Ibnu Katsir, 784.

In agreement with Al Tabari and Ibn Kathir, Al Hibri (2000) translates verse 4:3 as follows:

If you fear that you shall not be able deal justly with the orphans, marry women of your choice, two, three or four; But if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly [with them], then only one, or that which your right hand. (p. 66)

Today, however, men take advantage of the abovementioned verse to justify polygamy; they ignore its first part that clarifies the permissible context, i.e., to accommodate widows and orphans. Additionally, Polygamy is restricted in another Qur'anic verse that states:

Ye are never able to be fair and just among women, even if you tried hard [to do so]. So, do not incline completely [toward one] and leave another hanging. And if ye amend [your affairs] and fear Allah - then indeed, Allah is ever Forgiving and Merciful. (Qur'an, 4:129).

The verse refers to a special kind of equality and justice between wives, including physical and emotional aspects that are impossible to achieve. The futility of these conditions appears in the first sentence of the verse, "you will never be able to be equal between wives" which explicitly reveals its impracticality. For Al Hibri, the two verses (i.e., the Qur'an, 4:3 and 4:129) indicate that a Muslim man can marry more than one wife, and up to four wives, only if he can be fair to all wives. Since this condition cannot be fulfilled, then, it is only recommended for a man to marry one woman. In other words, Al Hibri (1982a) asserts that the two verses strongly discourage polygamy in Islam, and "it seems rather evident that the whole issue of polygamy is the result of patriarchal

attempts to distort the Qur'an in men's favor" (p. 217). Al Hibri also discusses the fact that the Prophet was polygamous by asserting that is not an excuse for any men to do the same. To prove her argument, Al Hibri (1982a) clarifies that Prophet Muhammad was monogamous during the life of his first wife Khadijah and also cites the Qur'anic verse 33.32 that says, "neither the Prophet nor his wives are like other men and women" (p. 216). This argument agrees with El Saadawi (1982b) who confirms the impossibility of treating wives equally as explained earlier.

For Wadud (1999), moreover, the verse is meant to address the "treatment of orphans" because some "male guardians, responsible for managing the wealth of orphaned female children, were unable to refrain from unjust management of that wealth" (p. 83). Thus, Wadud (2000) claims that polygamy is allowed in Islam to care about widows and orphans at a time when society did not enjoy official social welfare. Her argument is based on two important reasons. First, the historical context of the verse shows, according to Wadud, that polygamy is permitted in Islam as a reform measure aimed at improving the current situation of widows and orphan children for the better and integrating them socially and financially in their society. Second, polygamy applies to a historical context in which "marriage of subjugation at the time of revelation was premised on the need for females to be materially provided for by some male" (p. 82-3). Yet, women today "neither have nor need male supporters" (p. 84) and therefore Wadud calls for a reevaluation of the verse and its meaning, whose original historical condition no longer exists. The same interpretation has been confirmed by other scholars such as Karen Armstrong who emphasizes that "polygamy was not designed to improve the sex life of the boys, but it was a piece of social legislation" (2007, p.190). For Armstrong,

however, polygamy is presented to reform the prevailing social system at the time in which marriage to an unspecified number of wives was permitted.

The issue of polygamy also draws the attention of other scholars. For example, the modern reformist Muhammad Abduh opposes polygamy and says that monogamy is the essence of marriage in Islam, and accordingly Abduh issues a fatwa to the Egyptian government prohibiting polygamy in Egypt because of the problems it causes for the Muslim family. In addition, Kidwai, (1976) argues that the verse does not urge men to marry more than one wife. Instead, it aims to solve the social problem of the widows and children of the battle martyrs. Mashhour (2005), moreover, explains that the verse was initially revealed after the battle of *Uhud*³¹ in which a large number of Muslim men were killed, leaving behind a large number of unmarried widows and girls under the custody of their male guardians. Hence, polygamy is presented as a potential option that is neither a privilege nor an imperative of obedience. Alternatively, it is intended to reflect community-based care for both widowed women and their young orphan children who need financial and emotional support. Besides, other scholars argue that polygamy is initially permitted as a gradual control of that traditional practice before completely banning it in a manner similar to the prohibition of alcohol (Sonbol, 2001).

Discouragement of polygamy can also be seen in another verse in which the Qur'an affirms that "God has not made for any man two hearts"³², which indicates the impossibility for a man to love two women equally. Prophet Muhammad also prevented Ali, his cousin, and his son in law, from marrying a second wife during the life of his

³¹ *Uhud* is a battle that took place in AD 624 between the early Muslims and their Quraish Meccan enemies.

³² The Qur'an, 33:4. See Appendix E.

daughter Fatima. The Prophet mentioned the reason by saying: “because Fatima is a part of my body, and I hate what she hates to see, and what hurts her, hurts me” (Al Bukhari, 2007, p.352). His words, I argue, display the pain a woman feels when her husband marries another one and that argument displays that the Prophet opposed his daughter going through this painful experience, and subsequently, it is condemned for all Muslim women as well. In light of these discussions, it can be concluded that classical and several modern scholars consider monogamy the default option; while, in their opinion, polygamy aims to solve the social problem of assimilating widows and orphan girls.

4.4 The Issue of Divorce

As explained before, the Qur’an asserts that marriage is legalized to be full of joy, mercy, understanding, and tranquility. The spouses are believed to have equal rights and responsibilities that must be carried out in a compassionate way for the best interests of the family. When married couples face difficulties, however, they are advised in the Qur’an as well to seek all possible remedies to reconcile the relationship. The following lines present El Saadawi’s views on the issue of divorce, followed by an analysis of her arguments.

4.4.1 El Saadawi’s Views on Divorce

Divorce is another point for which El Saadawi criticizes Islam. For her, divorce is a traumatic experience that she herself has to go through three times. In particular, El Saadawi has struggled to get her second divorce because her second husband refused to divorce her. In this regard, El Saadawi, in an interview with Sarah Raphael (2018),

blames the Islamic *Shariah* law for not allowing a Muslim woman to divorce her husband. In the second volume of her autobiography, El Saadawi (1998) remarks that "it is the man who decides to divorce and not the woman" which causes troubles for his wife who finds herself powerless and unable to initiate divorce herself. Rather, a Muslim wife is expected to ask her husband for divorce and his consent is mandatory for divorce to be granted. Not only are women enslaved to marriage and deprived of privacy and freedom, El Saadawi says, but divorce papers are also their birth certificates. In *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* (1989), for example, El Saadawi describes her difficult experience at Cairo airport when an officer refuses to let her board until she shows her husband's permission to travel. When the officer learns that she is divorced, he insists on seeing her divorce document to allow her to travel.

El Saadawi, moreover, argues that some women do not seek divorce despite suffering ill-treatment at the hands of their spouses. The reason is due to the fact that they are not economically independent. A woman's need for financial support, therefore, can likely force her to save her unsuccessful marriage life in order to maintain her only source of finance. For El Saadawi, this is another kind of bias against women whose consent and/ or rejection of divorce does not change the situation for Muslim women who are mere executors for their husbands' will.

4.4.2 Analysis of El Saadawi's Views on Divorce

Men are advised to treat women with honor, kindness, and patience. As the Qur'an says, "Live with them honorably" (Qur'an, 4:19). Yet, divorce is permissible in Islam as a last choice, even though it is not encouraged, as the Prophet said, "of all the lawful things,

divorce is the most hated one” (Al Bukhari, 2007., p. 456). Due to its significance, there is a chapter in the Qur'an entitled *at-talaq*³³ "divorce" that is devoted to the topic of divorce, its procedures, before initiating the divorce. In this respect, Al Tabari (2000) explains that the Qur'an provides certain steps for the couple to follow. First, they are advised to reconcile their difference in the hope to solve their problems and resume their relationship. If they fail to do so, then they move to the second step that requires them to “appoint an arbiter from among his people and an arbiter from among her people; if they both want to set things alright, God may bring about their reconciliation” (4:35). In other words, the spouses are advised to seek their families' help by choosing one arbiter from both sides to resolve the differences. If the two arbiters fail to solve the problems and eliminate them completely, then, the separation between the husband and wife is recommended and divorce is introduced as the last resort for the two partners in order to end the marital relationship in a friendly dignified manner.

Similarly, Ibn Kathir says that scholars of Fiqh agree to refer the husband and wife to a trusted person when a dispute occurs between them to help them resolve it. Yet if the problem continues or gets worse, the couple is referred to sit with a trusted person from the woman's family and a trusted person from the man's family. The two arbitrators are instructed to discuss the problem with the two spouses and help them decide whether it is better for them to stay together or separate. Ibn Kathir further adds that God gives preference for the husband and wife to stay together, and therefore God says, “if they both wish for peace, Allah will cause their reconciliation”. Nevertheless, if the two arbitrators disagree, it is better for the marriage not to be dissolved. Here, Ibn Kathir

³³ *At-talaq* is an Arabic word that means “freeing or undoing the knot”.

explains that the opinion of the arbitrators is binding even if it is not chosen by the spouses in accordance with the Qur'anic verse 4:19 in which God Almighty says: "If you dislike them, it may be that you dislike a thing and Allah brings through it a great deal of good".

During the execution of the divorce, Ibn Kathir clarifies, the husband is advised to honorably free his wife without any harm or pain as indicated in the Qur'anic verse below:

And when you divorce women and they have [nearly] fulfilled their term, either retain them according to acceptable terms or release them according to acceptable terms, and do not keep them, intending harm, to transgress [against them]. And whoever does that has certainly wronged himself.

And do not take the verses of Allah in jest. And fear Allah and know that Allah is Knowing of all things. (Qur'an, 2:231)

According to Ibn Kathir, the verse reveals God's command to men not to keep their wives willing to divorce with the intent of harming them. It further asserts that a man who does so is subject to God's punishment because this nullifies the rights granted to women.

After divorce, Ibn Kathir argues, the woman can keep all the gifts given to her by her husband who is commanded not to take any gifts back:

But if you intend to replace a wife by another and you have given one of them a Qintar, take not the least bit of it back; would you take it wrongfully without a right and (with) a manifest sin? And how could you take it (back) while you have gone in unto each other, and they have taken from you a firm and strong covenant. (Qur'an, 4:20-21)

Al Tabari (2000) notes that it is not permissible to take a woman's dowry from her, and the verse instructs men not to do so because it is "illegal" and "improper". More significantly, after divorce a woman has to wait three months before she can marry someone as the Qur'an says:

Divorced women shall undergo, without remarrying, a waiting-period of three-monthly courses: for it is not lawful for them to conceal what God may have created in their wombs, if they believe in God and the Last Day. And during this period their husbands are fully entitled to take them back, if they desire reconciliation; but, in accordance with justice, the rights of the wives [with regard to their husbands] are equal to the [husbands'] rights with regard to them, although men have a degree over them [in this respect], and Allah is Mighty, Wise. (Qur'an, 2:228)

Al Tabari illustrates that God has set a waiting period of three months for divorced women after divorce before remarrying.

Here, Wadud (1999) explains the term *darajah* "step, degree" asserting that the preference given to men in this verse is only restricted to this context of being "individually able to pronounce divorce against their wives without arbitration or assistance" and cannot be extended to be an absolute one (p. 68). By doing so, Wadud further argues, the Qur'an places "a limitation rather than a universal perspective on this issue because convention is relative to time and place" (p. 69). The verse indicates that if the divorced woman is pregnant, Wadud adds, she must wait until delivering her baby, and then she can marry another man afterward. During this period, it is her husband's responsibility to pay all of her

expenses and they can reconcile their relationship and renew the marriage contract if both of them like to resume their marital relationship. If reconciliation is not possible, however, a Muslim woman is free to marry any other man she loves after delivering her baby and her husband is instructed in the verse below not to prevent her from doing so:

And when you divorce women, and they have come to the end of their waiting period, hinder them not from marrying other men if they have agreed with each other in a fair manner. (Qur'an, 2:232)

The use of the word “fair” in the above verse prominently displays the Qur'an's emphasis on the significance of a dignified relationship between the two spouses even after the divorce. For Wadud, “What is important is mutual and peaceable reconciliation or separation. The Qur'an applies explicit measures to prevent abandonment and misuse of women, who were subject to the whims of husbands in marriage and divorce” (p. 80). In other words, Wadud notes that the Qur'an does not renounce any of women's rights in relation to divorce it rather pays much attention to designated conditions and responsibilities.

Rahman (1986), furthermore, argues that a woman may file for divorce and that mutual consent between spouses is necessary for a divorce to occur. Islam allows the repudiation of divorce in which a husband could dissolve his marriage by saying to his wife that he repudiates her. This is followed by a repudiation period of three months in which the husband can reconsider his decision, annul the divorce, and get his wife back. A man is allowed two repudiation periods after them the divorce becomes final, and he cannot resume his marital relationship again.

