Fatḥiyyah al-ʿAssāl and the Tradition of Women's Writing in Egypt:

The Thematic and Stylistic Impacts of Gender on Her Autobiographical and Dramatic Works

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ABSTRACT

This thesis contends that Egyptian author Fatḥiyyah al-ʿAssāl's dramatic and autobiographical corpus exhibits several key factors of style and content which firmly situate her works within a distinct tradition of Egyptian women's writing. I argue that four factors are indicative of this female canon: the prominent use of dialect, the tendency towards non-linear narratives patterns, a radical strategy of female character empowerment through the use of polyphony and a commitment to addressing issues of gendered injustices. Moreover, I posit that each of these literary techniques result from the marginalization of female Egyptian authors, rather than from any inherent female qualities.

ABSTRAIT

Cette thèse soutient que le corpus dramatique et autobiographique de l'auteure égyptienne Fatḥiyyah al-ʿAssāl présente plusieurs facteurs clés de style et de contenu qui situent fermement ses œuvres dans une tradition distincte de l'écriture des femmes égyptiennes. Je soutiens que quatre facteurs sont révélateurs de cette canon femelle: l'utilisation de dialecte, la tendance vers des récits non linéaires modèles, une stratégie radicale de l'autonomisation de personnage féminin grâce à l'utilisation de la polyphonie, et un engagement à aborder les questions d'injustices sexospécifiques. De plus, je pose que chacune de ces techniques littéraires résultent de la marginalisation des auteurs égyptiens femmes, plutôt que de tout des qualités féminines inhérents.

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A NOTE ON TRANSLATION

All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted. This was necessary as none of Fatḥiyyah al-ʿAssāl's works have been translated into English, with the notable exception of her short World Theatre Day address in 2004 from which I quote the English translation provided on the International Theatre Institute's webpage. For translation purposes I used Martin Hinds and El-Said Badawi's *A Dictionary of Egyptian Arabic: Arabic-English* for Egyptian colloquial Arabic and Hans Wehr's *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic: Arabic-English* for formal Arabic. English translations of Arabic titles are indicated by the use of square brackets immediately after the Arabic citation. For transliterations of Arabic words and names into Latin characters I used the International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES) system. I stray from this only in transliterating Egyptian Arabic according to Egyptian pronunciation, hence "Sign al-Nisāʾ" not "Sijn al-Nisāʾ" as in formal Arabic.

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I. Introduction

In this study I investigate the significance of gender in the stylistic and thematic elements of the autobiographical and dramatic works of Egyptian author Fatḥiyyah al-ʿAssāl. It is evident from al-ʿAssāl's writing that she finds the question of women's gendered experience in Egypt compelling; by the diversity of difficult situations experienced by Egyptian women of all classes, backgrounds and creeds; by the similarity of the patriarchal methods used to try to place limits on these women's strength, creativity, intelligence and energy; and by the many strategies by which women successfully negotiate these perilous social situations in order to preserve their integrity, to maintain their dignity, to assert their individual and communal identities, and to achieve their goals. As tragic as many of the fictional and non-fiction stories of women's experiences al-ʿAssāl recounts are, there remains a steady pulse of inner strength throughout all of them which is inspiring, celebratory, and ultimately, hopeful.

I will argue that the structure and content of al-ʿAssāl's autobiography *Ḥuḍn al-ʿUmr* [The Womb of Life] and her most notable play "Sign al-Nisāʾ" [The Women's Prison] place her within a distinct tradition of Egyptian women writers who share similar literary techniques, themes and gender justice aims. The literary canon is overwhelmingly male-dominated in virtually every culture's literary tradition. There is a contentious debate among literary critics, especially in Egypt, over whether or not women's writing constitutes a distinct tradition vis-à-vis the literature produced by men. I explore this discussion in the context of Egyptian literature specifically by investigating how Fatḥiyyah al-ʿAssāl and other Egyptian women writers have reacted to this idea of female distinctiveness in literature, and whether their writings actually correspond to this claim.

In al-ʿAssāl's texts I discovered much evidence to confirm that her writing in both the

dramatic and autobiographical genres does exhibit characteristics which are reflective of literary trends and traits associated with other female Egyptian authors of the twentieth century. I demonstrate that the stylistic choices al-ʿAssāl makes in these works, combined with the recurring themes of gender injustice and contested womanhoods found in her characters and story-lines, resonate with specific narrative and linguistic strategies associated with women in Arabic literature, thereby acting to subvert male literary dominance and patriarchal generic norms. These strategies include the choice of dialect over formal Arabic, the employment of circular narrative strategies, and the use of polyphonic dialogue as a tool to encourage character empowerment through self-representation.

I contend that there is a no inherent 'femaleness' in every woman's writing; rather, that the particular experience of living as a woman is different than living as a man, and consequently those differing experiential realities are often reflected in a woman's and a man's writing (Zeidan 3; Elsadda, "Egypt" 101). An author's identity as a woman frequently impacts her writing techniques, not because of some kind of mystical or biologically driven and inherent femaleness that she channels into the work, but rather by imprinting her own experiences of marginalization resulting from living in a gendered society which dictates the limits of acceptable behaviour for women and men. Furthermore, I posit that women authors' experiences of marginalization and injustice can often sensitize them to other forms of injustice and frequently spurs them to fight not only for gender justice, but for the wider ideals of social justice for all.

Each of the attributes I assign to Egyptian women writers could individually be ascribed to any number of male Arabic writers. However, the distinctiveness of the tradition of Egyptian women's writing lies in the consistency of the recurrence of these features, their prominence, and the common impulses and gendered life experiences which drive female

authors towards selecting these particular literary modes of expression. As will be discussed in more detail below, the literary milieu in which Arab women authors' works are received and understood is certainly gendered. The fact that their works are judged according to gendered norms and expectations has an impact on their writing.

The literary characteristics of female marginalization that I identify in the works of al-ʿAssāl's are not unique to her and are not only present, but prominent, in literature composed by other Egyptian women writers. One of the most apparent of these features is the tendency for female writers to move away from writing in formal Arabic (*fuṣḥā*) and towards the use of their native Arabic dialects (sing. *ʿāmmiyyah*). This choice is heavy with gender and class connotations in that *fuṣḥā* symbolizes elitist social structures maintained through education and literary gatekeeping mechanisms controlled by proponents of patriarchy and capitalism, which consequently enshrine linguistic hierarchies that shore up traditional nodes of power. Many women writers do elect to write in *fuṣḥā*, perhaps in an effort to change the male-dominated Arabic literary canon from the inside out by first proving their worth and ability as writers in the prestige language. However, many female authors use *ʿāmmiyyah* to signal an affinity to the oral traditions maintained by women in the domestic sphere, and to validate the spoken tongue of the under-educated masses. It is this possible valence behind the choice of writing in dialect that this thesis will examine.

On the one hand, al-ʿAssāl's decision to write her plays in the colloquial appears to be merely part of a larger realist strategy and is not an uncommon tool in the dramatic sphere. On the other hand, I will argue that her choice consciously and simultaneously serves to generate respect for women's knowledge and oral practices as they are embodied in women's speech practices, and to give pride of place to the language mastered by the under-educated lower classes and by women of all classes, which has been mostly excluded from the Arabic

literary canon. Significantly, al-ʿAssāl also elected to write her autobiography in dialect, a highly unusual move. While many artists compose dramatic works in dialect, or use dialect for dialogue in fictional works composed in formal Arabic, autobiographies have largely remained within the purview of formal Arabic for writers of both sexes. Yet, Fatḥiyyah al-ʿAssāl's four volume autobiography *Ḥuḍn al-ʿUmr* is written almost completely in dialect, with only the first five pages of an eight hundred page work written in *fuṣḥā*.

In both her dramatic and autobiographical literature, al-ʿAssāl's use of dialect supports her use of dialogue as a means to embed within her works a circular narrative structure. This circularity incorporates frequent digressions that interrupt any kind of chronological linearity and introduce new topics or characters in a continual loop pattern which mimics the digressions of conversational speech. In this way her writing imitates not only the sounds, but the structures of natural speech. This aspect of her oeuvre aligns her work with a wider tradition of women's writing in Egypt and other countries in the Arab world. Scholars of women's autobiographies in Arabic have noted that women writers tend to reject the more traditional, canonical narrative form which consists of a chronological, linear narrative with a clear start at birth until the end at death or the present moment (Awadalla 444; al-Nowaihi 484-5). Instead, they favour non-linear narrative structures which may begin with a discussion of one subject, before transferring to consider a single or several related, but separate, subject(s) before returning to the first topic (Awadalla 444; al-Nowaihi 484-485).

This circular form of narrative is prominent in al-ʿAssāl's compositions. In her play "Sign al-Nisāʾ" numerous prisoners in the eponymous women's prison continually take the dialogue in different directions, just as sudden interventions by the prison's administration alter events midcourse. Linearity is perpetually disrupted. In her autobiography we find a similar narrative circularity which appears in the form of her constant recounting of other

women's stories, generally those of friends and family members, alongside her own. Indeed, she often interrupts her own story to do so. These digressions are frequently triggered when she undergoes a similar experience herself to what another woman she knows has experienced, thereby providing an experiential link between the two and forming a community of women with shared histories.