According to Al Hibri (2001), moreover, “a Muslim woman has the right to take her husband to court or divorce him for abusing her” (p.60). Although men are allowed to divorce women at will, women are granted three possible ways to get a divorce. First, a woman can resort to *faskh* through which a wife requests a dissolution of marriage due to her husband’s inability to fulfill his obligations towards her. In other words, there must be a reason for *faskh* to occur and it has to be approved by a judicial authority. In this regard, men are instructed in the Qur’an not to “mistreat them to make them return some of the dowry as a ransom for divorce” and to “treat them fairly” (Qur’an, 4:19). The same idea is affirmed in another Qur’anic verse that instructs spouses not to “forget kindness among yourselves” when they decide to terminate their marriage (Qur’an, 2:237).

The second possibility for women to terminate their marriage is *Khula* that allows a wife to pay for her divorce by returning her dowry. Thus, it may seem to be unfair for a woman to pay for her release, but in reality, she pays for her choice to end an unhappy marital relationship that represents compensation for breaking the marriage contract. During Caliph Omar’s time, for example, a Muslim woman came to him asking for *Khula* because she could not bear living anymore with her husband whom she disliked. In her petition for *Khula*, the woman claimed that there was no deficiency in the husband's faith or morals, however, it was only her distaste for him that led her to confine herself to a room for three nights which she described to be the happiest days of her life. The Caliph found that to be sufficient evidence to allow the woman to get a divorce (Al Buhkari, 2007).

Third, according to Al Hibri (1982a), a woman is allowed to include in her marriage contract all the conditions she likes, such as her right to divorce her husband at

will too. According to Al Hibri, divorce is not an arbitrary decision of men. Furthermore, even if this right is mainly practiced by highly educated women who belong to the upper-class, Islam, in her opinion, should not be blamed for the fact that many women do not exercise that right to divorce due to certain social or cultural practices. In addition, Al Hibri (1982a) notes that “the oppressive form of the marriage contract we find now in the Arab World was standardized and propagated by patriarchy to serve its interests.” (p. 217). Yet the Qur’an displays that divorce should be in a nice and friendly way, stating that “when you divorce women, and they reach their prescribed term, then retain them in kindness and retain them not for injury so that you transgress (the limits)” (Qur’an, 2:231). Women enjoyed all these rights during the early Islamic state in the seventh century, during the era of Prophet Muhammad and the first four successive Caliphs. Yet, the following era (1250-1900) had witnessed a decline of women’s rights, and divorce reverted to be the man’s decision without consulting his wife, whose consent was not even considered. In this respect, Rahman (1980) presents possible reasons for reversing women’s rights such as political disturbances, feudalism, and the emergence of regional variations in the interpretations of the Islamic *Shariah* laws. Although women regained some of lost rights during the following period, i.e., 1900-1970s, divorce remains a man’s decision and that continues to be the case in the present age. Likewise, Esposito and DeLong-Bas (2001) explain that it is the law that should be blamed for not translating “these teachings and values of the Qur’an into specific legal restrictions on the husband’s right to divorce to guard against abuses” (p. 29).

Chapter 5: The Issues of Inheritance Rights and the Veil “hijab”

Veiling - to Western eyes, the most visible marker of the differentness and inferiority of Islamic societies became the symbol now of both the oppression of women (or, in the language of the day, Islam's degradation of women) and the backwardness of Islam, and it became the open target of colonial attack and the spearhead of the assault on Muslim societies.
-Leila Ahmed³⁴

women were victims of a double exploitation: they shared class exploitation with men, but in turn they were subject to exploitation by men, to sex discrimination, to patriarchy
-Nawal El Saadawi³⁵

Whereas the previous chapter discusses El Saadawi's perspective regarding marriage, polygamy, and divorce, this chapter discusses her arguments with respect to two other issues: inheritance and veiling.

5.1 The Issue of Inheritance Rights

Islam grants specific shares for both men and women as the Qur'an says, "there is a share for men and a share for women from what is left by parents and those nearest related, whether the property is small or large, an obligatory share" (Qur'an, 4:7). The verse confirms that women are designated definite shares in her relatives' inheritance that was not granted for women in the Arabian Peninsula during the pre-Islamic era. Nevertheless. Islam is constantly criticized for the unequal inheritance shares that are provided for each gender. The following lines present this issue and how El Saadawi views it, followed by an analysis of her arguments in light of classical and modern scholars' interpretations of the Qur'an.

³⁴ Ahmed, L. (1993). *Women and gender in Islam: Historical roots of a modern debate*. New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, p. 152.

³⁵ El Saadawi, N. (1997). *The Nawal El Saadawi reader*. London: Zed Books, p. 58.

5.1.1 El Saadawi's Views on Inheritance Rights

El Saadawi criticizes Islam in relation to the unequal shares of inheritance between the two genders that is mentioned in the following Qur'anic verse:

God directs you as regards the (inheritance) of your children: the male has a share equal to the share of two females: if only daughters, two or more, their share is two-thirds of the inheritance; if only one, her share is a half.

(Qur'an, 4:11)

El Saadawi, in an interview with Bart Moore-Gilbert (2009), strongly condemns the above verse that, in her opinion, reveals explicit discrimination against women. For her, Islam oppresses women by allocating half of the male share to the female, which asserts the superiority of men (El Saadawi, 1986a).

5.1.2 Analysis of El Saadawi's Views on Inheritance Rights

According to Al Tabari (2000), inheritance in Islam is not based on masculinity or femininity. Rather, it is governed by three main criteria: the degree of kinship between the inheritor and the deceased person, the age of the inheritor, and the financial burden that Islamic *Shariah* law requires the inheritor to bear. The general rule is that the heir who is younger, closer to the deceased person, and has more financial burdens, is the one who gets the higher share of the inheritance. If the heirs are equal in degree of kinship and age, then the difference in financial burdens results in the difference of the inheritance share. Contrary to Saadawi's claim of inequality between men and women, Al Tabari (2000) clarifies that Islamic law shows three different cases of inheritance shares with women inheriting more than men, half a man's share and an equal share for men.

Hence, the claim that men are given a higher inheritance than women is not a general rule, but it is rather limited to certain cases. Here, Al Tabari explains that the word “children” in the Qur’anic verse 4:11, which is criticized by El Saadawi, confirms that a woman does not receive half of a man’s share except in the case of brothers. In light of this interpretation, the verse can then be described according to the primary responsibilities of both genders. Whereas a man is responsible for all financial needs of his family including his children, wife, sisters, and parents, a woman is exempt from this economic responsibility. Before marriage, for instance, the father is financially responsible for his daughter. After marriage, however, the woman’s financial responsibility is handed over to her husband who is fully responsible for paying all her expenses. Al Tabari also displays that a man and a woman receives the same share in different other contexts that are mentioned in verse 4:12 which refers to the situation of a person who dies without a father or child, leaving only a brother and a sister. In that case, each of them receives one-sixth of the total value of the estate. If there are more than two siblings, Al Tabari adds, each one inherits one-third of the value of the inheritance. Likewise, Ibn Kathir interprets the same verse as follows:

If the man or woman whose inheritance is in question was left in *Kalalah*³⁶, but has left a brother or a sister, each one of the two gets a sixth; but if more than two, they share in a third; after payment of legacies he (or she) may have bequeathed or debts, so that no loss is caused (to anyone).

³⁶ *Kalalah* is a derivative of *Iklil*; the crown that surrounds the head. The meaning of *Kalalah* in this verse is that the person's heirs come from other than the first degree of relative. That is a person left neither ascendants nor descendants.

Here, Ibn Kathir (2003) provides a long discussion of the meaning of the word *kalala* including the opinion of Abu Bakr who said

I will say my own opinion about it, and if it is correct, then this correctness is from Allah. However, if my opinion is wrong, it will be my error and because of the evil efforts of Satan, and Allah and His Messenger have nothing to do with it. *Kalalah* refers to the man who has neither descendants nor ascendants. (p. 1460)

For Umar Ibn Al Khattab, Ibn Kathir explains, *Kalalah* means a person who does not have children nor parents. The word *Kalalah* is mentioned in verse 4:176 that supersedes the provision for siblings in verse 4:12. According to Ibn Kathir, the verse explains that a woman receives a half of her brother's inheritance in the absence of parents or children but if the deceased brother has two sisters, they shall have two-thirds of the inheritance. Yet, if there are more siblings, the male has twice the share of the female, confirming the same inheritance rule mentioned earlier in verse 4:11. Similarly, Ibn Kathir's interpretation of the first part of verse 4:34 displays that, "Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has made one of them to excel the other, and because they spend (to support them) from their means". Ibn Kathir further presents the same idea in his interpretation of another verse that says: "let a man of wealth spend from his wealth, and he whose provision is restricted - let him spend from what Allah has given him" (Qur'an, 65:7). In this sense, the traditional reading of the two verses affirms a woman's right to receive financial support from her husband. If the husband dies, the son or a male relative takes care of his widow.

According to Al Hibri (2001), on the other hand, the "Qur'an does specify that a sister inherits half of the amount her brother inherits, but also specifies that other females of different degrees of kinship may inherit more than other males" (p. 49). Yet, when a woman inherits a family member, she is entitled to keep the inherited wealth for herself, unlike her brother who has to use the inherited wealth to support the entire family. In this respect, Al Hibri further explains that the male "must support the women in his family regardless of their financial condition, unless there is a financially able male relative who is closer to them" (p. 47). In other words, Al Hibri explains, a sister's inherited amount is "a net amount added to her wealth" but the brother's inherited share is "a gross amount" that he has to use to support other family members including his sister (p. 50). She also asserts that the daughter is financially supported by her father until she gets married and then her husband financially supports her. Additionally, a wealthy Muslim woman is not expected to support herself. Instead, Al Hibri emphasizes, "her closest male relative has that obligation, which she may waive only if she so chooses" (P. 50). Al Hibri maintains that it is fair as well as logical that a male is granted twice the share of a female. She believes that the different allocations are not "based on gender; it is rather based on the different economic roles of men and women in the family" (Shah, 2006, p. 55). According to her logic, the unequal shares of inheritance allocated to women and men do not represent male superiority but rather achieve equality and enable them to fulfill their financial responsibilities. Unlike men, on the other hand, Wadud (1999) notes:

Although the initial Qur'anic statement, in verses 4:11-12, makes 'the share of the male is equivalent to the portion of two female (siblings)', a

complete look at this same verse enumerates a variety of proportional divisions between males and females. (p. 87)

Although a woman is entitled to inherit one half of her brother's share of the inheritance, Wadud argues, Muslim women generally receive a higher share of the inheritance than their male counterparts. For example, a female child gets half of her deceased parent's property which is higher than her grandfather and her uncles who together share the other half of the inheritance. Wadud also explains that if a person dies and leaves behind a wife, sister, and nephew, then the wife has a quarter of the estate, and the sister inherits half of the estate, and the rest is for the nephew. Based on this, the sister's share is greater than that of the nephew. There are also several other cases in which a woman inherits an equal share to men (Al Dawlibi, 1983). If a woman dies and leaves behind only a husband and a sister, for example, her property is divided equally between the two. If the deceased person leaves a son, father, and mother, moreover, each of the father and mother has one-sixth of his property.

Likewise, if a man dies and has a son, grandfather, and grandmother then each of the grandparents inherits one-sixth of his property. In addition, if the deceased person leaves a girl and a grandson, then the girl has half of the inheritance, and the grandson inherits the other half. In this respect, Wadud (1999) notes that two significant points. First, the Qur'an affirms that women are not deprived of inheritance under any circumstance which was the case in the pre-Islamic era, and it may exist today in some societies. Second, "consideration must be given to the circumstance of the bereft, their benefit to the deceased, and the benefits of the wealth inherited." (p. 88). Prophet Muhammad also forbade one of his companions, i.e., Sa'ad ibn Abi Waqqas, to donate

most of his wealth to charity. Instead, the Prophet advised him to donate a “third and a third is a lot, and it is better that you leave your heirs wealthy rather than leave them needy begging from the people. You will not spend anything seeking Allah's countenance, but you receive a reward for that expenditure, even the morsel of food you put into your wife's mouth” (Al Bukhari, 2007, p. 2591). Together, the above lines display some agreement between the traditional and several modern interpretations of Qur’anic verses regarding the issue of inheritance. the sources point out great attention is paid to women in the Qur’an and that an effort is made to treat women equally with men.

5.2 The Issue of Veil “*hijab*”

The word *hijab*³⁷ is an Arabic word that refers to Muslim women’s veiling.