In terms of genre conventions, it may seem counterintuitive for stories of people other than the author-subject of an autobiography to appear so prominently. However, this is another characteristic which has long been associated with women's writing in Egypt and the Arab world: the clear tendency towards including numerous and diverse female characters and points of view in fiction and drama, and in the case of autobiographical writing, the de-emphasizing of the subject of the autobiography itself, instead laying equal focus on the women around the author (Golley 73; Matthes 69-87). This Bakhtinian polyphonic structure creates an autobiographical text which is more than just an exercise in self-writing, self-exoneration or self-reflection, but rather acts as a kind of radical, disruptive and subversive community history which "re-inscribes women's [un-documented] stories into Egypt's recent [textual] history" in a dignified and empowering way (Seymour-Jorn "New" 153).

The diversity of female perspectives included in Fatḥiyyah al-ʿAssāl's dramatic and autobiographical works is accompanied by a conspicuous propensity for allowing characters to speak for themselves. Even in her autobiography the omniscient narrative voice overseeing the review of events in her life is frequently relegated to the background. Instead, al-ʿAssāl shares memories from events in her life by portraying them, not through narrative or description, but by crafting mini-scenes which replicate in dialogue the important conversations which shaped her own personality. In this way all of the people in her memory become characters who speak for themselves in their own voices. Similarly, in her play "Sign

al-Nisāʾ" each of the wide cast of minor and major female characters participates in a kind of "community monologue" in which each character is given the chance to tell their own story in their own words of how and why they ended up in prison, while everyone else who is present listens in and responds empathetically. Hence, we do not learn through other characters the circumstances of any one prisoners' life, but rather that prisoner herself is given space to justify her own position and to define her own identity and womanhood.

The effect of this focus on dialogue and self-representation is one of radical character empowerment. Al-ʿAssāl's texts are thus polyphonic in the Baktinian sense that the "character and narrator exist on the same plane, the latter does not take precedence over the former but has equal rights to speak" (Vice 112). As Bakhtin scholar Sue Vice points out, a polyphonic work "is dialogic in form" and "is a democratic one, in which equality of utterance is central" and in which the author allows for "the autonomy of the characters' voices" (112). Of course, al-ʿAssāl as author remains the mediating force behind all of these scenes, yet her proclivity towards allowing characters to self-represent bespeaks a desire for an egalitarian form of storytelling. I argue this technique is a reaction to al-ʿAssāl's own experiences as a marginalized citizen and a peripheral writer engaging with a substantially male-dominated canon in a society which honours men's achievements disproportionately and has allowed male writers to represent women. Moreover, I propose that she is not alone in doing so and that attempts such as this one are a feature of the tradition of Egyptian women's literature.

As for the content of her works, the realistic representations of Egyptian women of various backgrounds who make up the cast of characters in her play "Sign al-Nisāʾ" [The Women's Prison] exhibit conspicuous parallels with the difficulties faced by 'real' women portrayed in her autobiography *Ḥuḍn al-ʿUmr* [The Womb of Life], that is, al-ʿAssāl herself

and her female friends, family and neighbours. This study will investigate the commonalities of theme and content in these two major works by focusing on representations of gender injustice[1] and identity shared by the 'real' characters in al-ʿAssāl's autobiography and the realistic characters depicted in "Sign al-Nisāʾ". Bodies, gender roles, social positions and generations become metaphorical and real prisons trapping women in al-ʿAssāl's writing, and thus the recurring symbolic trope of imprisonment will be used as the central frame for examining the gender justice theme in her works.

Within this theme of confinement al-ʿAssāl's broader activist goals becomes identifiable, most notably through her emphasis on the ways in which women subvert and resist patriarchal impositions on them. It is a goal which she shares with many other Egyptian and Arab women writers, that is, of bringing gender justice to the real world off the page and off-stage. This aim is evident from the content of her plays and their focus on women's struggles against the various social structures which limit them, and which are collectively symbolized by the motif of imprisonment. This activist undercurrent of al-ʿAssāl's writing is not unique; Egyptian women's literature continuously and unmistakably coalesces around a focus on the plight of socially, politically and economically marginalized groups, female and otherwise, along with a deep commitment to achieving social justice for these groups (Seymour-Jorn, *Cultural* 16).

This introductory chapter has sketched out the approach and arguments I will utilize throughout this thesis. A short summary of the rationale of pursuing this study is outlined in the section immediately below, followed by a delineation of the methodological basis from which I am working and a brief biography of Fatḥiyyah al-ʿAssāl. In the second chapter of

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1. Due to the contentious nature of the term 'feminism' in the history of the Arab world I use the more general term of 'gender justice' to describe the aims of those who agitate against the confines of a patriarchal society that disproportionately inflicts injustices against women based on their gender.

this work I untangle some of the complexities of gender politics in the literary sphere in Egypt, and I will examine how these politics create a climate in which female writers are marginalized. Chapter three outlines the politics of diglossia in Arabic literature and argues that writing in *ʿāmmiyyah* can be viewed as a radical gender and social justice statement aimed at validating spoken Egyptian Arabic as the language of women and the poor. The following chapter analyzes how the use of circular narratives and polyphony in al-ʿAssāl's and other Egyptian women's writings acts to support a platform of radical character empowerment that is driven by a desire for gender justice.

The fifth chapter engages in a close reading of Fatḥiyyah al-ʿAssāl's autobiography *Ḥuḍn al-ʿUmr* and her play "Sign al-Nisāʾ" to show how deeply ingrained the theme of gender justice for women is in her writing. To explore these themes further, I group the main gender justice topics in al-ʿAssāl's works under four thematic headings. The first of these categories, 'Female Bodies, Honour and Chastity,' documents the ways in which al-ʿAssāl's female characters deal with their communities' attempts to define women's bodies as vessels of familial honour and how this embodiment ends up trapping women. The second section, entitled 'Wife, Mother, Hesitant Writer,' examines Fatḥiyyah al-ʿAssāl's own ambivalence about the three roles she inhabits and argues that her position as a writer must constantly be redefined in relation to her roles as a wife and mother throughout *Ḥuḍn al-ʿUmr*. 'Prison Realities and Metaphors' is a section which illustrates the parallels al-ʿAssāl draws in "Sign al-Nisāʾ" between abusive husbands and the authoritarian state as two different, but linked, expressions of violence the patriarchal system inflicts on women.

The final category, 'Women Oppressing Women: Class and Generation,' surveys the divisive role class and generational differences play in female characters' lives in "Sign al-Nisāʾ". Upper class women are shown to exploit lower class women, both directly via

personal interactions and indirectly through a failure or refusal to use their increased social status and political power to agitate for change on behalf of more marginalized women. Moreover, older women are often depicted as front-line agents enforcing the rules of patriarchy on younger women, thereby complicating simplistic understandings of patriarchy as men oppressing women. The sixth and final chapter will conclude that al-ʿAssāl is a prototypical example and strong proof of the existence of a discrete and distinctive tradition of a women's writing in Egypt.

Rationale and Objective of Research

The objective of my research in the widest sense is to bring to light a neglected, though important, area of Arab women's writing. More specifically, I aim to illustrate the importance of Fatḥiyyah al-ʿAssāl's own contributions to Egyptian women's writing and to assert the necessity and validity of outlining a distinct body of Egyptian women's writing. Dearth is perhaps too generous a word to describe the appalling erasure of female Arab, let alone Egyptian, dramaturges in English language scholarship on Arabic literature. In the course of reviewing the literature in English, I discovered only four sources that even attest to the existence of plays written by Arab women, three of which only reference a handful of playwrights in a peripheral manner: Joseph T. Zeidan in a long footnote, Salma Khadra Jayyusi in a few lines about Samia Qazmouz Bakri, and Hoda Elsadda with a short section on Egyptian women playwrights (Elsadda, "Egypt" 147-49; Jayyusi ix-x; Selaiha and Enany *passim*; Zeidan 291).[2] Zeidan's short footnote in his book *Arab Women Novelists: The Formative Years and Beyond*, which mentions six female Arab playwrights (four of whom are Egyptian, including al-ʿAssāl) covers more ground in terms of exposing theatre produced by

2. Salih J. Altoma includes Nehad Gad's play in his bibliography *Modern Arabic Literature in Translation: A Companion*, but makes no mention of her or any other female authors in the main body of his text.

women than many scholars who devote an entire monograph to modern Arab or Egyptian theatre (291).

Only Nehad Selaiha and Sarah Enany's 2010 article "Women Playwrights of Egypt" deals in a serious and sustained manner with the works produced by two dozen of the most notable female Egyptian playwrights in the twentieth century. In contrast, the overwhelming majority of the main English-language sources for information on Arabic drama whisper not a syllable on women.[3] This focus on male dramaturges is consistent with translation practices for Arabic drama as well. Many of the most important pieces of theatre authored by male Arab writers has been translated into English, either individually or in anthologies. Several plays composed by canonical figures such as Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm have even had the distinction of being translated into English multiple times by different authors (Altoma 154). As for Arab women's plays, on the other hand, only six plays written by a total of four authors have been translated into English.[4]

With such a wide area so under-represented in English language sources, I felt the most direct way to begin addressing this lacuna was to select one of the most prominent female Arab dramatists and to focus on one of her theatrical works. I selected Fatḥiyyah al-ʿAssāl as the ideal candidate. My initial interest in her was sparked by the sheer length and breadth of her career in producing theatrical scripts for the theatre, television and radio.[5] In the course of my research I discovered al-ʿAssāl's autobiography and was compelled by the strong stylistic

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3. For example: Allen, *Arabic Literary Heritage*; Allen, *Introduction to Arabic Literature*; Badawi, *Early Arabic Drama*; Badawi, Introduction; Badawi, *Modern Arabic Drama in Egypt*; Badawi, *Short History*; Carlson; Jayyusi and Allen; Johnson-Davies; al-Raʿi; Starkey; Wahab.

4. Samia Qazmouz Bakri's *The Alley*; Nawal El Saadawi's *Twelve Women in a Cell, God Resigns at the Summit Meeting*, and *Isis*; Nehad Gad's *Adila and the Bus Stop*; Laila Soliman's *Egyptian Products*.

5. It should be noted that beyond the field of theatre studies, Lila Abu-Lughod's book *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt* references a half-dozen female writers of television serials, in which al-ʿAssāl's work features prominently.

and thematic links between these two genres of al-ʿAssāl's body of writings to include it as well. Literary studies of autobiographies written by Arab women is a much more developed field of scholarship in English than Arab women's theatre. Thus, this study also contributes to the small but significant body of literary scholarship in English on Arab women's autobiographies.

Methodology

As Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany and Nadine Naber point out, the notion of gender continues to be "a useful analytical category" for studying the reality of hierarchical human interactions, just as race and class continue to govern relations between people (xxv). Gender constructs are a social reality that impact the lives and restrict the identities of women and men. As will be outlined in the section on literary marginality below, women writers face severe obstacles to having their works circulated among readers and treated seriously by critics. For this reason, literature penned by women is often overlooked, ignored or denigrated. I share with other feminist literary critics the desire to bring women's writing from the margins to the centre by participating in a project of recovery and revision of the canon. My aim is to validate the importance of women's writing in Egypt through a process of "reevaluating and valorizing these very characteristics - triviality, simplicity, primacy of emotion, dailiness" which have led to much women's writing being dismissed as poor quality and lacking in literary merit (Booth, "Translator's xvii). I use the works of several prominent feminist theorists of Arab women's writing to show how gendered canonization practices have routinely excluded Arab women writers from consideration by arbiters of literary taste. In terms of more general literary theory, I draw heavily from Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "polyphony" to describe the egalitarian narrative strategies used by al-ʿAssāl and other Arab women writers.

It is also important to note that, although I generally rely on materials relating to Egyptian writers and Egypt's literary history, I sometimes use materials relating to the writers and literary traditions of other Arab nations. Although there are differences between Arab countries, a pan-Arab literary sphere and reading public does exist; literary innovations, developments and debates in one nation are soon echoed in others. As Richard Jacquemond writes, although "locally determined factors," especially local political situations, do distinctly mark national literatures in Arabic "Arab [literary] production should continue to be considered as a coherent whole" (13). Salma Khadra Jayyusi and Roger Allen similarly observe that "[c]ulture and literature in the Arab world have remained a pan-Arab involvement, and the unity of its literary output is instinctively recognized and upheld" (viii). This is the basis from which I justify drawing links between, for example, Palestinian women's autobiographies with those produced by women in Egypt.

In addition, I would like to make clear why I focus particularly on the links between al-ʿAssāl's writing and the works of Egyptian authors Salwā Bakr and Laṭīfah al-Zayyāt, and the Palestinian writer Fadwā Tūqān. There are solid reasons for selecting these three from the many other female Arab and Egyptian writers I could have chosen as being representative of Arab and Egyptian women's writing. Firstly, the similarity between Bakr and al-ʿAssāl's writing strategies is so striking that engaging in comparison between the two was necessary. As for al-Zayyāt and Tūqān, they are both mentioned in al-ʿAssāl's autobiography as being influential figures in her life; al-ʿAssāl states at the beginning of *Ḥuḍn al-ʿUmr* that Tūqān's memoirs were a model for her own (*Ḥuḍn* 1: 6), and she writes later in the book that she feels like a daughter to Laṭīfah al-Zayyāt and that they are very close friends *(Ḥuḍn* 2: 79).[6] In ad-

6. As all four volumes of *Ḥuḍn al-ʿUmr* have the same title, I include the volume and the page number in citations from those works. For example, a citation from page six of volume one is (1: 6).

dition to these explicit links, there are many commonalities in writing style and substance in the writings of al-ʿAssāl, al-Zayyāt and Tūqān.

Biographical Sketch of the Artist

Fatḥiyyah al-ʿAssāl was born in Cairo in 1933 into a conservative family (Reda-Mekdashi 359). From the time she reached puberty at the age of ten until she was married at age seventeen, al-ʿAssāl struggled under the oppressive patriarchal values espoused by her father and her brothers; she was pulled out of school following her first menstruation, she was subsequently forced to remain in seclusion at home, only being allowed out under strict supervision, and she was compelled to undergo genital mutilation (N.A., "Fathia El Assal"; Selaiha, "Blood"). Her family members kept her under constant watch while she was "rigorously coached in the rituals of female obedience" (Selaiha, "Blood"). However, as her autobiography shows, the young al-ʿAssāl resisted these confining practices by continuing to teach herself how to read and write at home.

Her early experiences of gender injustice on the home front deeply informed al-ʿAssāl's later personal and artistic path. She rejected two suitors presented by her family, instead opting to marry the man of her own choosing, ʿAbdāllah al-Ṭūkhī, in 1950 (al-ʿAssāl, *Ḥuḍn* 1: 223). A law student at Cairo University at the time, she had met him without the knowledge of her family but managed to convince them to allow her to marry him. Al-Ṭūkhī was already a strong activist for social justice and encouraged his wife to attend lectures at the university as an unregistered student, to continue her education and to pursue her writing aspirations (N.A., "Fathia El Assal"; Selaiha, "Blood"). Al-Ṭūkhī later became a writer, journalist and political activist, as did al-ʿAssāl, and both were eventually imprisoned under Sādāt for their leftist political activities (N.A., "Fathia El Assal"; Selaiha, "Blood").

Al-ʿAssāl began a long career in writing radio and television dramas from the late

1950s onward (Selaiha and Enany 630). Although she received little formal education, she had audited several classes at the Screenplay Institute, going on to write over 120 radio dramas from 1957 to 1967, after which she switched over to writing television screenplays (Reda-Mekdashi 359; N.A., "Fathia El Assal"). Al-ʿAssāl has produced scripts for almost 60 television serials, and won a prize for her screenplay "Hiya wa-l-Mustahīl" [She and the Impossible] (Reda-Mekdashi 359). Lila Abu-Lughod highlights al-ʿAssāl's work in her anthropological study of television serials in Egypt *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt* and mentions that she is "one of only a handful of women of her generation writing television dramas in Egypt" (35). She describes her as a "vibrant and self-confident writer" whose televisions serials "were known for their social concerns" and because they displayed her position that "women's issues were critical" (35). Abu-Lughod further asserts that al-ʿAssāl embeds within her television dramas messages of "universally applicable revolutionary alternative[s] to enhance women's status and lives" (37). As an example of this Abu-Lughod cites al-ʿAssāl's serial "ʾUmmahāt fī Bayt al-Ḥubb" [Mothers in the House of Love] in which a group of elderly ladies living in a retirement home for women resist a businessman's plan to demolish their home to build a high-rise apartment building, and win (34-37).

Al-ʿAssāl wrote eight plays which were all published independently, while five were collected and republished in 2007 under the title *Makhtarāt min Mawʾlifāt Fatḥiyyah Al-ʿAssāl: al-Margīḥah, Bilā Āqnaʿah, Sign al-Nisāʾ, Laylat al-Ḥinnah, al-Khursāʾ* [Selected Works of the Author Fatḥiyyah al-ʿAssāl: The Swing, Without Masks, Women's Prison, Henna Night, The Mute]. Her first play, "al-Margīḥah" [The Swing], was staged in 1969 (Selaiha and Enany 630), although it was not published until her collected works came out in 2007. Following this, her play "al-Bāsbūr" [The Passport] was performed in 1972 (Selaiha and Enany 630-1), although it too was not published until much later in 1997 under the title

“Jawāz Safar” [The Passport] (Reda-Mekdashi 359). Al-ʿAssāl’s third play, titled “Lām, Alif, Hamzah, Lāʾ” [N. o. No.], was written in 1972 but not published until 2002 (Selaiha, “Of Silence”). These first three plays were “traditional, realistic social comedies about marriage and family relationships” which acted as springboards from which she developed her craft (Selaiha and Enany 631).

In her later plays al-ʿAssāl’s social justice aims come to the fore, “leading her to experiment with forms in search of a suitable dramatic mode to accommodate such views without descending into sloganeering” (Selaiha and Enany 631). This next phase produced her piece “al-Khursāʾ” [The Mute], which she wrote in 1972, and “Nisāʾ Bilā Āqnaʿah” [Women Without Masks], which was composed in 1975 (Selaiha and Enany 632). However, she was unable to get either of these works published or staged during the Sādāt era because of censorship issues (Selaiha and Enany 632). They were both finally published in 1981 (Selaiha and Enany 632; Reda-Mekdashi 359). “Al-Khursāʾ” addressed many serious social issues in Egypt, such as corruption, unemployment, police brutality, religious fundamentalism, and drug use (Selaiha and Enany 632). The play’s critical look on Egyptian society is still compelling for audiences as it was restaged as recently as 2003 (N.A., “Fathia El Assal”).