Linguistically, the word *hijab* is derived from the Arabic verb *hajaba*, meaning to hide, conceal, or protect what is beneath it (Al Zabaidi, 2011, p. 203). During the time of the Prophet Muhammad, *hijab* commonly referred to covering the entire body of women who are expected to dress modestly in public. Today, *hijab* has many other names in different cultures, such as burka, chador, and dupatta; however, the word *hijab* itself becomes synonymous with the headscarf that covers a woman’s hair and neck.

The debate about the veil “hijab” did not start recently, and Islam was not the initiator of the practice of the veil, which dates back to an early time prior to the advent of Islam (Ahmed, 1993; El Guindi, 2003). In particular, the practice of the veil has been introduced into other Ibrahimic religions, Judaism, and Christianity, and has been mentioned in the Bible and the Torah, or *halakhoth* (Hoodfar, 2003). For instance, St.

³⁷ In this thesis, the Arabic word *hijab* is used interchangeably with its English equivalent “veil”.

Paul affirms that “the head of every woman is man. Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonoureth his head. But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head.” (1 Corinthians 11:3-5).

In Addition, the veil was present in both the Persian and Byzantine empires as well as the Arabian Peninsula before the advent of Islam, and it was mainly associated with upper-class women (Al Zamakhashari, d.1144; Ibn Kathir, 2003). In the Byzantine empire, for instance, “women were always supposed to be veiled” and it was the veil that differentiated between “honest women and prostitutes” because unveiled bodies are inherently shameful (Ahmed, 1993, p. 26). In the thirteenth century, moreover, the veil was restricted to only “respectable”³⁸ women whereas female slaves and prostitutes were not permitted to wear the veil (Hoodfar, 2003, p. 6). Furthermore, the veil was important to the Hasidic sect in the seventeenth century. In this way, married women used to cover their hair using sheitels or wigs (Auslander, 2017). Although the veil was a symbol of the upper class in the Middle Ages, it now refers specifically to Islamic cultures in which women use it as a means of empowering themselves through piety (Hirshmann, 1997). The Islamic dress code is not only limited to wearing the veil but also includes public dress that should be long and loose (Husain, 2006). As a result, there is currently a significant increase in the number of veiled women in Muslim societies whose clothing conforms to Western standards in terms of designs as well as colors. Style becomes a distinctive fashion of Muslim women and differs slightly from one Muslim society to another (Ahmed, 1993).

³⁸ The word “respectable” refers to noblewomen.

Many scholars also explain that Muslim women have different reasons for wearing the veil. While some women wear it for spiritual reasons, others wear the veil to display their cultural identity as well as political leanings. In this respect, Droogsma (2007), for example, clarifies that the veil “functions to define Muslim identity, perform a behavior check, resist sexual objectification, afford more respect, preserve intimate relationships, and provide freedom” (p. 294). In other words, Droogsma believes that the veil not only protects women from sexual harassment in public but also gives them more freedom. For Hirshmann (1997), moreover, the veil is “a tangible marker of separateness and independence” (p. 474). In addition, Killian (2003) affirms that the veil is a “vehicle for distinguishing between women and men and a means of controlling male sexual desire” (p. 570). That is, the veil is a way to protect women from sexual harassment. El Guindi (2003) advises her readers to view the veil as a “creative alternative” that facilitates communication for women in public places and protects them from sexual harassment and is, as El Guindi suggests, “largely about identity, largely about privacy of space and body” (p. xvii).

In the contemporary Western societies, by contrast, the veil is primarily considered as a sign of Muslims’ backwardness and inferiority especially after the September 11 attacks that increased Islamophobic feelings (Ahmed, 2012; Droogsma, 2007). Moreover, many secular feminists generally describe veiled Muslim women as “victims of the Islamic code” that restricts their actions (Mohanty, 1991a, p. 57). For them, veiling is a symbol of women’s oppression in patriarchal Muslim communities. Hence, some countries in the West such as France takes actions to end such of brutal practice and ban the veil in schools and all governmental offices (Scott, 2007). Even

though veiling is viewed as “a racial” marker in the West, it has different other meanings in Islam such as religious identity assertion, respect of traditions, public protection, adherence to scripture, and modesty (Cooke, 2007, p. 140; Hoodfar, 2003).

The veil is also viewed by other females to be their means to gain their freedom in Western societies. Hoodfar (2003), for instance, showed that the number of veiled women increased in Canada especially among young generations. To explore that phenomenon, 69 Muslim women who reside in Quebec and Ontario including only 7 veiled ones were interviewed. The results indicated that parents tended to prevent their daughters to freely go out like their male siblings and they had to resort to the veil in order to gain their lost freedom. One of the participants said:

The veil has freed me from arguments and headaches. I always wanted to do many things that women normally do not do in my culture. I had thought living in Canada would give me that opportunity. But when I turned fourteen, my life changed. My parents started to limit my activities and even telephone conversations. My brothers were free to go and come as they pleased, but my sister and I were to be good Muslim girls. Even the books we read became subject to inspection. Life became intolerable for me. The weekends were hell. (p. 20)

She added that she attended Qur’anic classes in which she met many Muslim girls and became convinced that “The more I hung around with them, the more convinced I was that the veil is the answer to all Muslim girls’ problems here in North America” (p. 21). Other women reported that wearing the veil helped them interact more easily with men. One of them said before the veil she was always

concerned about talking to men that would be misunderstood which “is not good for one’s reputation in the community”; however, she added that “since taking the veil these worries about talking with classmates or colleagues have disappeared” (p. 21).

The above discussion shows that the veil is perceived differently in different social contexts. El Saadawi is one of those scholars who criticizes the veil, and her criticism is presented in the following section.

5.2.1 El Saadawi’s Views on the Veil

El Saadawi (1982b) believes that the veil has originally begun before Islam and says:

The veil originates with the fact that Eve is looked upon as the source of evil and sin and must feel shame for her corrupt nature. She must therefore cover her body including the head and face, and refrain from exhibiting any part of it. It is also inspired by the idea that Eve (woman) is a body without head and that Adam (her spouse and man) is her head. (p. 202)

In an interview with Alliston Mitchell, El Saadawi (2010) strongly rejects the Islamic veil that she considers to be “a tool of oppression of women” whose bodies only become shameful when they are veiled. El Saadawi (2015) also denies the idea that *hijab* is a sign of morality. Her argument is mainly based on three major premises. Firstly, El Saadawi (1986c) claims that the veil is a type of slavery that belongs to the pre-Islamic era and “has nothing to do with Islam; it is not historical, and it is not positive”. Instead, “It began with the evolution of the slave society when a woman is considered as property”. She further affirms that “there is not a single verse with the conception of the veil” (p.43). In

other words, Islam does not mandate the veil, but Islam requires Muslim women to dress modestly. El Saadawi (1997) argues that the veil is a traditional Arabic practice that has nothing to do with the Islamic tradition.

Secondly, El Saadawi asserts that wearing the veil is not a personal choice of Muslim women. Rather, women are veiled because of the intense social pressures that are usually hidden. In other words, a veiled woman does not choose to be veiled, but she is brainwashed and “considers herself a stigma, so she covers herself” (in an interview with Sarah Raphael, 2018). El Saadawi, in an interview with Sarah Wajid (2008), states repeatedly that the veiled women who “say they choose to do so are either lying or ignorant”. Although El Saadawi’s sisters, however, are veiled and she herself, in an interview with Homa Khaleeli (2010), admits being “exposed to different pressures” from them and other family members to be veiled, she consistently rejects the veil and denies it as a free choice she would like to make one day.

Thirdly, El Saadawi (1997) adds that the veil is “just a piece of clothing, not a symbol; if we view it to be so, “an authentic identity” is reduced to a piece of clothing” and it is merely a tool of oppression (p. 260). In a newspaper interview with Sarah Raphael in 2018, El Saadawi further asks why Muslim women should be covered and why they are being treated as “sex target”. The most problematic thing for El Saadawi is how some scholars view the veil as an indicator of a woman’s morality; however, she firmly rejects the idea that women are obligated to be mere bodies “either to be veiled under religion or to be veiled by makeup”³⁹. In another interview with Helena Powell in 2013, El Saadawi further argues that “the veiling and the nakedness of women are two

³⁹ El Saadawi said so in an interview in 2018 with Refinery29.

sides of the same coin”. In her opinion, women are taught not to “face the world with their real face” but rather “they have to hide their face somehow” (El Saadawi, 1999, p.7). In other words, El Saadawi suggests that women are mainly perceived as bodies that should be controlled either through the veil or nudity and makeup. This makes a woman's value as a human being equal to the appearance of her body and completely ignores her personality, thought, emotions, and education.

El Saadawi not only condemns the veil of Muslim women but also rejects and resists it. In her publications and interviews, moreover, she elucidates how she has been fighting the veil throughout her life. In an interview with Sophie Smith in 2007, for instance, El Saadawi argues that “the veil of the mind is more dangerous than the religious veil” and this needs the cooperation of women and men because “this isn’t an issue for women only” (p. 64). El Saadawi further explains that while there was not a single veiled student in medical school when she was a student in the 1950s, 30% of the students were veiled in the 1970s when her daughter was a student at the same university. For her, the increase in the number of veiled women in Egypt, in general, is due to President Sadat's encouragement of the “fundamentalist movement to fight against progressive political groups” (Cohen, 1995).

5.2.2 Analysis of El Saadawi’s Views on the Veil

Although the veil was a common practice before Islam, today, it is primarily restricted to Islam and is widely seen as an oppressive practice of Muslim women as well as a sign of religious fanaticism. As a result, Islam is harshly criticized for its so-called unjust religious practice. Nevertheless, El Saadawi claims that the veil is not a religious practice

but rather a cultural act that has no basis in the Qur'an. Contrary to El Saadawi's claim, Al Tabari (2000) clarifies that the veil is mentioned in four different Qur'anic verses which describe the Islamic dress for women. The first revealed verse regarding the veil, for instance, addresses the Prophet's wives saying:

O you who believe, do not enter the house of the Prophet for a meal without awaiting the proper time, unless asked, and enter when you are invited, and depart when you have eaten, and do not stay on talking. This puts the Prophet to inconvenience, and he feels embarrassed in (saying) the truth. And when you ask his wife for something of utility, ask for it behind curtain [hijab]; This is for the purity of your heart and theirs.

(Qur'an, 33:53)

This verse does not mention the veil directly, but it asks Muslim men to talk to the Prophet's wives behind a veil when they visiting the Prophet. Another verse further commands men to "lower their gaze and guard their chastity. That is purer for them" (Qur'an, 24:30). For Al Tabari, the verse commands men to entirely divert their eyes from women who are also instructed in the following verse to be veiled:

And say to the believing women that they should avert their gaze and guard their modesty, and that they should not display their adornment (zīnah) except what is apparent (zāhirah) thereof, and that they should throw (yadribna) their head-scarves (khumur) over their bosoms/necklines (juyūb), and not display their adornment (zīnah) except to their husbands, or fathers, their husband's fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women, or

the slaves whom their right hands possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex; and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments. (Qur'an, 24:31)

According to Al Tabari, the verse emphasizes that women should wear modest clothes covering their chests as well as necks and it also demands them not to reveal their concealed adornments that women used to do before Islam. Muslim women, according to this verse, are only allowed to be unveiled in the company with their *mahrams*⁴⁰ such as fathers, sons, siblings, uncles and nephews. Al Tabari distinguishes between two types of adornment: hidden and apparent. Whereas women are instructed in that verse to conceal the hidden adornment, they are asked to show the apparent ones. Although the Qur'an does not provide a description of hidden and apparent adornment, Al Tabari (2000) describes hidden adornment to include anklets, bracelets, earrings, and necklaces, in addition to the woman's entire body. Nevertheless, Al Tabari adds that there are different meanings for the apparent adornment by early traditional commentators. While some see it refer to outer clothing, Al Tabari says, others say it refer to a woman's face or ring. Al Tabari claims that apparent adornment refers to the face as well as hands, and he asserts that the veil is presented as a mandatory practice that conforms with the concept of modesty and concealment of physical beauty. This interpretation is also supported by Ibn Kathir who mentions the *hadith* for Aisha, the wife of the Prophet, in which she said that when they heard the above verse, women in *Al Madinah*⁴¹ cut the edges of their waist

⁴⁰ *Mahrams* is an Arabic plural word that refers to family members whom a Muslim cannot marry like father, brother, mother, son and uncle.

⁴¹ *Al Madinah* is the city of the Prophet.

sheets and used cutting pieces to cover their heads as well as their necks (Al Bukhari, 2007). Ibn Kathir further argues that “many people of knowledge hold that a woman is not allowed to look at men who are not her close relatives at all, whether or not her glances are lustful” which is not applied to men even though there is a similar verse for them (p. 311). Ibn Kathir adds that God’s command for women to cover their bosom means that they must wear the veil in public.