“Nisāʾ Bilā Āqnaʿah” represented a significant development in al-ʿAssāl’s writing as it was in this play that she first experimented with the “untraditional form” of several interlinked monologues that figures so greatly in her later masterpiece “Sign al-Nisāʾ” (Selaiha and Enany 632). This play was also the first of hers to address women’s issues aggressively by showing “such taboo subjects as female sexuality, the psychological trauma and disastrous long-term effects of female genital mutilation, legitimized rape within marriage and wife beating” and she was the first playwright to depict such domestic violence

onstage in the Arab world (Selaiha and Enany 632). The "play's daring content" led to a "bitter fight with the censor" and was only performed in 1982 as "Bilā Āqnaʿah" [Without Masks] after the word "women" had been bowdlerized from the title, presumably to lessen the gender justice message of the work (Selaiha and Enany 632-3). This was not the only occasion she faced censorship of her writing; many television serials she wrote were subsequently cancelled by government censors or aborted in the planning stage (Abu-Lughod 35).

Fatḥiyyah al-ʿAssāl's next play, "Al Bayn Bayn" [Betwixt and Between][7], was published in 1989 and dealt again with the oppression of women in terms of being "part of a complex web of interrelated sociopolitical, economic, and ideological forces" (Selaiha and Enany 633). Selaiha and Enany describe it as an "expressionistic piece with an element of fantasy" which documents the slow corruption of an honest clerk in a factory who finally commits suicide in despair at how far he has betrayed his principles (633-4). This play has been staged twice, first in 1998 and later in 2005 (Selaiha and Enany 634; Selaiha, "Look").

Between 1982 and 1989 al-ʿAssāl composed her magnum opus "Sign al-Nisāʾ" [The Women's Prison], which was published in 1993 and first performed in 1994 (Selaiha and Enany 634). A television production of "Sign al-Nisāʾ" was produced and broadcast in Egypt during Ramadan in June and July of 2014 **(**N.A., "Musalsal"). The author's time in prison in 1982 deeply informed her writing of this play, and she even used some of the real life stories of her fellow prisoners in it (Selaiha and Enany 634). This play will be examined in detail below. Al-ʿAssāl's most recent play, "Laylat al-Ḥinnah" [Henna Night], centres around the trials of a Palestinian family living under Israeli occupation (Selaiha, "Blood"). It was first published in her collected works in 2007, although it had already been presented live on stage

7. I use Nehad Selaiha's translation of the title.

for a month in Egypt in 2005 before being recorded and broadcast on television stations across the Arab world (Selaiha, “Blood”).

As the above biographical sketch shows, al-ʿAssāl had produced a wide-ranging corpus of dramatic works and has been an influential force on the airwaves, the stage, and the screen for over fifty years. Several of her plays have been translated into French, Finnish and Russian (Reda-Mekdashi 359). She has received numerous prizes for her theatrical contributions in Egypt and abroad (Reda-Mekdashi 359). Most notably, al-ʿAssāl was selected by the International Theatre Institute for the honour of writing the 2004 World Theatre Day address (Selaiha and Enany 634). She was the first Arab woman and only the second Arab dramaturge to have done so, after the Syrian Saʿadallah Wannūs in 1996 (N.A.,“Fathia El Assal”). In 2002 and 2003 she crowned her long life of literary achievements with the publication of her four-volume autobiography *Ḥuḍn al-ʿUmr* [The Womb of Life].

Dramatic writing in its various forms has offered Fatḥiyyah al-ʿAssāl “an effective public forum from which to disseminate her political ideals [and to fight what she calls] “the twin devils of capitalism and patriarchy” (Selaiha, “Blood”). However, her commitment to achieving social justice has not been limited to literature alone. She has been politically active throughout her life and ran for public office on two occasions under the al-Tajammuʿ (National Progressive Unionist) party in the economically disadvantaged riding of al-Sayyidah Zaynab in central Cairo (Selaiha, “Blood”). Abu-Lughod notes that her platform when running for office was “secular nationalist, antiterrorist, and in support of the rights of women and the downtrodden, especially workers and artisans” (230). Although she never won a seat in the People’s Assembly, she has continued to be deeply involved in the party’s social justice goals, having served on the main secretariat, as well as on the party’s secretariat

of artists (Reda-Mekdashi 359). Nehad Selaiha writes that Fatḥiyyah al-ʿAssāl "is known all over the Arab world for her many public stands and passionate tirades in defence of the poor and downtrodden" ("Blood").

Additionally, al-ʿAssāl has been a major player in the arts community in Egypt for decades; she is a member of numerous unions for artists, such as the Filmmakers' Syndicate, and is a member of the Committee to Defend National Culture (Reda-Mekdashi 359). Her gender justice aims are clear from her participation in numerous organizations representing women in the arts; she has served as a board member and is a past President of the Egyptian Women Writer's Union, and is a member of the Union of Progressive Women (Reda-Mekdashi 359; N.A.,"Fathia El Assal"). In addition, she is a member of the board of the Union of Egyptian Women Filmmakers/Cinematographers (N.A., "Fathia El Assal").

II. Gender and Literary Marginality

> Literary marginality is of course bound up in social and political marginalization. Women writers have had to fight their marginality - their marginalization - but they have also used marginality as a privileged position, one that widens their gaze and the modes of expression available to them. - Marilyn Booth[8]

In this section I will illustrate how the social, political, economic and literary marginalization of women in the Arab world affects the literary output of female Arab authors. As the epigraph above suggests, marginality is both a blessing and a curse for Arab women writers. I use the terms 'marginalization' and 'marginality' interchangeably and define them as describing the experience of a person who is excluded from the centres of economic, political and cultural power because of discrimination based on class or gender. Female writers in Egypt are generally marginalized because, as will be demonstrated below, they still experience gender-based discrimination in the literary sphere which affects the reception of their works. I will argue that this common experience of marginality is a key unifying feature which has produced some of the most prominent characteristics of Arab women's literature. The theory of gendered literary marginality that I will outline in this chapter will form the methodological basis on which I rest my later arguments that Fatḥiyyah al-ʿAssāl's dramatic and autobiographical works fit firmly within a continuing tradition of Arab and Egyptian women's literature.

Sasson Somekh defines the literary canon in Arabic as consisting of "those segments of the literary output that are regarded by the community as prestigious [and] commendable" (65). Conversely, non-canonical literary "works, authors or styles [are those] that are deemed

8. "Translator's" xi.

less worthy or less representative" of the societies they depict (Somekh 65). There are four primary mechanisms whereby literature is institutionalized and canons are formed: "the system of education; writers' groups (literary groups, literary salons and journals); publishers and booksellers; literary history and criticism" (Paré 18-19). In the Egyptian literary context, these forms of literary power and exclusion have deeply affected the reception of women's writing. In the case of Egypt, critical structures of cultural power and canonization, such as the Higher Council of Arts and Letters, are dominated by men and act to police and punish female writers by specifically targeting any aspects of female writing which deviates from the literary conventions of the male elite.

The very real marginalization of Arab women writers by the male literary establishment evidenced by the following examples produces a sense of distinctness among women writers from the common obstacles they share, the exclusion they suffer from mainstream literary circles and the ways in which they actively resist this marginalization. Overt debasement of women's writing is not a new phenomenon and has a long history in the Egyptian literary milieu of the twentieth century. Hoda Elsadda observes that "prejudice against literary women, manifested in critical endeavors to undermine their contribution, goes as far back as the reception of women's writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century" (*Gender, Nation* 152-3).

For example, in Egypt during the 1930's women writers, such as Suhayr al-Qalamāwī, were producing works that differed from that of their male colleagues in that they "offered a social critique [grounded in a] 'dailiness' that captures the everyday, supposedly trivial but in fact fundamental events that shape us" (Booth, "Translator's" xvii). In the introduction he wrote to her short story collection *Ahādīth Jaddatī* [My Grandmother's Tales] published in 1935, the great littérateur Ṭaha Ḥusayn patronizingly praised Suhayr al-Qalamāwī's work for

its “sweet ingenuousness” (Booth, “Translator’s” xvii). As Marilyn Booth aptly observes, “‘Feminine’ and ‘naive’ are equated” by Ḥusayn to the detriment of al-Qalamāwī and other female authors (“Translator’s” xvii). Women writers’ distinct focus on the private sphere and on mundane activities was used to discredit their writings, as it was taken to be proof that women were simply incapable of writing the great public sagas that men write (Booth, “Translator’s” xvii). Their concern with the quotidian was viewed by literary tastemakers as a natural and unavoidable limitation springing from their femininity, rather than a conscious choice or an artistic strategy (Booth, “Translator’s” xvii).

In addition to being denigrated for their supposedly limited domestic focus, Egyptian women writers have often had their innovations simply wiped from the critical record. In recent years debates over which book constitutes the first “true” novel in Arabic have abounded. Feminist literary scholar Bouthaina Shaaban has argued that there was a novel written in Arabic by a woman which preceded the 1914 novel *Zaynab* by the Egyptian Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal, which has long been considered the first novel written in Arabic (“Arab Women”). Shaaban contests *Zaynab*’s canonical status and instead offers the 1906 novel *Badīʿah wa Fūʾād* by Lebanese-American author ʿAfīfah Karam as the true holder of the title of the first Arabic novel (“Arab Women”).

This kind of critical blindness to women’s writing is also present in the dramatic sphere. A clear example of this is Jādhibiyyah (Gazibiya) Ṣidqī’s use of the metaphor of an apartment building to highlight the problems of class divisions in Egypt, which formed the symbolic backbone of her play “Sukkān al-ʿImārah” [The Building’s Inhabitants], which was staged at the National Theatre in 1955 (Selaiha and Enany 629). This metaphor came to be a recurring trope in many of the socially engaged Egyptian plays in the 1960s (Selaiha and Enany 629). However, it is the male Egyptian playwright Nuʿmān ʿĀshūr to whom critics have unfailingly

paid tribute to for having "invented" this powerful metaphor, even though his two plays which make extensive use of the image, "Al-Nās illi Taḥt" [The People Downstairs] and "Al-Nās illi Fawq" [The People Upstairs], were staged in 1956 and 1958, that is, one to three years after Ṣidqī's play (Selaiha and Enany 629).

A more recent example of literary criticism exhibiting a significant bias against female writers was the "girls write their bodies" controversy of the 1990s. Hoda Elsadda provides a detailed analysis of this episode in Egyptian literary history in her book *Gender, Nation and the Arabic Novel: Egypt, 1892-2008*. Elsadda locates the origin of the controversy in the collision of several factors, most notably a sudden upsurge in the number of new, young women writers appearing on the scene with innovative works of impressive quality, and a growing scholarly and popular interest in women's writing, both in Egypt and internationally (*Gender, Nation* 151). However, the increasing stature of women's writing elicited a severe and immediate reprisal from the male literary elite:

> There emerged a perception that there was an artificial prominence given to women writers, disadvantaging male writers and corrupting the cultural scene . . . The high profile of creative women's presence and visibility in the literary scene triggered an aggressive backlash, driven and orchestrated by gatekeepers troubled by the rapidly changing key players in the cultural field (151).

A hostile campaign was thereby inaugurated to "undermine the work of young women writers, by referring to their writing as "*kitabat al-banat* [girl's writing]," a campaign which was unprecedented in "the scale and intensity of the antagonism" directed towards female writers (151-3). The clearly patronizing and infantilizing effect of referring to women writers as "girls" was compounded by many male critics' use of the phrase "*al-banat yaktubna asjadhunna* [girls write their bodies]" to refer to this new group of prominent female authors (153). Elsadda contends that this phrase was harmful because it was:

> deliberately manipulated by some critics to suggest that women writers were at the forefront of the fight against conservatism and religious

> fundamentalism by openly challenging cultural taboos and writing explicitly about their bodies and their sexual relationships. This seemingly liberal attitude, however, was double-edged: while outwardly championing the "cause" of women by foregrounding the specificity of their voice and their experience, it became . . . synonymous with pornographic writing. Thus it effectively undermined the literary value of the writers in question (154).

This kind of objectification of women's writing by referring to it with demeaning titles that transfer focus from the writing itself to the sexualized female bodies that produced it was not unusual for the period; in 1987 Egyptian critic Maḥmud Fawzī published a collection of sixty Arab women writers' works under the title *The Literature of Long Nails* [Adab al-Aẓāfir al-Ṭawīlah] (Zeidan 232). All of this goes to show that critics reading women's writing under such disgraceful labels have "increased the burden on women writers to prove themselves" in a male-dominated literary field (Zeidan 232).

Caroline Seymour-Jorn recounts a telling anecdote of gendered literary criticism from her field research in Cairo in from 1991-2010 which illustrates the kind of pressure still put on women writers to select traditionally male content and structures for their writing if they wish to receive accolades from their male colleagues (*Cultural* xxxvi). Seymour-Jorn reports that in an interview she conducted with the prominent literary critic Ībrāhīm Fatḥī he stated that author Salwā Bakr's "focus on marginalized women . . . is part of a superficial social commentary that does not address more important issues such as the failing economy and lack of democracy in Egypt" (*Cultural* 15). Fatḥī easily dismisses Bakr's writing for dallying in the unimportant world of women's daily lives rather than focusing on the more consequential, male-dominated realms of commerce and politics. However, considering that the marginalized women she writes about are marginalized by political and economic forces, Fatḥī's attack on Bakr is illogical and reveals more about his own disinterest in the real social consequences of Egypt's economic and political malaise on the country's most marginalized

group: lower-class women.

Although the situation of discrimination by critics against women writers has somewhat improved in recent years, "there is still a great deal of prejudice, hardship, and restrictions with which women must contend" (Zeidan 232). The exclusionary tactics perpetuated by the male literary elite have had the effect of producing a self-conciously female literary tradition which exists on the margins of Egyptian literature and which simultaneously aims to redefine the values used to judge the merits of a work of literature by the centre. Many women writers do "not feel that critics [take] them seriously or that their male colleagues easily [engage] them in intellectual topics" (Seymour-Jorn, "View" 79). Moreover, writing in 2004 Seymour-Jorn asserts that despite the increased attention women writers have been receiving from "critics, publishers, television and radio producers, and even translators over the past ten to fifteen years" female authors in Egypt "still are not settled comfortably in the literary landscape, nor do they necessarily feel that they are accepted by society in general" ("View" 79). The sexual harassment in the literary sphere exhibited by these male critics contributes to some female writers' desire to disassociate themselves from any perceived tradition of women's writing in an attempt to have their work taken seriously.

Many contemporary Arab women writers' tendency to eschew the label "women's writing" is thus less reflective of whether or not these writers feel there is such a thing as a distinct women's tradition of writing, but rather is much more reflective of their presence in a hostile literary environment where the label itself implies not distinctiveness but deficiency; the assumption being that women's writing is limited to only dealing with women's issues, not universal human issues, and is therefore of lesser quality and significance (Elsadda, *Gender, Nation* 152; Seymour-Jorn, *Cultural* 15). Denial of the existence of the category of "women's writing," even by female writers themselves, stems from the fact that the term has

become pejorative and therefore by "emphasizing the female orientation of their works [female authors risk] dismissal by at least some important members of the literary establishment" (Seymour-Jorn, *Cultural* 15). It is for this reason that very few female Egyptian writers emphasize the impact of their gender on the structure and content of their craft, although most of them admit that women writers' perspectives on life differs from those of male writers (Seymour-Jorn, *Cultural* 15). Laṭīfah al-Zayyāt, for example, has stated that her initial rejection in the 1960s of the label "woman writer" was "a form of self-defense because critics had trivialized literature produced by women and excluded it from the literary heritage" (cooke 33).

Ironically then, female authors' peripheral position vis-à-vis the central, andocentric literary establishment both produces a sense of communal identity but also gives rise to a tendency to deny a distinctively female, peripheral voice in order to claim membership in the literary elite and to have their achievements acknowledged by the centre. Yet, by acknowledging their distinctiveness vis-à-vis the male elite many women writers in Egypt, including Fatḥiyyah al-ʿAssāl, have fought to de-centre the centre and have created an alternate literary sphere which recognizes their marginality and celebrates their participation in a discrete female tradition of writing.

Many authors claim affinity to this tradition by paying tribute to their "literary "foremothers"" and by explicitly linking their writings to those women who came before them (Badran and cooke, "Introduction" xliii). Egyptian women writers frequently engage in recollective practices that overtly link their writing practices with earlier female pioneers. As Marilyn Booth's book *May Her Likes Be Multiplied: Biography and Gender Politics in Egypt* documents, the practice of referencing and honouring the female writers who came before is widespread among female writers in Arabic, and has been since the late nineteenth century.

Al-ʿAssāl's autobiography is a paradigmatic example of this in that she explicitly references Fadwā Tūqān and Hudā Shaʿarāwī's autobiographies at the beginning of her own to justify her self-writing project (*Ḥuḍn* 1: 6/41). By doing so, she actively places *Ḥuḍn al-ʿUmr* within the genealogy of a distinctly female Arabic literary tradition.

Egyptian women writers have also resisted marginalization by creating alternative critical spaces and practices. Indeed, Joseph T. Zeidan links the beginning of a "distinct aesthetic" in women's writing with the collective action of women writers during the *Nahḍa* period, especially the founding of literary and gender justice-oriented journals which fostered a growing "sense of solidarity with their predecessors" and spurred the formulation of a consciousness of a distinct tradition of writing for and by women (5). These journals provided space for women writers to evaluate their peers' writing outside of the traditional literary centre using values they themselves define.

This phenomenon has continued up until the present, as there is "a growing tradition of Arab feminist literary criticism" characterized by "Arab women increasingly [writing] introductions to each other's writings as well as critical reviews on essays" (Badran and cooke, "Introduction" xliii). By writing introductions to each other's works they avoided having such demeaning prefaces as that written by Ṭaha Ḥusayn for Suhayr al-Qalamāwī, just as reviewing each others' works offers a counterpoint to dismissive male reviewers. Fatḥiyyah al-ʿAssāl's works inhabit this alternate, women-positive critical sphere, as evidenced by the introduction feminist theatre critic Nehad Selaiha wrote for her play "Sign al-Nisāʾ" in her collected works, along with the numerous reviews of al-ʿAssāl's works that Selaiha has published in Al-Ahrām newspaper. Indeed, Dr. Selaiha's critical mission to highlight the contributions of women dramaturges in Egypt, as exhibited in her article with Sarah Enany "Women Playwrights in Egypt" published in *Theatre Journal* in 2000, is a prime

example of the necessity of carving out this alternate, female sphere of literary criticism. In the dozens of anthologies, monographs, journal articles and critical studies in English that approach the subject of Arabic drama, her article stands alone in acknowledging, let alone seriously examining, the existence of a theatrical tradition in Arabic produced by creative women.