The same meaning is confirmed in another Qur’anic verse, argues Al Tabari, that instructs the Prophet to inform his daughters and all Muslim women to be covered in order not to be recognized and hurt:

O Prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters, and the believing women, that they should cast their outer garments over their persons (when abroad): that is most convenient, that they should be known (as such) and not molested. And Allah is oft-forgiving, most merciful. (Qur’an, 33:59)

Al Tabari asserts that the above verse evidently legalizes the veil for the Prophet’s wives and all Muslim women who are mandated to wear the veil in order to be protected from harassment. In this respect he says:

God is telling His Prophet to tell his wives, daughters and the women of the believers that they should not dress themselves like slave women by revealing their hair and face. Rather they should bring their cloaks closer to themselves so that no dissolute person harasses them when he knows that they are free women. (p. 213)

The veil, hence, is seen as a mandatory practice that conforms with the notion of modesty and hiding of physical beauty. In this regard, Al-Tabari explains that the verse provides a

rationale for the obligation of women to wear the veil in Islamic tradition, which aims to protect women from being mistakenly perceived as slaves and thus vulnerable to sexual harassment. Like Al Tabari, Ibn Kathir (2003) stresses the importance of modest clothing for a Muslim woman and the obligation to cover her entire body, including her hair, for protection. Ibn Kathir also clarifies that the veil is not mandatory for non-Muslim women. To prove his argument, Ibn Kathir quotes some earlier scholars such as Sufyan Al Thawri⁴² who asserts that the veil is obligatory for Muslim women to be recognized as free women, not slaves.

On the other hand, modern interpretations of the aforementioned verses express different viewpoints. Asad (1984), for example, claims that the veil is intended to cover women's shoulders and chests rather than their heads, and is restricted only to the Prophet's wives who are instructed to be covered and stay at home. Mernissi (1999), however, argues that the veil is not an Islamic practice that is mandated for all Muslim women. Instead, it is enforced on all women by the hypocrites in *Al Madinah* during the Prophet's time who used to assault Muslim women on the pretext that they mistakenly considered them slaves. For Mernissi, therefore, the veil "represents the triumph of the hypocrites" and it is not obligatory for Muslim women (p. 187).

More recently, Wadud (2006) argues that the veil becomes so significant in any discussions about Islam and gender as if it becomes "a sixth pillar" of Islam. Although, as Wadud suggests, *hijab* is a clear symbolic representation of Islam that is not mentioned in the Qur'an which includes only statements about women's dress, the veil is not a mandatory dress for a Muslim woman and the "best dress is the dress of *taqwa* [piety]"

⁴² Sufyan Al Thawri was an Islamic scholar, Jurist and one of the famous compilers of *hadith*.

(The Qur'an, 7:26). Wadud believes that the veil is a personal choice, and she herself has chosen to wear it for more than 35 years for two reasons: to reach out to persecuted Muslim women and to facilitate all her discussions about Islam and gender. In her first book, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's reform in Islam*, Wadud writes "If you think that the difference between heaven and hell is 45 inches of material, boy will you be surprised" (p. 220). In her interview with Hera Diani in 2020, moreover, Wadud notes:

I believe in the wearing of choice, and I believe in the taking off of choice.

Because I both wear it and do not wear it, I live in one hundred percent a place of choice, and that is where I am.

Similarly, Al Hibri (2001) notes that modesty is a quality required for both men and women. Instead of analyzing the veil itself and expressing his viewpoint on it, Al Hibri (1994) discusses it within the framework of the so-called gender apartheid by saying:

Western Feminists do not attempt to educate themselves about Islam as a world religion, or about the points of view of Muslim or Arab women.

Instead, western feminists hold an Orientalist view of Islam, and act on that view. This attitude has already resulted in western feminists silencing Muslim/ Arab-American women not through coercion, but rather by their astounding inability to hear us, regardless of how loudly we protest. And that inability to hear is not the result of a cultural gap (p. 160-1).

While Western feminists pay a lot of attention to the veil, Al Hibri argues, Muslim women do not consider the veil a priority issue. Thus, she rejects the current debate surrounding the veil which she considers a personal choice of Muslim women.

Although classical and several modern scholars agree on the necessity of modesty in the dress of a Muslim woman, there is a difference between them as to whether the veil is required or optional, which is puzzling. Nevertheless, their interpretations contradict with El Saadawi's description of the veil as a form of slavery. Looking back on the Arabian Peninsula and other parts of the world during the early ages, it can be seen that free women were distinguished from slaves by wearing the veil. The practice of veiling was "a symbol of privilege" and was mainly worn by upper-class women during pre-Islamic times (Marmorstein, 1954, p. 11). In recent times, moreover, many scholars have discussed the benefits of the Islamic veil. El Guindi (2003), for example, describes the veil as "a tool of female empowerment" that facilitates women communication in public spaces and protects them from sexual harassment (p. 28). For El Guindi (1999), a woman's decision to wear the veil represents a "liberation from imposed, imported identities, consumerist behaviors, and an increasingly materialistic culture" (p. 71).

El Saadawi's second claim against the veil is based on her personal assumption that Muslim women do not choose to wear the veil, but rather it is imposed on them. To support her argument, El Saadawi presents her personal experience with the veil as an example that reflects the societal pressure women typically face. Contrary to her claim, various studies have reported conflicting views on this issue. For example, Franks (2000) interviewed a number of veiled Muslim women residing in the United Kingdom who also answered a questionnaire. The findings displayed that all interviewees reported wearing "the hijab through choice as an expression of their religious faith commitment and for the benefits they perceived it to bestow" (p. 927). That is, no one forced them to wear the veil. Even though these women were exposed to racial abuse and aggressive behavior in

public places, they freely chose to wear the veil while living in a non-Muslim society and were subjected to “the brunt of the hate and harassment” (Zahedi, 2011, p. 184).

Afshar (2008), moreover, interviewed eighty veiled women in the city of Leicester in the United Kingdom who described various incidents in which they were attacked verbally and physically in public places due to their “visible Muslim identity” that was shown via the veil (p. 97). Despite their exposure to violence and abuse, the female participants continued to wear the veil, which they asserted to be their own personal choice. Conversely, other studies have reported different results. For instance, Syahrivar (2020) explored whether or not accepting to wear the veil is a personal choice. The researcher surveyed 25 Muslim women from different Muslim countries, such as Iran, and Pakistan, and Indonesia, who live in Europe. Participants reported that they did not freely choose to be veiled. Rather, the veil was imposed on them by their parents. Participants further clarified that their choice was limited only to the color of the veil. Conversely, Hussein (2007) claimed that Muslim women “‘negotiate’ rather than ‘choose’ over issues such as dress, and they do not ‘negotiate’ on equal terms” (p. 2).

The above discussion demonstrates that there are several interpretations of the veil verses. The availability of different interpretations, I argue, provides an opportunity for women to determine whether or not to be veiled. It is possible that some parents in some societies force their female dependents to wear the veil. Yet El Saadawi’s generalization that veiled women do so under family pressure seems to be imprecise because it denies others’ free choice to be veiled. In addition, El Saadawi’s choice not to wear the veil despite the familial and societal pressure on her is a clear example that women do not have to bow to the pressures placed on them. Instead, they can do as El

Saadawi and reject it in case it was not a mandatory dress in their country. Whereas some women fight against the veil, others fight for it and view it as a mandatory practice that fulfills religious requirements (Ali, 2005). Denying others' right to choose to wear the veil and describing them as being brainwashed for their own choice by El Saadawi contradicts the concept of freedom of choice.

Regarding her third criticism, El Saadawi claims that Islam mixes women's self-value as human beings with their physical appearance indicating a lack of respect for women who are treated as bodies. Nevertheless, Classical commentaries of the Qur'an discuss various Qur'anic verses that display gender equality in terms of composition, rights, and responsibilities. For instance, Al Tabari states that men and women are created from dust and have gone through the same stages of composition which is explained in the verse below:

We created you from dust, then from a sperm-drop, then from a clinging clot, and then from a lump of flesh, formed and unformed- that We may show you. And We settle in the wombs whom We will for a specified term, then We bring you out as a child, and then [We develop you] that you may reach your [time of] maturity. (Qur'an, 22:5)

In his interpretation of the verse, Ibn Kathir illuminates that men and women are created equally and there are no genuine differences between them in terms of the early stages of composition which is also confirmed in the following Qur'anic verses:

And indeed, We created man out of an extract of Tin. Thereafter We made him a *Nutfah* (sperm-drop) in a safe lodging. Then We made the *Nutfah* into a clot, then We made the clot into a little lump of flesh, then We made

out of that little lump of flesh bones, then We clothed the bones with flesh,
and then We brought it forth as another creation. So blessed is Allah, the
Best of creators. (Qur'an, 23:12-14)

The word “Man” in the above verses, argues Ibn Kathir, refers to the two genders as humans who pass through the same phases of creation. Although the Qur'an displays that the duties of men and women are not identical, Ibn Kathir argues that the text does acknowledge gender equality and complementary roles. In this respect, Ibn Kathir clarifies that the Qur'an reinforces the idea that all humans share the same spirit with no superiority of a man over a woman “O mankind, fear your Lord, who created you from one soul and created from it its mate and dispersed from both of them many men and women” (Qur'an, 4:1).

Al Tabari (2000) further discusses the Prophet's *hadith* that says, “women are the twin halves of men” meaning they both are equal in terms of creation and nature and therefore the Prophet advised men to “treat women nicely” (p. 575). Then he adds that when Prophet Muhammad was asked about his most beloved person, he said his wife, Aisha, from whom he asked Muslims to “take half of their religion”. This indicates the high status of women whose intellectuality is highly respected by the Prophet himself. Ibn Kathir (2003), moreover, underlines that claiming the inferiority of women in Islam is “pure fiction and should be completely disregarded” (p. 526). His argument is consistent with the following Qur'anic verse that says:

O mankind, we have created you from a male and a female; and We have
made you tribes and sub-tribes that you may know one another. Verily, the
most honorable among you, in the sight of Allah, is the one who is the

most righteous among you. Surely, Allah is All-Knowing, All- Aware.

(Qur'an, 49:14)

Here, Ibn Kathir affirms that the Islamic *Shariah* laws are applied to both men and women which is supported by another Qur'anic verse saying, "every soul will be (held) in pledge for its deeds" (Qur'an, 74:38). Ibn Kathir says that the Qur'an shows great respect for women and includes a chapter entitled *An-Nissaa* "Women" but does not contain a chapter entitled *Al Rijal* "man". Besides, there is a chapter in the Qur'an named after Mary, the mother of Christ, whose miraculous birth to him is described in several other chapters as well. For example, in the third Qur'anic chapter, entitled Ali 'Imran, the Qur'an tells the story of Mary's mother saying that "(remember) when the wife of Imran said: "O my lord! I have vowed to You what (the child that) is in my womb to be dedicated for Your service, so accept this from me" (Qur'an, 3:35). In addition, Al Tabari explains that the Qur'an mentions other women as well. For example, the Quran mentions Asiya bint Muzahim⁴³ in two different verses (i.e., 28:7-9 and 66:11) describing her piety and the tyranny of her husband.

The same argument is asserted by Al Hibri (1982c), who quotes the second Caliph of Islam Umar as saying: "By God, we did not use to pay attention to women until God said about them in the Qur'an what is said and gave them their share on matters" (p. 213). Al Hibri (1982a) also demonstrates that the so-called Islamic patriarchy stems from cultural and social practices rather than the Islamic religion itself whose values and principles are based mainly on equality and fairness. Al Hibri (2000a) adds that all

⁴³ Asiya bint Muzahim was the wife of the Egyptian Pharaoh who adopted Moses according to Islamic traditions.

human beings, regardless of gender or race, according to the Islamic faith, are equal before God and are not distinguished except by their piety that is directly mentioned in the following Qur'anic verse:

O humanity! Indeed, we created you from a male and a female, and made you into peoples and tribes so that you may get to know one another. Surely the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous among you. (Qur'an, 49:13)

Al Hibri adds that the Qur'an affirms the equality of men and women in the reward for their deeds in the hereafter "I will never deny any of you -male or female- the reward of your deeds. Both are equal regarding hereafter rewards" (3:195). Another Qur'anic verse clarifies gender equality in the rewards of the hereafter by saying:

Surely, men who submit themselves to God and women who submit themselves to Him, and believing men and believing women, and obedient men and obedient women, and truthful men and truthful women, and men steadfast in their faith and steadfast women, and men who are humble and women who are humble, and men who give alms, and women who gives alms, and men who fast and women who fast, and men who are chaste and women who are chaste, and men and women who remember Allah much- Allah has prepared for all of them forgiveness and a great reward. (Qur'an, 33:36)

Al Hibri (2000a), thus, underscores that "from the perspective of these Qur'anic passages, no man is superior to a woman by a virtue of his gender alone" (p. 51).