Unlike many of her fellow female writers in Egypt, al-ʿAssāl is vocal about her disgust with gender injustice, her desire to fight for gender justice for women and her own consciousness of marginalization as a woman writer. Her World Theatre Day address of 2004 acts as a kind of manifesto of her gender and social justice aims in writing. In it, she outlines how art can "help people to rise above themselves, to free themselves from their frustrations, from exploitation, and thus be able to gain a sense of dignity," and that it is the responsibility of playwrights to master their craft in order to purvey these messages by the most effective means to audiences (al-ʿAssāl, "2004" 1)[9]. From these more general social justice provisions, al-ʿAssāl then hones in on the issue of discrimination against women in the arts:

> They say that theatre is an art based on solid structures devoid of all superfluous trimmings, and that its dialogues should be firm, concise and far from any babbling. They also say that for this reason it is incompatible with the nature of woman, who is unable to dissociate herself from her ego, and consequently cannot express herself with objectivity. They say! To this I reply: [a] woman who can carry in her womb a new life during nine months is just as capable of creating a play that is solid and coherent (1).

In this statement al-ʿAssāl implies that not only are women intellectual and artistic equals to men but they are perhaps even more creative than men in that they possess the ultimate generative power: that of giving life itself.

Al-ʿAssāl continues the metaphor of birth to describe her own embodied creativity as a

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9. The following quotes are taken from the English translation of al-ʿAssāl's text which is provided on the World Theatre Day website. I was unable to access the original Arabic to verify the translation.

woman. Referring to her play "Women Without Masks," al-ʿAssāl writes that the play "began with a cry and a question, for I felt myself pregnant with words dating back tens, maybe even hundreds of years" (1). Here it seems she is referring to the historic exclusion of women writers from the Arabic literary canon. She goes on to say:

> Could it be that the time had come for the pains of labour strangling my innermost self to be releasing and projecting my words towards existence? My word! . . . my passion . . . my childhood . . . my child! I listen to its voice so remote from complaints, from sighs. A voice that was crushed and humiliated. A voice whose echos reverberated generation after generation. Conscience, in human history, bears the heavy weight of persecution and bondage (1).

The very genesis, then, of her impulse to write is to address the exclusion of female and other oppressed voices from the dominant discourse. Her commitment is amply demonstrated when she proceeds to declare, "I have refused to set down on paper a single phrase that did not emerge from my deepest soul. Not one line that did not express the truth about woman, and about her power of giving" (1).

III. Dialect and Orality

> The creative writer suffers from the repression of three restrictive regimes: religion, sex and politics. As far as the woman writer is concerned, the language is an added oppressor - the language which contains in its coffin the inherited male terms and expressions and which does not allow but a narrow margin to enable the woman writer to express her inner world as a female. - Salwā Bakr[10]

The oppressive and patriarchal language Salwā Bakr is referring to in the epigraph above is formal Arabic, or *fuṣḥā*. Arabic is a diglossic language;[11] *fuṣḥā* is the "high" Arabic register which is used predominantly for written communication and for oral communication in formal settings, while *ʿāmmiyyah* refers to "low" register, i.e. the colloquial Arabic varieties spoken across the Arab world in everyday conversation (Somekh 5). This chapter outlines the relative positions these two languages occupy in the literary sphere in Egypt, and examines how gender and class associations are tied to the use of both these languages. I then argue that Fatḥiyyah al-ʿAssāl's decision to write exclusively in *ʿāmmiyyah* is gendered and is part of a larger strategy of advocating for gender justice.

Fuṣḥā is a transnational language used across the Arab world as a kind of lingua franca for educated Arabs (Johnson-Davies vi; Manzalaoui 23; Radwan 4-5). Its roots lie in classical Arabic which is the codified version of a dialect of Arabic that was initially spoken by the Prophet Muḥammad and his Quraysh tribe in pre-Islamic Arabia, and that subsequently

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10. Quoted in Zeidan (314).

11. Some scholars have challenged the notion of diglossia in Arabic. For an in-depth discussion of this debate, see the "Diglossia and Dialect Groups in the Arab World" chapter in Reem Bassiouney's book *Arabic Sociolinguistics*. For the purposes of this thesis, I concur with Sasson Somekh's statement that the Arabic language exists in an "acute state of diglossia . . . in the realm of literature" (5), and continue to use diglossia as a concept because many authors writing in Arabic, including Fatḥiyyah al-ʿAssāl and Salwā Bakr, discuss their own use of the Arabic language in terms of a polarized diglossic context between *fuṣḥā* and *ʿāmmiyyah* (Seymour-Jorn, *Cultural* xxiii-xxiv).

became enshrined and codified as the most perfect form of Arabic, because it was the language of God's choice in which to reveal the Qurʾān to humanity (Johnson-Davies vi; Radwan 9). In the centuries that followed, this classical Arabic was first codified by grammarians, and then employed as the learned language of virtually all written communication, literature and scholarship between educated Arabs right up until the nineteenth century. Contemporary formal Arabic (*fuṣḥā*) is a simplified version of classical Arabic which was consciously developed in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century during the *Nahḍa* to adapt the Arabic language to the exigencies of new technologies, and to coin new political and scientific terminologies (Radwan 4-5/28-30).

Fuṣḥā persists as the written language of scholarship and newspapers, and as the spoken language for formal occasions, political rhetoric, religious sermons, and radio and TV newscasts across the Arab world (Somekh 8). This formal manifestation of Arabic is acquired through education, however it "is not the spoken or quotidian language of anyone, neither the uneducated nor the educated, in any of the Arabic speaking countries" (Radwan 5). Thus, learning to read the Arabic alphabet does not allow uneducated individuals to immediately shed their illiteracy because they must still learn the vocabulary, syntax and grammar rules of what is a closely related but still somewhat foreign language (Somekh 8). Hence, higher class individuals will generally speak, read, write and understand *fuṣḥā* better than their lower class compatriots (Somekh 8). In contrast to the pan-Arab homogeneity of formal Arabic, Arabic dialects are a picture of heterogeneity. Dialects differ from country to country, and within each country from region to region, from rural to urban populations, and from lower-class to upper-class speakers (Johnson-Davies vi; Radwan 201-2; Somekh 9). Unlike formal Arabic, which has no native speakers, every native speaker of Arabic speaks at least one colloquial, dialectal form of Arabic as their first language (Radwan 5; Somekh 8).

The distinction between high (*fuṣḥā*) and low (*ʿāmmiyyah*) Arabics has unmistakably shaped the history of Arabic literature. Where *fuṣḥā*'s semi-sacrosanct status is closely associated with education, erudition, intellectualism, religion, and it is considered the highest, most beautiful and most complex medium of expression for abstract ideas, *āmmiyyah* is generally viewed as being the unrefined language of the mundane and the commonplace communications of the everyday (Cachia 61; Somekh 5). From the time of the Prophet up until the nineteenth century almost all written literature in all genres in Arabic was composed in *fuṣḥā*, while literature written in *ʿāmmiyyah* existed in a minimal way and was limited to certain popular genres arising from the oral folk tradition: heroic romances, puppet and shadow plays, traditional songs, as well as four genres of poetry (*zajal*, *qūmā*, *kān wa-kān*, and *mawwāl*) (Cachia 59; Radwan 19; Somekh 4).

Much of the written literature in *ʿāmmiyyah* prior to the nineteenth century was anonymous and tended towards less elegant subjects, such as humour and bawdy tales (Cachia 60). This association of dialect with the profane meant that, prior to the nineteenth century, a work composed in the colloquial would be almost automatically dismissed as unimportant, unrefined and unliterary (Somekh 10). The hierarchical nature of the relationship between formal and dialectical Arabic during this early period was made clear in the statements of many scholars who arranged literary genres in a "descending scale according to the extent of their association with the literary idiom," i.e. those genres closely associated with formal Arabic at the top, other genres more frequently used for colloquial compositions at the bottom, and those few genres used for both in the middle (Cachia 59-60).

Over the course of the last two centuries, however, *ʿāmmiyyah* has made some slight inroads into the world of Arabic literature, despite the "near-religious reverence accorded to" *fuṣḥā* (Somekh 5). As Pierre Cachia puts it, literary works composed in Arabic vernaculars

have "gained a foothold in the theatre, and a toe-hold in the dialogue of the novel and short story" since the nineteenth century (66). The greater integration of dialects into these three genres (drama, novel and short story) was demanded by the generic conventions of realism, which has played such a large role in the development of those genres (Somekh 5). In addition, the generic demands of these new fictional forms required everyday language more than traditional genres because the new genres were by definition concerned with quotidian situations, and had developed techniques which necessitated the use of ordinary language, for example, the use of stream of consciousness writing to mimic how thoughts sound when flowing through a character's mind (Cachia 70; Somekh 5). As for the "toe-hold" Arabic dialects have gained in the novel and short story, it is largely confined to character dialogue while formal Arabic remains the dominant expressive vehicle for narrative passages (Somekh 25-9).

There are several factors at work to account for the "foothold" colloquial has attained in the realm of dramatic works, despite rigorous opposition from the literary establishment. As with fiction, realism has played a huge role in integrating the vernacular in Arabic theatre from the 1960s onward (Somekh 5; Starkey 187). Yet, Arab playwrights have continued to wrestle with the issue of writing realistic dialogue for plays in a diglossic literary context which generally denigrated the spoken language as being unworthy of literary reproduction. Many solutions were proposed and attempted, and almost all of them advocate for some use of *ʿāmmiyyah*, though to varying degrees. Some playwrights tried to simplify formal Arabic to bring it closer to the vernacular and coined this new hybrid "neo-classical" (Cachia 63-64). Others came up with more radical solutions; Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm even tried to create a "third language" which blended the two in such a way that the unvocalized text of the play could be read as either colloquial or formal Arabic, depending on how the vowels were placed (Somekh 40). Another author, Maḥmūd Taymūr, published his plays in two editions: one in

fuṣḥā for reading at home and one in *ʿāmmiyyah* for performance on stage (Cachia 68; Somekh 40). In fact, the only theatrical genres in which the unadulterated use of *fuṣḥā* seems to be accepted is for those whose subject matter is historical, mythical, philosophical or which feature an abstract theme (Somekh 41); in short, for those plays which do not attempt to portray contemporary life and conversations realistically.

A rather bizarre and unrealistic, but surprisingly commonplace, solution to diglossia in the Arabic theatre was to have higher class characters speak *fuṣḥā* while their lower class compatriots spoke in *ʿāmmiyyah* (Somekh 40). This technique was also used in fiction, for example in Muḥammad Haykal's novel *Zaynab*, in which formal Arabic is used for narrative but the dialogue is split between *ʿāmmiyyah* for lower class characters and *fuṣḥā* for higher class figures" (Booth, "Translator's" xxvi). The prevalence of this method in both fiction and drama demonstrates just how deeply entrenched the class connotations of formal and colloquial Arabic are.

In addition to concerns of authenticity and realism, the debate around the use of colloquial in literature has been affected by political concerns. Many of the political movements of the twentieth century influenced Arab authors' views on the use of *ʿāmmiyyah*. Pan-Arabists pushed for using *fuṣḥā* as a way to maintain ties with audiences in other Arab nations because writing in formal Arabic ensured that a play could travel from Morocco to Oman and be understood by all, or at least all who are educated (Cachia 72; Jayyusi and Allen vii-viii; Radwan 4-5; Somekh 26). Conversely, Egyptian nationalists advocated celebrating Egypt's unique culture and heritage by writing in *ʿāmmiyyah* (Cachia 72; Somekh 26). Many communists contended that adopting demotic Arabic as the dominant written medium was the best way to help ease the illiterate masses into literacy, rather than adding the burden of teaching the masses an entirely new language - *fuṣḥā* - with all of its complicated grammar in

addition to teaching them how to read the alphabet (Radwan 31). In this sense, writing in *ʿāmmiyyah* shows the author's special concern for making their literature accessible to the lower classes.

Although colloquial literature suffered in some quarters for its associations with the uneducated masses, this was also the source of its appeal to many class conscious writers. Advocates of the colloquial "criticized the classical language as incomprehensible to most Egyptians and the Arabic literary tradition as elitist and restricted to a small community of readers and writers" because of its dependence on *fuṣḥā* (Radwan 41). Writers who incorporate *ʿāmmiyya* into their work have often elected to do so precisely because of its association with the poor. Thematically, colloquial literature in Egypt deals more frequently and more in depth with issues facing the working poor than do works written purely in *fuṣḥā* (Radwan 56). Noha M. Radwan observes that "incorporating the colloquial in poetic expression accords it a stronger affiliation with the larger public, the majority of whom are illiterate or semiliterate" and that "its poetic appeal lies in the fact that it is the language that everyone, the educated as well as the uneducated, speak" and so it is "capable of representing the workers and the peasants in a language fashioned from their own idiom and from their own oral traditions" (201). This connection with the Egyptian oral tradition of "*sīras*, songs, lullabies, proverbs, or folktales" enhances the reading or listening audience's experience of *ʿāmmiyya* literature (Radwan 202). It is clear that, not only is the Egyptian dialect "quite capable of sophisticated and fulfilling literary expression" (Radwan 202), but that its use frequently acts as a marker of the writer's class consciousness and commitment to social justice.

Yet, proponents of *ʿāmmiyyah* have largely not succeeded in their efforts to have colloquial Egyptian recognized as an equally vibrant and viable literary language as *fuṣḥā*, and the colloquial remains marginalized and tainted by its past association with the common,

the uncultured and the irreverent (Jayyusi and Allen viii). The view that literary works composed in dialect are "sub-literary" is still quite widespread today (Somekh 26). Most writers who have elected to make extended use of colloquial Arabic have been stigmatized and have faced severe opposition from the literary establishment, including having their works barred from receiving awards, having awards stripped from them, being denied membership in literary societies, and having their works excluded from anthologies and school curriculums (Somekh 26). The Egyptian state has played a large role in this project of pushing colloquial literature to the margins in order to protect the canon of formal Arabic literature. "In its activities to define and impose norms and values for literature," Richard Jacquemond writes, "[the Egyptian state] directs, encourages, and remunerates through a whole set of institutions that work together in various ways to form the literary canon," such as the Higher Council for Arts and Letters, and through institutional appointments for intellectuals to university or government posts, a kind of "extra-literary" patronage (16).

Since the 1960s the Higher Council for Arts and Letters has "led a rear-guard struggle against the use of the spoken language in prose fiction" and poetry (Jacquemond 46). Colloquial literature was "considered [by members of the council] to be lacking in value, even as illegitimate, and [was] allowed into the canonical culture only if they have been domesticated or reified as "folklore"" (Jacquemond 10). Ṭaha Ḥusayn and ʿAbbās Maḥmūd al-ʿAqqād were two of the most vehement opponents who actively campaigned against writing in *ʿāmmiyya* (Radwan 30-1). These prominent intellectuals engaged in a campaign of "fierce opposition to the use of colloquial Arabic in literary expression" which they viewed "as a debased or corrupted tongue, to which they contrasted a supposedly 'pure' classical idiom" (Booth, "Translator's" xxv). Ḥusayn used his position as Minister of Education and his intellectual

capital as a popular writer to argue that the colloquial was not "a language fit for communication," let alone literary achievement (Radwan 30-1).

From 1956 until his death in 1964, al-ʿAqqād similarly used his position on the Higher Council of Arts and Letters as a platform from which to condemn *ʿāmmiyya* as being antithetical to literature (Radwan 30-1). Al-ʿAqqād threatened to resign from the council unless an award offered to Laṭīfah al-Zayyāt for her groundbreaking 1960 novel *The Open Door* [*Al-Bāb al-Maftūḥ*], which wove colloquial dialogue within a formal Arabic narrative structure, was retracted (Booth, "Translator's" xxviii). Following his statement, "the prize was withdrawn, on the basis that al-Zayyāt had been "immoderate in [her] use of the colloquial"" (Booth, "Translator's" xxviii).

Even today, using *ʿāmmiyya* in literary works remains a contentious issue and the critical apparatuses in Egypt continue to wage the war spearheaded by Ḥusayn and al-ʿAqqād in the 1960s. Some sporadic acknowledgement has been accorded to poets composing in the colloquial, such as Bayram al-Tūnisī and Ṣalāḥ Jāhīn, yet their works have largely been excluded by critical apparatuses and are not generally considered part of the canon (Somekh 67). Colloquial literature remains largely quarantined from *fuṣḥā* literature.

For example, the important literary magazine *al-Shʿir* [Poetry] did not publish or review any *ʿāmmiyya* poems until 1990 when it published a special issue dedicated to colloquial poetry in Egypt (Radwan 1). Following this, the magazine continued to only publish and review *fuṣḥā* poems, although occasionally it has devoted another special issue to poetry in *ʿāmmiyya* (Radwan 1). While acknowledging the existence of colloquial poetry, the publication practices of the magazine suggest that *ʿāmmiyya* poetry can only ever be considered a curious sub-genre on the fringes not in the same league as real, serious *fuṣḥā* poetry. *Fuṣḥā* remains the "basic medium of canonical literature" (Somekh 65). Writers who elect to write

partly or wholly in colloquial Egyptian are thus consciously choosing to take a more marginal path in the literary sphere.

Marilyn Booth has argued that al-Zayyāt was "privileging and interweaving two kinds of marginality, one social and one literary" in *The Open Door*, "the first, by putting a female perspective at the centre, within a context of family and community; the second, using everyday rather than literary diction" ("Translator's" xviii). This twofold marginality of gender and language was al-Zayyāt's radical answer to the patriarchal privileging of *fuṣḥā* as the only respectable mode of literary expression in Egypt. As the above shows, punitive methods have often been deployed by the patriarchal literary authorities to maintain the andocentric purity of the canon and to reject female linguistic innovation.

Al-Zayyāt was not the only female writer to use the Egyptian dialect as a tool to resist patriarchal literary norms. In addition, the writing of many of the so-called 1970s cohort of Egyptian women writers, including Salwā Bakr, was characterized by:

> privileging female experience through experimentation with narrative strategies; as generating unique visions of Egyptian society by experimenting with the diglossia and the dialects that exist in Arabic, and by echoing the language and images of the Egyptian oral narrative heritage (Seymour-Jorn, "View" 78).

The project of validating the oral traditions by writing in the spoken language is a project of recovery that many Egyptian women writers have participated in.

The connection between women, orality and the Egyptian dialect is a strong one. Women in Egypt make up a much higher percentage of illiterate citizens; a 2006 survey estimated that only a quarter of Egyptian men are illiterate, whereas nearly half of female Egyptians are unable to read and write (Seymour-Jorn, *Cultural* 9). The fact that such a large proportion of women are illiterate effectively bars them access to the prestige language and leaves dialect as the only language they speak fluently. As the discussion above has

demonstrated and as Mohja Kahf points out succintly, the diglossic situation of Arabic means that learning *fuṣḥā* is closely tied to education; hence women are at a disadvantage because of their "restricted access to education [which is] very much connected to gender" (157). It is perhaps for this reason, as linguist Mushira Eid maintains, that *ʿāmmiyya* is more strongly affiliated with women in the Arab world (Seymour-Jorn, *Cultural* xxiii). Indeed, the use of the most pithy and wise weapons of the Egyptian vernacular wielded in literature - proverbs - are often associated with illiterate peasant women (Radwan 46; Booth, "Translator's" xxvii; Seymour-Jorn, "View" 85).