According to Wadud (199), moreover, “the Qur'anic version of the creation of humankind is not expressed in gender terms” but it is rather expressed by the word *nafs* “soul” and the Qur’an also emphasizes that “everything created in pairs” as in verse 36:36 “Glory be to Him Who created all the *azwaj*, of that which the earth grows, and of their own *nafs*, and of that which they know not” (p. 21). Wadud further argues that the Qur’an does not blame Eve for the first sin and explicitly states that both Adam and Eve were tempted by Satan who “made them slip and removed them from the state they were in” (2:36). The verse, hence, confirms that both of them sinned, then were forgiven after repentance. Wadud also explains that “the Qur'an always uses the Arabic dual form to tell how Satan tempted both Adam and Eve and how they both disobeyed” and the only time the Qur’an uses a single form in the story of temptation of Adam and Eve by Satan is to blame Adam alone in verse 20: 121 “And Adam disobeyed his Lord, so went astray”. By doing so, claims Wadud, “the Qur'an overcomes the negative Greco-Roman and Biblical-Judaic implications that woman was the cause of evil and damnation”. Additionally, Wadud indicates that the Qur’an always refers to the responsibility of each individual for his/ her deeds and repeatedly states that “every man and woman individually and every people collectively are alone responsible for what they do (p. 25).

In light of the above discussion, it seems that both classical and some modern scholars agree that, for the most part, women are as respected as men and are not treated in Islam as mere bodies. This contradicts as El Saadawi’s claims. Instead, the sources point out that women are often shown in the Qur'an and in the Prophet’s *ahadith* as highly respected human beings with high status and equal rights with their male counterparts. Regarding the issue of veil, however, several modern and classical scholars

agree that Muslim women are mandatorily required to wear loose-fitting clothing when going out in public places. They differ about whether or not the veil is mandatory.

Whereas Ibn Kathir and Al Tabari believe that women should be veiled, Wadud and Al Hibri indicate that every woman is free to choose whether or not to be veiled and is responsible for her choice.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

We have not seen any of the divinely ordered systems of law, or any law from among the corpus of religious law (in Islam), ruling that woman is to be prohibited from involvement in the occupations of men. Nature has nothing to do with this ... woman is a human being as man is, with complete mental faculties and acumen and equivalent parts, capable of performing according to her own abilities.
-Margo Badran⁴⁴

the oppression of women is triple. Triple – globally by colonization, locally by the State and personally by the family. The man is oppressed globally by the colonization and locally by the State, but in the family, he is the oppressor of the woman
-Nawal El Saadawi⁴⁵

El Saadawi discusses many provocative issues related to women's rights in Islam and criticizes various controversial verses of the Quran that have sparked heated debate over time. For El Saadawi (1980; 1982; 1986c), Islam is a biased religion that gives men more privileges than women whose lives are destined to be maintained by their male guardians (i.e., a father, brother, husband, uncle...etc.). This thesis primarily explores her writings and analyzes her arguments on the issue of Muslim women's rights in light of interpretations of the Qur'an by classical scholars (i.e., Al Tabari and Ibn Kathir) and contemporary Muslim feminists: Amina Wadud and Azizah Al Hibri.

Having examined her arguments, some points can be highlighted. First, El Saadawi always emphasizes her good understanding of all religions and repeatedly states that she has studied them for ten years. Yet her writings mainly discuss the anti-religious viewpoint and refute the opposing arguments without examining or even referring to them. Second, El Saadawi has contradictory arguments on various issues. The first

⁴⁴ Badran, M. (1995). *Feminists, Islam and nation: Gender and the making of modern Egypt*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, p. 15.

⁴⁵ Smith, S. (2007). Interview with Nawal El Saadawi (Cairo, 29th January 2006). *Feminist Review*, 85(85), 59–69.(P. 66).

example is manifested in her contradictory attitudes towards religions in general. El Saadawi (2019) describes all religions to be male-dominated and therefore they are oppressive to women and cause their subordination. Yet, she asserts earlier (1986c) that the concept of equality regardless of gender, color, and ethnicity, exists in all religions, but is increasingly politicized and misused by people in power to serve their personal interests. As a result, religions' advocacy of gender equality is impeded and is not received by humans. In her opinion, El Saadawi adds in an interview with Homa Khaleeli (2010), "the problem is not Islam, it is the political systems that use Islam and religion". Moreover, El Saadawi (1997) expresses her rejection of polygamy because it creates hatred between children and severely blames Islam for allowing it. Then on a recent TV show, El Saadawi (2016) contradicts her earlier opinion by saying that "polygamy is a lie, and it is not in the Qur'an, and Arab countries like Tunisia have banned it". Additionally, although El Saadawi (2002) heavily criticizes many aspects of Muslim societies on many points related to women's rights, she praises Prophet Muhammad as the first liberator of women. El Saadawi (1982b) explains that his reign was an ideal time for Muslim women as they enjoyed gender equality and were able to express their views and participate in all aspects of life without restrictions. She further (1982a) argues that "women in the time of the Prophet obtained rights, which today are denied in most Arab countries" (p. 212) and therefore the oppression of women in Islamic societies is not because of Islam but rather the political and economic systems that "attempt to misinterpret religion and utilize it as an instrument of fear, oppression and exploitation" (p. 41). In other words, societal traditions and political systems are to be responsible for the inferior status of women in Muslim societies. Therefore, her arguments apparently lack consistency. Whereas

sometimes El Saadawi blames the Islamic religion, other times she condemns the cultural and political systems in Muslim societies.

Third, El Saadawi's views contradict with the classical and modern interpretations of the Qur'an regarding some gender issues. She claims (1982b), for instance, that Muslim women are forced to marry men chosen by their male guardians and their consent is not considered. Likewise, according to El Saadawi, the husband is allowed to beat his wife who must obey him and is also burdened with household chores. The findings of this study reveal that her claims about marriage contradict both classical and some modern scholars' interpretations of the Qur'an that acknowledge the importance of a woman's consent if the marriage contract is to be valid (e.g., Qur'an 2:232), and assert the equality between men and women (e.g., Qur'an 9:71, 33:35 and 7:189). The findings further show that the wife is not obligated to perform household chores. Instead, Wadud (1999) argues, it is the husband's responsibility to hire someone to help her with the housework, and he is also encouraged to assist with housework, similar to Prophet Muhammad who used to help his wives. Regarding the issue of violence against women, however, both Ibn Kathir and Al Tabari discuss various arguments on this issue and argue that wives' rebellion against their husbands should be dealt with through sequential steps, including light beatings with a small toothbrush, to draw their attention to the mistake they make rather than harm them. In addition, El Saadawi (1982b) denounces Islam for allowing polygamy, which she depicts as a means to please men and dehumanize women. She also asserts that it is not possible to treat women fairly, and even Prophet Muhammad himself preferred his wife Aisha to his other wives. This is consistent with Al Tabari and Ibn Kathir's interpretation of Qur'anic verse that says, "you will never be able to do perfect

justice between wives even if it is your ardent desire” (4:129). They both clarify that the husband will not be able to achieve full justice between the wives, even if it is his strong desire to do so. Al Hibri and Wadud also argue that polygamy is permitted primarily to solve social problems and help orphans and widows successfully integrate into their society rather than serving male sexual desires. Furthermore, El Saadawi argues that Islam gives men the right to end the marital relationship and denies women the same right. She describes this treatment as an example of the oppression of Muslim women. According to Ibn Kathir and Al Tabari, however, divorce is presented as a last resort for the two spouses who are advised to first seek reconciliation. If they find it is impossible to resume the relationship afterwards, nevertheless, the couple is advised to separate in a respectful manner without any harm or pain to either of them. Whereas men can divorce their wives at will, women can obtain divorce through *faskh* and *khula*. Wadud and Al Hibri also confirm that a woman can include in her marriage contract her right to divorce her husband at will.

In general, El Saadawi’s views reflect the challenges that Muslim women currently face. Despite her contradictory views, I argue that El Saadawi's intention is not to attack Islam itself, but rather to highlight current interpretations of primary Islamic sources that, in her view, are male dominated. In this regard, Barlas (2002) argues that “Islam is not based on the idea of male epistemic privilege, or in a formally ordained interpretive community, or clergy” (p. 209). It should also be noted that we need to differentiate between cultural traditions and Islamic principles. If different Muslim cultures, for example, allow certain behaviors such as gender segregation, this does not mean that all of these cultural practices are part of Islam, which is surprisingly blamed

rather than those societal norms. Understanding Islam in terms of how it is interpreted culturally in patriarchal Muslim societies, according to Abdel-Fattah (2013), merely uses Islam to justify the subordination of women, which is originally a product of patriarchal cultural traditions.

In conclusion, understanding the language of the Qur'an is a topic that continues to inspire a unique literature about women and Islam. The ambiguity and flexibility of the text invite multiple and sometimes contradictory readings that require careful analysis and comparison.

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Appendix A: A list of El Saadawi's Fiction Writings

1. Novels

Title	Year of Publications
The Absent One	1969
The Death of the Only Man on Earth	1975
Two Women in One	1992
Woman at Point Zero	1983
God Dies by the Nile	1984
The Children's Circling Song	1986
The Fall of the Imam	1987
Ganat and the Devil	1991
The Innocence of the Devil	1994
The Well of Life	1994
Love in the Kingdom of Oil	2001
Searching	2008
The Novel	2009
Zeina	2011

2. Short Stories

Title	Year of Publications
I Learnt Love	1957
A Moment of Truth	1959

Little Tenderness	1960
The Thread and the Wall	1972
Ain El Hayat	1976
She was the Weaker	1977
Death of an Ex-minister	1978
She Has No Place in Paradise	1987
Adab Am Kellet Abad	2000

3. Memoirs

Title	Year of Publications
Memoirs from the Women's Prison	1986
My Travels Around the World	1986
Memoirs of a Women Doctor	1989
Memoirs of a Child Called Soad	1990
My Life, Part I, Autobiography	1996
My Life, Part II, Autobiography	1998
My Life, Part III	2001
A Daughter of Isis	2002

4. Plays

Title	Year of Publications
Twelve Women in a Cell (Cairo, 1984)	
Isis	1985
God Resigns at the Summit Meeting, published by Madbouli, and four other plays included in her Collected Works (45 books in Arabic), Cairo: Madbouli, 2007	1996

Appendix B: A list of El Saadawi's Non-Fiction Writings

Title	Year of Publications
Women and Sex	1969
Woman is the Origin	1971
Men and Sex	1973
The Naked Face of Arab Women	1974
Women and Neurosis	1975
The Hidden Face of Eve	1882
My Travels Around the World	1985
On Women	1986
A New Battle in Arab Women Liberation	1992
The Nawal Saadawi Reader	1997
A Daughter of Isis, autobiography (Part I)	1998
Breaking Down Barriers	2004
Walking Through Fire, autobiography (Part II)	2008

Appendix C: A list of El Saadawi's Newspaper Interviews

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Appendix D: A list of El Saadawi's TV Shows

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Appendix E: A list of Quranic verses (listed by themes)

For each of the Qur'anic verses to which this study refers, this appendix provides:

- The Arabic text
- The English translation

Source: 'Abdullah Yusuf 'AIT, *The Holy Qur 'an: Text, Translation, and Commentary*, 4th ed. (Brentwood, MD: Amana Corporation, 1989).

1. Marriage

Verse 30:21

وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ أَنْ خَلَقَ لَكُمْ مِنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَزْوَاجًا لِتَسْكُنُوا إِلَيْهَا وَجَعَلَ بَيْنَكُمْ مَوَدَّةً وَرَحْمَةً إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ

English Translation

And one of His signs is that He created for you spouses from among yourselves, in order to have tranquility and contentment with each other, and He placed in your hearts love and care towards your spouses. Surly in this, there are lessons for people who think.

Verse 2:187

أَجَلَ لَكُمْ لَيْلَةَ الصَّيَامِ الرَّفْتُ إِلَى نِسَائِكُمْ هُنَّ لِبَاسٌ لَكُمْ وَأَنْتُمْ لِبَاسٌ لَهُنَّ

English Translation

Permitted to you, on the night of the fasts, is the approach to your wives. They are your garments and ye are their garments.

Verse 16:72

وَاللَّهُ جَعَلَ لَكُمْ مِنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَزْوَاجًا وَجَعَلَ لَكُمْ مِنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ بَنِينَ وَحَفَدَةً وَرَزَقَكُمْ مِنَ الطَّيِّبَاتِ أَفَبِالْبَاطِلِ يُؤْمِنُونَ وَبِنِعْمَتِ اللَّهِ هُمْ يَكْفُرُونَ

English Translation

And Allah has made for you mates (and companions) of your own nature, and made for you, out of them, sons and daughters and grandchildren, and provided for you sustenance of the best: will they then believe in vain things, and be ungrateful for Allah's favors?

Verse 4:4

وَأَوْثُوا النِّسَاءَ صَدُقَتِهِنَّ نِحْلَةً فَإِنْ طِبْنَ لَكُمْ عَنْ شَيْءٍ مِنْهُ نَفْسًا فَكُلُوهُ هَنِيئًا مَرِيئًا

English Translation

And give the women (on marriage) their dower as a free gift; but if they, of their own good pleasure, remit any part of it to you, Take it and enjoy it with right good cheer.

Verse 4:34

الرِّجَالُ قَوَّامُونَ عَلَى النِّسَاءِ بِمَا فَضَّلَ اللَّهُ بَعْضَهُمْ عَلَى بَعْضٍ وَبِمَا أَنْفَقُوا مِنْ أَمْوَالِهِمْ فَالْمُطْلَقَاتُ فَإِنْ كُنَّ خَافُونَ بِمَا خَفِظَ اللَّهُ وَالَّتِي تَخَافُونَ نُشُورَهُنَّ فَعِظُوهُنَّ وَأَهْجُرُوهُنَّ فِي الْمَضَاجِعِ وَأَضْرِبُوهُنَّ فَإِنْ أَطَعْنَكُمْ فَلَا تَبْغُوا عَلَيْهِنَّ سَبِيلًا إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَلِيمًا كَبِيرًا

English Translation

Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore, the righteous women are devoutly obedient, and guard in (the husband's) absence what Allah would have them guard. As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill-conduct, admonish them (first), (Next), refuse to share their beds, (And last) beat them (lightly); but if they return to obedience, seek not against them Means (of annoyance): For Allah is Most High, great (above you all).

Verse 25:74

وَالَّذِينَ يَقُولُونَ رَبَّنَا هَبْ لَنَا مِنْ أَزْوَاجِنَا وَذُرِّيَّاتِنَا قُرَّةَ أَعْيُنٍ وَاجْعَلْ لَنَا لِمَتَّقِينَ إِمَامًا

English Translation

And those who pray, "Our Lord! Grant unto us wives and offspring who will be the comfort of our eyes and give us (the grace) to lead the righteous."

Verse 49: 13

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا ۚ إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتَقْوَاهُ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ

English Translation

O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other)). Verily the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things).

Verse 16:97

مَنْ عَمِلَ صَالِحًا مِمَّنْ ذَكَرَ أَوْ أُنتَىٰ وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ فَلَنُحْيِيَنَّهٗ حَيٰوةً طَيِّبَةً ۖ وَلَنَجْزِيَنَّهُمْ أَجْرَهُمْ بِأَحْسَنِ مَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ

English Translation

Whoever works righteousness, man or woman, and has Faith, verily, to him will We give a new Life, a life that is good and pure and We will bestow on such their reward according to the best of their actions.

Verse 57:12

يَوْمَ تَرَى الْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتِ يَسْعَىٰ نُورُهُمْ بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَبِأَيْمَانِهِمْ بُشْرَاكُمُ الْيَوْمَ جَنَّتُ تَجْرَىٰ مِنْ تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا ۚ ذَٰلِكَ هُوَ الْفَوْزُ الْعَظِيمُ

English Translation

One Day shalt thou see the believing men and the believing women- how their Light runs forward before them and by their right hands: (their greeting will be): "Good News for you this Day! Gardens beneath which flow rivers! to dwell therein for aye! This is indeed the highest Achievement!"

Verse 33:4

مَا جَعَلَ اللَّهُ لِرَجُلٍ مِّن قَلْبَيْنِ فِي جَوْفَةٍ ۚ وَمَا جَعَلَ أَزْوَاجَكُمُ اللَّائِي تُظَاهِرُونَ مِنْهُنَّ أُمَّهَاتِكُمْ ۚ وَمَا جَعَلَ أَدْعِيَاءَكُمْ أَبْنَاءَكُمْ ۚ ذَٰلِكُمْ قَوْلُكُمْ بِأَفْوَاهِكُمْ ۚ وَاللَّهُ يَقُولُ الْحَقَّ وَهُوَ يَهْدِي السَّبِيلَ

English Translation

Allah has not made for any man two hearts in his (one) body: nor has He made your wives whom ye divorce by Zihar your mothers: nor has He made your adopted sons your sons. Such is (only) your (manner of) speech by your mouths. But Allah tells (you) the Truth, and He shows the (right) Way.

2. polygamy

Verse 4:3

وَإِنْ خِفْتُمْ أَلَّا تُقْسِطُوا فِي الْيَتَامَىٰ فَانكِسُوا مَا طَابَ لَكُمْ مِنَ النِّسَاءِ مَنِّي وَتِلْكَ وَرُبَّ فَإِنْ خِفْتُمْ أَلَّا تَعْدِلُوا فَوَاحِدَةً أَوْ مَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُكُمْ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ أَدْنَىٰ أَلَّا تَعُولُوا

English Translation

If ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, Marry women of your choice, Two or three or four; but if ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one, or (a captive) that your right hands possess, that will be more suitable, to prevent you from doing injustice.

Verse 4:129

وَلَنْ تَسْتَطِيعُوا أَنْ تَعْدِلُوا بَيْنَ النِّسَاءِ وَلَوْ حَرَصْتُمْ ۖ فَلَا تَمِيلُوا كُلَّ الْمِيلِ فَتَدْرُواهَا كَالْمِغْلَقَةِ ۚ وَإِنْ تُصْلِحُوا وَتَتَّقُوا فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ غَفُورًا رَحِيمًا

English Translation

Ye are never able to be fair and just as between women, even if it is your ardent desire: But turn not away (from a woman) altogether, so as to leave her (as it were) hanging (in the air). If ye come to a friendly understanding, and practice self-restraint, Allah is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful.

3. Divorce

Verse 2:232

وَإِذَا طَلَقْتُمُ النِّسَاءَ فَلْيُغْنِ أَجَلُهُنَّ فَلَا تَعْضُلُوهُنَّ أَنْ يَنْكِحْنَ أَزْوَاجَهُنَّ إِذَا تَرَضَوْا بَيْنَهُمْ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ يُوعَظُ بِهِ مَن كَانَ مِنْكُمْ يُؤْمِنُ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ ۚ ذَٰلِكُمْ أَزْكَىٰ لَكُمْ وَأَطْهَرُ ۚ وَاللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ وَأَنْتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ

English Translation

When ye divorce women, and they fulfil the term of their ('Iddat), do not prevent them from marrying their (former) husbands, if they mutually agree on equitable terms. This instruction is for all amongst you, who believe in Allah and the Last Day. That is (the course Making for) most virtue and purity amongst you and Allah knows, and ye know not.

Verse 4:35

وَإِنْ خِفْتُمْ شِقَاقَ بَيْنِهِمَا فَابْعَثُوا حَكَمًا مِّنْ أَهْلِهِ وَحَكَمًا مِّنْ أَهْلِهَا إِنْ يُرِيدَا إِصْلَاحًا يُوَفِّقِ اللَّهُ بَيْنَهُمَا ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَلِيمًا خَبِيرًا

English Translation

If ye fear a breach between them twain, appoint (two) arbiters, one from his family, and the other from hers; if they wish for peace, Allah will cause their reconciliation: For Allah hath full knowledge, and is acquainted with all things.

Verse 2:231

وَإِذَا طَلَقْتُمُ النِّسَاءَ فَلَهُنَّ أَجَلُهُنَّ فَأَمْسِكُوهُنَّ بِمَعْرُوفٍ أَوْ سَرِّحُوهُنَّ بِمَعْرُوفٍ ۚ وَلَا تُمْسِكُوهُنَّ ضِرَارًا لِّتَعْتَدُوا ۚ وَمَنْ يَفْعَلْ ذَلِكَ فَقَدْ ظَلَمَ نَفْسَهُ ۚ وَلَا تَتَّخِذُوا آيَاتِ اللَّهِ هُزُوًا ۚ وَادْكُرُوا نِعْمَتَ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ وَمَا أَنْزَلَ عَلَيْكُمْ مِنَ الْكِتَابِ وَالْحِكْمَةِ بِعِظْكُمْ بِهِ ۚ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَأَعْلَمُوا أَنَّ اللَّهَ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ

English Translation

When ye divorce women, and they fulfil the term of their ('Iddat), either take them back on equitable terms or set them free on equitable terms; but do not take them back to injure them, (or) to take undue advantage; if anyone does that; He wrongs his own soul. Do not treat Allah's Signs as a jest, but solemnly rehearse Allah's favors on you, and the fact that He sent down to you the Book and Wisdom, for your instruction. And fear Allah and know that Allah is well acquainted with all things.

Verse 4:20-21

وَإِنْ أَرَدْتُمْ اسْتِبْدَالَ زَوْجٍ مَّكَانَ زَوْجٍ وَآتَيْتُمْ إِحْدَاهُنَّ قِنْطَارًا فَلَا تَأْخُذُوا مِنْهُ شَيْئًا ۚ أَتَأْخُذُونَهُ بُهْتَانًا وَإِثْمًا مُّبِينًا ۚ وَكَيْفَ تَأْخُذُونَهُ وَقَدْ أَفْضَىٰ بَعْضُكُمْ إِلَىٰ بَعْضٍ وَأَخَذْنَ مِنْكُمْ مِيثَاقًا غَلِيظًا

English Translation

But if ye decide to take one wife in place of another, even if ye had given the latter a whole treasure for dower, Take not the least bit of it back: Would ye take it by slander and manifest wrong? And how could ye take it when ye have gone in unto each other, and they have Taken from you a solemn covenant?

Verse 2:228

وَالْمُطَلَّقَاتُ يَتَرَبَّصْنَ بِأَنْفُسِهِنَّ ثَلَاثَةَ قُرُوءٍ ۚ وَلَا يَحِلُّ لَهُنَّ أَنْ يَكْتُمْنَ مَا خَلَقَ اللَّهُ فِي أَرْحَامِهِنَّ إِنْ كُنَّ يُؤْمِنُ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ ۚ وَبُعُولَتُهُنَّ أَحَقُّ بِرَدِّهِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ إِنْ أَرَادُوا إِصْلَاحًا وَلَهُنَّ مِثْلُ الَّذِي عَلَيْهُنَّ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ ۚ وَلِلرِّجَالِ عَلَيْهِنَّ دَرَجَةٌ ۚ وَاللَّهُ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ

English Translation

Divorced women shall wait concerning themselves for three monthly periods. Nor is it lawful for them to hide what Allah Hath created in their wombs, if they have faith in Allah and the Last Day. And their husbands have the better right to take them back in that period, if they wish for reconciliation. And women shall have rights similar to the rights against them, according to what is equitable; but men have a degree (of advantage) over them. And Allah is Exalted in Power, Wise.

Verse 4:19

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا لَا يَحِلُّ لَكُمْ أَنْ تَرِثُوا النِّسَاءَ كَرِهًا ۚ وَلَا تَعْضُلُوهُنَّ لِيَنْدَهُبُوا بِبَعْضِ مَا ءَاتَيْتُمُوهُنَّ إِلَّا أَنْ يَأْتِيَنَّ بِفَحِشَةٍ مُّبِينَةٍ ۚ وَعَاشِرُوهُنَّ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ ۚ فَإِنْ كَرِهْتُمُوهُنَّ فَعَسَىٰ أَنْ تَكْرَهُوا شَيْئًا وَيَجْعَلَ اللَّهُ فِيهِ خَيْرًا كَثِيرًا

English Translation

O ye who believe! Ye are forbidden to inherit women against their will. Nor should ye treat them with harshness, that ye may Take away part of the dower ye have given them, - except where they have been guilty of open lewdness; on the contrary live with them on a footing of kindness and equity. If ye take a dislike to them it may be that ye dislike a thing, and Allah brings about through it a great deal of good.

Verse 2:232

وَإِذَا طَلَقْتُمُ النِّسَاءَ فَلَهُنَّ أَجَلُهُنَّ فَلَا تَعْصِلُوهُنَّ أَنْ يَنْكِحْنَ أَزْوَاجَهُنَّ إِذَا تَرَضُوا بَيْنَهُمْ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ يُوعَظُ بِهِ مَنْ كَانَ مِنْكُمْ يُؤْمِنُ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ ۚ ذَٰلِكُمْ أَزْكَىٰ لَكُمْ وَأَطْهَرُ ۚ وَاللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ وَأَنْتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ

English Translation

When ye divorce women, and they fulfil the term of their ('Iddat), do not prevent them from marrying their (former) husbands, if they mutually agree on equitable terms. This instruction is for all amongst you, who believe in Allah and the Last Day. That is (the course Making for) most virtue and purity amongst you and Allah knows, and ye know not.

Verse 2:237

وَإِنْ طَلَقْتُمُوهُنَّ مِنْ قَبْلِ أَنْ تَمْسُوهُنَّ وَقَدْ فَرَضْتُمْ لَهُنَّ فَرِيضَةً فَنِصْفُ مَا فَرَضْتُمْ إِلَّا أَنْ يَعْفُونَ أَوْ يَعْفُوا الَّذِي بِيَدِهِ عُقْدَةُ النِّكَاحِ ۚ وَأَنْ تَعْفُوا أَقْرَبُ لِلتَّقْوَىٰ ۚ وَلَا تَنْسُوا الْفَضْلَ بَيْنَكُمْ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ بَصِيرٌ

English Translation

And if ye divorce them before consummation, but after the fixation of a dower for them, then the half of the dower (Is due to them), unless they remit it or (the man's half) is remitted by him in whose hands is the marriage tie; and the remission (of the man's half) is the nearest to righteousness. And do not forget Liberality between yourselves. For Allah sees well all that ye do.

4. Inheritance

Verse 4:7

لِلرِّجَالِ نَصِيبٌ مِمَّا تَرَكَ الْوَالِدَانِ وَالْأَقْرَبُونَ وَلِلنِّسَاءِ نَصِيبٌ مِمَّا تَرَكَ الْوَالِدَانِ وَالْأَقْرَبُونَ مِمَّا قَلَّ مِنْهُ أَوْ كَثُرَ ۚ نَصِيبًا مَّفْرُوضًا

English Translation

From what is left by parents and those nearest related there is a share for men and a share for women, whether the property be small or large,-a determinate share.

Verse 4:11-12

يُوصِيكُمُ اللَّهُ فِي أَوْلَادِكُمْ لِلذَّكَرِ مِثْلُ حَظِّ الْأُنثِيَيْنِ ۚ فَإِنْ كُنَّ نِسَاءً فَوْقَ اثْنَتَيْنِ فَلَهُنَّ ثُلُثَا مَا تَرَكَ ۚ وَإِنْ كَانَتْ وَاحِدَةً فَلَهَا النِّصْفُ ۚ وَلِأَبَوَيْهِ لِكُلِّ وَاحِدٍ مِّنْهُمَا السُّدُسُ مِمَّا تَرَكَ إِنْ كَانَ لَهُ وَلَدٌ ۚ فَإِنْ لَمْ يَكُنْ لَهُ وَلَدٌ وَوَرِثَتْهُ أَبَوَاهُ فَلِلْمِثْلِ ۚ وَلِلْأَخِ إِخْوَةٌ فَلِلْمِثْلِ ۚ السُّدُسُ ۚ مَنْ بَعْدَ وَصِيَّةٍ يُوصَىٰ بِهَا أَوْ دَيْنٍ ۚ وَأَبَاؤُكُمْ وَأَبْنَاؤُكُمْ لَا تَدْرُونَ أَيُّهُمْ أَقْرَبُ لَكُمْ نَفْعًا فَرِيضَةٌ مِنَ اللَّهِ ۚ إِنْ اللَّهُ كَانَ عَلِيمًا حَكِيمًا ۚ وَلَكُمْ نِصْفُ مَا تَرَكَ أَزْوَاجُكُمْ إِنْ لَمْ يَكُنْ لَهُنَّ وَلَدٌ ۚ فَإِنْ كَانَ لَهُنَّ وَلَدٌ فَلَكُمْ الرُّبْعُ مِمَّا تَرَكَنَّ ۚ مَنْ بَعْدَ وَصِيَّةٍ يُوصَىٰ بِهَا أَوْ دَيْنٍ ۚ وَلَهُنَّ الرُّبْعُ مِمَّا تَرَكَنَّ إِنْ لَمْ يَكُنْ لَكُمْ وَلَدٌ ۚ فَإِنْ كَانَ لَكُمْ وَلَدٌ فَلَهُنَّ الثُّلُثُ مِمَّا تَرَكَنَّ ۚ مَنْ بَعْدَ وَصِيَّةٍ تُوصُونَ بِهَا أَوْ دَيْنٍ ۚ وَإِنْ كَانَ رَجُلٌ يُورِثُ كَلَّةً أَوْ امْرَأَةً وَلَهُ أَخٌ أَوْ أُخْتُ فَلِكُلِّ وَاحِدٍ مِّنْهُمَا السُّدُسُ ۚ فَإِنْ كَانُوا أَكْثَرَ مِنْ ذَٰلِكَ فَهُمْ شُرَكَاءُ فِي الثُّلُثِ ۚ مَنْ بَعْدَ وَصِيَّةٍ يُوصَىٰ بِهَا أَوْ دَيْنٍ غَيْرَ مُضَارٍّ ۚ وَصِيَّةٌ مِنَ اللَّهِ ۚ وَاللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ حَلِيمٌ

English Translation

Allah (thus) directs you as regards your Children's (Inheritance): to the male, a portion equal to that of two females: if only daughters, two or more, their share is two-thirds of the inheritance; if only one, her share is a half. For parents, a sixth share of the inheritance to each, if the deceased left children; if no children, and the parents are the (only) heirs, the mother has a third; if the deceased Left brothers (or sisters) the mother

has a sixth. (The distribution in all cases ('s) after the payment of legacies and debts. Ye know not whether your parents or your children are nearest to you in benefit. These are settled portions ordained by Allah; and Allah is All-knowing, Al wise. In what your wives leave, your share is a half, if they leave no child; but if they leave a child, ye get a fourth; after payment of legacies and debts. In what ye leave, their share is a fourth, if ye leave no child; but if ye leave a child, they get an eighth; after payment of legacies and debts. If the man or woman whose inheritance is in question, has left neither ascendants nor descendants, but has left a brother or a sister, each one of the two gets a sixth; but if more than two, they share in a third; after payment of legacies and debts; so that no loss is caused (to anyone). Thus, is it ordained by Allah; and Allah is All-knowing, Most Forbearing.

Verse 4:34

الرِّجَالُ قَوَّامُونَ عَلَى النِّسَاءِ بِمَا فَضَّلَ اللَّهُ بَعْضَهُمْ عَلَى بَعْضٍ وَبِمَا أَنْفَقُوا مِنْ أَمْوَالِهِمْ ۚ فَالصَّالِحَاتُ قَنَاطٌ حَفِظَتْ
لِلْغَيْبِ بِمَا حَفِظَ اللَّهُ ۚ وَالَّتِي تَخَافُونَ نُشُوزَهُنَّ فَعِظُوهُنَّ وَأَهْجُرُوهُنَّ فِي الْمَضَاجِعِ وَاضْرِبُوهُنَّ ۚ فَإِنْ أَطَعْنَكُمْ فَلَا
تَبْغُوا عَلَيْهِنَّ سَبِيلًا ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَلِيمًا كَبِيرًا

English Translation

Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore, the righteous women are devoutly obedient, and guard in (the husband's) absence what Allah would have them guard. As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill-conduct, admonish them (first), (Next), refuse to share their beds, (And last) beat them (lightly); but if they return to obedience, seek not against them Means (of annoyance): For Allah is Most High, great (above you all).

Verse 65:7

لِيُنْفِقَ ذُو سَعَةٍ مِّن سَعَتِهِ ۖ وَمَن قُدِرَ عَلَيْهِ رِزْقُهُ فَلْيُنْفِقْ مِمَّا ءَاتَاهُ اللَّهُ ۚ لَا يَكْلِفُ اللَّهُ نَفْسًا إِلَّا مَا ءَاتَاهَا ۚ سَيَجْعَلُ
اللَّهُ بَعْدَ عُسْرٍ يُسْرًا

English Translation

Let the man of means spend according to his means: and the man whose resources are restricted, let him spend according to what Allah has given him. Allah puts no burden on any person beyond what He has given him. After a difficulty, Allah will soon grant relief.

5. Veiling

Verse 33:53

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا لَا تَدْخُلُوا بُيُوتَ النَّبِيِّ إِلَّا أَنْ يُؤْذَنَ لَكُمْ إِلَى طَعَامٍ غَيْرٍ نَّظِيرٍ لِّهِ ۖ وَلَٰكِنْ إِذَا دُعِيتُمْ فَادْخُلُوا
فَإِذَا طَعِمْتُمْ فَانْتَشِرُوا وَلَا مَسْتَنَبِينَ لِحَدِيثٍ ۚ إِنَّ ذَلِكُمْ كَانَ يُؤْذَى النَّبِيَّ فَيَسْتَحْيِي مِنْكُمْ ۚ وَاللَّهُ لَا يَسْتَحْيِي مِنَ
الْحَقِّ ۚ وَإِذَا سَأَلْتُمُوهُنَّ مَتَاعًا فَسْأَلُوهُنَّ مِنْ وَرَاءِ حِجَابٍ ۚ ذَلِكُمْ أَطْهَرُ لِقُلُوبِكُمْ وَقُلُوبِهِنَّ ۚ وَمَا كَانَ لَكُمْ أَنْ تُؤْذُوا
رَسُولَ اللَّهِ ۚ وَلَا أَنْ تَنكِحُوا أَزْوَاجَهُ مِنْ بَعْدِهِ أَبَدًا ۚ إِنَّ ذَلِكُمْ كَانَ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ عَظِيمًا

English Translation

O ye who believe! Enter not the Prophet's houses, - until leave is given you, - for a meal, (and then) not (so early as) to wait for its preparation: but when ye are invited, enter; and when ye have taken your meal, disperse, without seeking familiar talk. Such (behavior) annoys the Prophet: he is ashamed to dismiss you, but Allah is not ashamed (to tell you) the truth. And when ye ask (his ladies) for anything ye want, ask them from before a

screen: that makes for greater purity for your hearts and for theirs. Nor is it right for you that ye should annoy Allah's Messenger, or that ye should marry his widows after him at any time. Truly such a thing is in Allah's sight an enormity.

Verse 24:30-31

قُلْ لِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ يَغُضُّوا مِنْ أَبْصَارِهِمْ وَيَحْفَظُوا فُرُوجَهُمْ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ أَزْكَىٰ لَهُمْ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ خَبِيرٌ بِمَا يَصْنَعُونَ وَقُلْ لِلْمُؤْمِنَاتِ يَغْضُضْنَ مِنْ أَبْصَارِهِنَّ وَيَحْفَظْنَ فُرُوجَهُنَّ وَلَا يُبْدِينَ زِينَتَهُنَّ إِلَّا مَا ظَهَرَ مِنْهَا ۚ وَلْيَضْرِبْنَ بِخُمُرِهِنَّ عَلَىٰ جُيُوبِهِنَّ ۚ وَلَا يُبْدِينَ زِينَتَهُنَّ إِلَّا لِبُعُولَتِهِنَّ أَوْ آبَائِهِنَّ أَوْ آبَاءِ بُعُولَتِهِنَّ أَوْ أَبْنَائِهِنَّ أَوْ أَبْنَاءِ بُعُولَتِهِنَّ أَوْ إِخْوَانِهِنَّ أَوْ بَنَىٰ إِخْوَانِهِنَّ أَوْ بَنَىٰ أَخَوَاتِهِنَّ أَوْ نِسَائِهِنَّ أَوْ مَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُهُنَّ أَوْ التَّبَاعِينَ ۚ غَيْرَ أُولَىٰ إِلَٰزِمَةٍ مِنَ الرِّجَالِ أَوْ الطِّفْلِ الَّذِينَ لَمْ يَظْهَرُوا عَلَىٰ عَوْرَتِ النِّسَاءِ ۚ وَلَا يَضْرِبْنَ بِأَرْجُلِهِنَّ لِيُعْلَمَ مَا يُخْفِينَ ۚ مِن زِينَتِهِنَّ ۚ وَتَوْبُوا إِلَى اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا أَيُّهَا الْمُؤْمِنُونَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُفْلِحُونَ

English Translation

Tell the believing men to reduce [some] of their vision and guard their private parts. That is purer for them. Indeed, Allah is Acquainted with what they do. And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husband's fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women, or the slaves whom their right hands possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex; and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments. And O ye Believers! turn ye all together towards Allah, that ye may attain Bliss.

Verse 33:59

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّبِيُّ قُلْ لِّأَزْوَاجِكَ وَبَنَاتِكَ وَنِسَاءِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ يُدْنِينَ عَلَيْهِنَّ مِنْ جَلْبِيبِهِنَّ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ أَدْنَىٰ أَنْ يُعْرَفْنَ فَلَا يُؤْذَيْنَ ۚ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ غَفُورًا رَّحِيمًا

English Translation

Prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters, and the believing women, that they should cast their outer garments over their persons (when abroad): that is most convenient, that they should be known (as such) and not molested. And Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.

Verse 23:12-14

وَلَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ مِنْ سُلَالَةٍ مِّن طِينٍ ثُمَّ جَعَلْنَاهُ نُطْفَةً فِي قَرَارٍ مَّكِينٍ ثُمَّ خَلَقْنَا النَّطْفَةَ عَلَقَةً فَخَلَقْنَا الْعَلَقَةَ مُضْغَةً فَخَلَقْنَا الْمُضْغَةَ عِظْمًا فَكَسَوْنَا الْعِظْمَ لَحْمًا ثُمَّ أَنشَأْنَاهُ خَلْقًا آخَرَ ۚ فَتَبَارَكَ اللَّهُ أَحْسَنُ الْخَالِقِينَ

English Translation

Man, We did create from a quintessence (of clay); Then We placed him as (a drop of) sperm in a place of rest, firmly fixed; Then We made the sperm into a clot of congealed blood; then of that clot We made a (fetus) lump; then we made out of that lump bones and clothed the bones with flesh; then we developed out of it another creature. So blessed be Allah, the best to create!

Verse 4:1

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ اتَّقُوا رَبَّكُمُ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ نَفْسٍ وَجِدَةٍ وَخَلَقَ مِنْهَا رَوْحَهَا وَبَثَّ مِنْهُمَا رِجَالًا كَثِيرًا وَنِسَاءً ۚ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ الَّذِي تَسَاءَلُونَ بِهِ وَالْأَرْحَامَ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَلَيْكُمْ رَقِيبًا

English Translation

mankind! reverence your Guardian-Lord, who created you from a single person, created, of like nature, His mate, and from them twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women;- reverence Allah, through whom ye demand your mutual (rights), and (reverence) the wombs (That bore you): for Allah ever watches over you.

6. The Story of Mary “Marriam” in the Qur’an

Verse 3:35

إِذْ قَالَتِ امْرَأَتُ عِمْرَانَ رَبِّ إِنِّي نَذَرْتُ لَكَ مَا فِي بَطْنِي مُحَرَّرًا فَتَقَبَّلْ مِنِّي إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ السَّمِيعُ الْعَلِيمُ

English Translation

Behold! a woman of 'Imran said: "O my Lord! I do dedicate unto Thee what is in my womb for Thy special service: So, accept this of me: For Thou hearest and knowest all things."

Verse 28:7-9

وَأَوْحَيْنَا إِلَىٰ أُمِّ مُوسَىٰ أَنْ أَرْضِعِيهِ فَإِذَا جُفِيَ عَلَيْهِ فَأَلْقِيهِ فِي الْيَمِّ وَلَا تَخَافِي وَلَا تَحْزَنِي إِنَّا رَادُّوهُ إِلَيْكِ وَجَاعِلُوهُ مِنَ الْمُرْسَلِينَ فَاَلْتَقَطَهُ آلُ فِرْعَوْنَ لِيَكُونَ لَهُمْ عَدُوًّا وَحَزَنًا إِنَّ فِرْعَوْنَ وَهَمُّنَ وَجُنُودَهُمَا كَانُوا خَاطِبِينَ وَقَالَتِ امْرَأَتُ فِرْعَوْنَ قُرْثُ غَيْرَ لِي وَلَكَ لَا تَقْلُوهُ عَسَىٰ أَنْ يَنْفَعَنَا أَوْ نَتَّخِذَهُ وَلَدًا وَهُمْ لَا يَشْعُرُونَ

English Translation

So, We sent this inspiration to the mother of Moses: "Suckle (thy child), but when thou hast fears about him, cast him into the river, but fear not nor grieve for We shall restore him to thee, and We shall make him one of Our messengers." Then the people of Pharaoh picked him up (from the river): (It was intended) that (Moses) should be to them an adversary and a cause of sorrow: for Pharaoh and Haman and (all) their hosts were men of sin. The wife of Pharaoh said: "(Here is) joy of the eye, for me and for thee: slay him not. It may be that he will be use to us, or we may adopt him as a son." And they perceived not (what they were doing)!

Verse 66:11

وَضَرَبَ اللَّهُ مَثَلًا لِلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا امْرَأَتِ فِرْعَوْنَ إِذْ قَالَتْ رَبِّ ابْنِ لِي عِنْدَكَ بَيْتًا فِي الْجَنَّةِ وَنَجِّنِي مِنَ فِرْعَوْنَ وَعَمَلِهِ وَنَجِّنِي مِنَ الْقَوْمِ الظَّالِمِينَ

English Translation

And Allah sets forth, as an example to those who believe the wife of Pharaoh: Behold she said: "O my Lord! Build for me, in nearness to Thee, a mansion in the Garden, and save me from Pharaoh and his doings, and save me from those that do wrong";

7. Creation/ Equality

Verse 7:189

هُوَ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ نَفْسٍ وَاحِدَةٍ وَجَعَلَ مِنْهَا زَوْجَهَا لِيَسْكُنَ إِلَيْهَا فَلَمَّا تَغَشَّاهَا حَمَلَتْ حَمْلًا خَفِيًّا فَمَرَّتْ بِهِ فَلَمَّا أَثْقَلَتْ دَعَوَا اللَّهَ رَبَّهُمَا لَئِنْ ءَاتَيْتِنَا صُلْحًا لَنَكُونَنَّ مِنَ الشَّاكِرِينَ

English Translation

It is He Who created you from a single person, and made his mate of like nature, in order that he might dwell with her (in love). When they are united, she bears a light burden and

carries it about (unnoticed). When she grows heavy, they both pray to Allah their Lord, (saying): "If Thou givest us a goodly child, we vow we shall (ever) be grateful."

Verse 9:71

وَالْمُؤْمِنُونَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتُ بَعْضُهُمْ أَوْلِيَاءُ بَعْضٍ يَأْمُرُونَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَيَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَيُقِيمُونَ الصَّلَاةَ وَيُؤْتُونَ الزَّكَاةَ وَيُطِيعُونَ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ أُولَئِكَ سَيَرْحَمُهُمُ اللَّهُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ

English Translation

Believing men and believing women are supporters and protectors of one another: They enjoin goodness and forbid evil; They establish prayer and give charity; They obey Allah and His Messenger. Allah will shower mercy upon them. Truly, God is Mighty, Wise.

Verse 2:36

فَازْلِهَما الشَّيْطَانُ عَنْهَا فَأَخْرَجَهُمَا مِمَّا كَانَا فِيهِ وَقُلْنَا اهْبِطُوا بَعْضُكُمْ لِبَعْضٍ عَدُوٌّ وَلَكُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ مُسْتَقَرٌّ وَمَتَعٌ إِلَى حِينٍ

English Translation

Then did Satan make them slip from the (garden) and get them out of the state (of felicity) in which they had been. We said: "Get ye down, all (ye people), with enmity between yourselves. On earth will be your dwelling-place and your means of livelihood - for a time."

Verse 22:5

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِن كُنْتُمْ فِي رَيْبٍ مِّنَ الْبَعْثِ فَإِنَّا خَلَقْنَاهُ مِن تَرَابٍ ثُمَّ مِنْ نُطْفَةٍ ثُمَّ مِنْ عَلَقَةٍ ثُمَّ مِنْ مُّضْغَةٍ مُّخَلَّقَةٍ وَغَيْرِ مُخَلَّقَةٍ لِّنَبِّئَنَّكُمْ لَكُمْ وَنَقَرُ فِي الْأَرْحَامِ مَا نَشَاءُ إِلَىٰ أَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى ثُمَّ نُخْرِجُكُمْ طِفْلًا ثُمَّ لِتَبْلُغُوا أَشُدَّكُمْ وَمِنْكُمْ مَّن يُّتَوَفَّىٰ وَمِنْكُمْ مَّن يُرَدُّ إِلَىٰ أَرْذَلِ الْعُمُرِ لِكَيْلَا يَعْلَمَ مِن بَعْدِ عِلْمٍ شَيْئًا وَتَرَى الْأَرْضَ هَامِدَةً فَإِذَا أَنزَلْنَا عَلَيْهَا الْمَاءَ اهْتَزَّتْ وَرَبَتْ وَأَنْبَتَتْ مِن كُلِّ زَوْجٍ بَهِيجٍ

English Translation

mankind! if ye have a doubt about the Resurrection, (consider) that We created you out of dust, then out of sperm, then out of a leech-like clot, then out of a morsel of flesh, partly formed and partly unformed, in order that We may manifest (our power) to you; and We cause whom We will to rest in the wombs for an appointed term, then do We bring you out as babes, then (foster you) that ye may reach your age of full strength; and some of you are called to die, and some are sent back to the feeblest old age, so that they know nothing after having known (much), and (further), thou seest the earth barren and lifeless, but when We pour down rain on it, it is stirred (to life), it swells, and it puts forth every kind of beautiful growth (in pairs).

Verse 33:35

إِنَّ الْمُسْلِمِينَ وَالْمُسْلِمَاتِ وَالْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتِ وَالْقَنَاتِ وَالْقَنَاتِ وَالصَّادِقِينَ وَالصَّادِقَاتِ وَالصَّابِرِينَ وَالصَّابِرَاتِ وَالْخَاشِعِينَ وَالْخَاشِعَاتِ وَالْمُتَصَدِّقِينَ وَالْمُتَصَدِّقَاتِ وَالصَّائِمِينَ وَالصَّائِمَاتِ وَالْحَافِظِينَ فُرُوجَهُمْ وَالْحَافِظَاتِ وَالذَّاكِرِينَ اللَّهَ كَثِيرًا وَالذَّاكِرَاتِ أَعَدَّ اللَّهُ لَهُمْ مَغْفِرَةً وَأَجْرًا عَظِيمًا

English Translation

For Muslim men and women,- for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in Charity, for men and women who fast (and deny themselves), for men and women who guard their

chastity, and for men and women who engage much in Allah's praise,- for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward.

Verse 49:13

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا ۚ إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتَقْوَاهُ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ

English Translation

mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other)). Verily the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things).

Verse 3:195

فَأَسْتَجِبْ لَهُمْ رَبُّهُمْ أَيْ لَا أَعْصِي عَمَلٍ مِنْكُمْ مَنْ ذَكَرَ أَوْ أُنْثَىٰ تَبِعُكُمْ مِنْ بَعْضِ الَّذِينَ هَاجَرُوا وَأُخْرِجُوا مِنْ دِيَارِهِمْ وَأُودُوا فِي سَبِيلِي وَقُتِلُوا وَقُتِلُوا لَا تُكْفِرَنَّ عَنْهُمْ سَيِّئَاتِهِمْ وَلَا تَدْخُلْنَهُمْ جَنَّتٍ تَجْرَىٰ مِنْ تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ نَوَافِلًا مِنْ عِنْدِ اللَّهِ ۖ وَاللَّهُ عِنْدَهُ حُسْنُ الثَّوَابِ

English Translation

And their Lord hath accepted of them, and answered them: "Never will I suffer to be lost the work of any of you, be he male or female: Ye are members, one of another: Those who have left their homes, or been driven out therefrom, or suffered harm in My Cause, or fought or been slain,- verily, I will blot out from them their iniquities, and admit them into Gardens with rivers flowing beneath;- A reward from the presence of Allah, and from His presence is the best of rewards."

Verse 33:36

وَمَا كَانَ لِمُؤْمِنٍ وَلَا لِمُؤْمِنَةٍ إِذَا قَضَىٰ اللَّهُ وَرَسُولُهُ أَمْرًا أَنْ يَكُونَ لَهُمُ الْخِيَرَةُ مِنْ أَمْرِهِمْ ۗ وَمَنْ يَعْصِ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ فَقَدْ ضَلَّ ضَلَالًا مُبِينًا

English Translation

It is not fitting for a Believer, man or woman, when a matter has been decided by Allah and His Messenger to have any option about their decision: if anyone disobeys Allah and His Messenger, he is indeed on a clearly wrong Path.

Verse 74:38

كُلُّ نَفْسٍ بِمَا كَسَبَتْ رَهِينَةٌ

English Translation

Every soul will be (held) in pledge for its deeds.