The Egyptian dialect is a defining characteristic of al-ʿAssāl's writing oeuvre; all of her television, radio and theatrical productions were composed in dialect, as was her autobiography. Selaiha and Enany have observed that al-ʿAssāl accurately mimics the speech patterns and dialectical characteristics of her characters according to how women of each class would speak in real life (634). As is demonstrated above, *fuṣḥā* symbolizes elitist structures maintained through education and enshrined in patriarchal language, whereas the use of *ʿāmmiyyah* signals an affinity with the domestic orality of women and the under-educated masses. In this sense, al-ʿAssāl's choice to write in dialect can be interpreted as being distinctly gendered and class conscious.

Fatḥiyyah al-ʿAssāl's own life experiences show exactly how language and literature are gendered spheres in Egypt. Like many women in Egypt, she was blocked from accessing formal education early on in her life. Although she did audit classes at the post-secondary level later in life, as an unregistered student she was likely only permitted to attend lectures and did not have any of her writing graded. The long educational process of attaining written fluency in the prestige language, which would require having her writing corrected by someone more knowledgable about the grammatical rules and vocabulary of *fuṣḥā*, was probably blocked to her. However, she did not allow her relatively low level of education in

fuṣḥā to stop her from creating literature. Still desiring to participate in the literary sphere, she choose to write in the one genre in which the language she had mastered - *ʿāmmiyyah* - was somewhat accepted: theatre. The orality of *ʿāmmiyyah* in large part prevents it being recognized as a respectable literary language; yet, by writing in *ʿāmmiyyah* al-ʿAssāl highlights the rich expressiveness of dialect and celebrates its egalitarian function as the medium of speech of the common people, both men and women, and their everyday cares, concerns, heartbreaks and triumphs.

I am arguing that al-ʿAssāl's dedication to writing in dialect is a populist and a gender justice-oriented move that elevates and honours the common language by demonstrating its greater vitality vis-à-vis *fuṣḥā* and by making her works accessible to less-educated readers and audiences. Considering the difficulties writers face in having their work taken seriously if it is written in *ʿāmmiyyah*, combined with the marginality she already faces as a female writer, al-ʿAssāl's consistent choice to write in *ʿāmmiyyah* is audaciously subversive. In her memoirs *A Border Passage*, Egyptian intellectual Leila Ahmed rejected *fuṣḥā* as "the language of textuality [and] hegemonic masculinity" (Suleiman 96). Because of this, Zeidan rightly calls the choice by women writers to use dialect "a bold rebellion . . . [b]ecause [formal Arabic] is also a cornerstone of the patriarchal structure" (234) in which power is preserved through reserving education for the few, most of whom are men.

Al-ʿAssāl's own belief in the vivacious expressiveness of *ʿāmmiyyah* becomes clear in the first few pages of her autobiography. It must be noted that, while her decision to write her plays in dialect is not terribly unusual, her choice to compose her autobiography in *ʿāmmiyyah* breaks major generic conventions. These first three short chapters, comprising only five pages together, are the only ones in the entirety of the eight hundred pages of the four volumes that are written in *fuṣḥā*. In this short section, she explicitly addresses the issue

of language and rejects the idea of writing in *fuṣḥā* for this specific task because she feels that she lacks the ability to do so, even referring to her low level of education as her "backwardness" (al-ʿAssāl, *Ḥuḍn* 1: 11). Egyptian Arabic is the only language she has mastered every aspect of, and which she can write in with confidence. Al-ʿAssāl's decision to write in the Egyptian colloquial dialect is reflective then of the gendered discrimination she suffered growing up.

However, al-ʿAssāl is not simply victim to historical forces, but also an agent who crafts her own destiny. On the one hand, she considers herself inadequate and believes that she is at fault because she does not possess the appropriate educational capabilities to write eloquently in *fuṣḥā*. Perhaps she can write in formal Arabic in a basic way, as the introduction shows, but she still seems hesitant to use it as the primary medium of the book. On the other hand, it seems the deficiencies of formal Arabic itself are what prevents al-ʿAssāl using it alone for this composition. She finds fault with *fuṣḥā* itself as an inadequate medium to express her memories; she says that she feels *fuṣḥā* would not be able to express the "flood" of memories and feelings "boiling" inside her (al-ʿAssāl, *Ḥuḍn* 1: 11). In her own words she states that *fuṣḥā* is insufficient for her purpose, which is to express the raw and powerful emotions and events she has lived through with utter honesty. Thus, al-ʿAssāl criticizes the very elements that lends *fuṣḥā* its prestige: its formality and historical importance as a vehicle for educated discourse. Such a language may be sufficient for a legal treatise, but it is completely disarmed before the passions and disarray of real life. While acknowledging her low position in patriarchal society with seeming acquiescence, al-ʿAssāl simultaneously challenges androcentric literary norms through her choice to write in dialect.

The language politics at play in this transitional moment in *Ḥuḍn al-ʿUmr* between formal and dialectical Arabic reveal that formal Arabic is considered the normative choice for

the genre. The fact that al-ʿAssāl feels she must justify her choice implies that formal Arabic would be generally accepted as the ideal choice. By electing to write in dialect, she is consciously subverting the gendered linguistic norms of autobiographical writing in Arabic. While the slight tinge of shame in the passage seems to confirm the supremacy of *fuṣḥā*, al-ʿAssāl's statement simultaneously challenges the elevated status of formal Arabic. As Nadje al-Ali puts it, "authors' use of language generates the emphasis of specific values while criticizing and disrupting others" (10). In al-ʿAssāl's description *fuṣḥā* is like a wall that "stops" the "flood" of her creativity, whereas dialect is capable of communicating more directly the experiences of her life as she lived it. *ʿĀmmiyya* is the more appropriate choice for the genre of autobiography, as it "is the language in which everyone first expresses their joy, grief, pride, fear and love. It is, therefore, the most versatile and capable of reflecting these emotions" (Radwan 201). Writing in formal Arabic would require an act of translation to express these same emotions which would deaden them.

Another reason for al-ʿAssāl's selection of vernacular Egyptian over formal Arabic for her autobiography becomes evident throughout the remainder of the work. *Ḥuḍn al-ʿUmr* makes extensive use of dialogue in representing events and memories from al-ʿAssāl's life. Unlike most traditional self-writing, which consists of substantial narrative with no, or limited amounts of, dialogue, al-ʿAssāl's memoirs frequently forego narrative and instead rely solely on dialogue to portray events and conversations as they happened in real time. This is true even of incidents when she was not present and only had the information recounted to her by someone else. In this way her inscribed memories form a series of dramatic scenes very much akin to actual dramatic dialogues. Her experience writing scripts of dialogue for television and theatrical productions over several decades may have influenced her choice of form in composing her autobiography. Yet, by doing so she is also rewriting the genre of autobiography to suit her own needs and desires as a female writer to

portray her life as realistically as possible. Transferring this stylistic practice from her dramatic writings to the autobiographical genre allows her space to resist the confines of the normative narrative structures of the genre of autobiography.

IV. Circular Narratives

> [Women writers in Egypt have constructed an entirely different] structure and narrative rhythm . . . on the same traditional female social role . . . that of a preserver and renewer of community history through oral narrative.
> - Marilyn Booth[12]

Fatḥiyyah al-ʿAssāl and many other Arab women writers favour a form of circular storytelling that seamlessly integrates interruptions, digressions, and a great deal of branching out from the central narrative to other tales, times, places, and people. This propensity for an intricate, disrupted, and layered narrative which is constantly folding back in upon itself to create new meanings is characteristic of Egyptian women's natural conversational patterns. Just as writing literature in the Egyptian dialect can be viewed as an act of homage to everyday speech practices and to the oral tradition, so too do women writers use circular narrative structures to venerate the vernacular language structure as a compelling vehicle for artistic expression. By writing what is usually unwritten, they honour the millions who have shaped the Arabic language through their own creative speech practices, but whose words have not been enshrined in text.

Chronological Disruption

Al-ʿAssāl consciously exploits this traditional, circular narrative form, which replicates the circular structure of oral storytelling, in her plays and in her autobiography. In "Sign al-Nisāʾ" "the structure does not take the form of linear plot progression toward a climax . . . but proceeds, not unlike folk narratives, through calculated interruptions, digressions, and the accumulation of fragments that ultimately make up the whole and create a strong impact" (Selaiha and Enanay 634). Similarly, her memoirs are anything but linear. In fact, they are

12. "Translator's" xv.

more episodic than narrative, and the chronology of events is constantly being fractured and rearranged.

Magda M. al-Nowaihi identifies a similar circular narrative structure in Palestinian author Fadwā Tūqān's autobiography *Riḥlah Jabaliyyah* (*A Mountainous Journey*) in which:

> progress is rarely, if ever, "uninterrupted," and that often "going forward" involves making circuitous trips, meandering, stopping, and even temporarily going backward. Thus, the surface organization, an apparently linear and chronological ordering of events, is almost constantly interrupted and dislocated (485).

Here we must recall that al-ʿAssāl mentions Tūqān's book as an inspirational model when documenting her difficult decision to write her own autobiography. Egyptian author Laṭīfah al-Zayyāt is another woman al-ʿAssāl identifies as being one of her literary foremothers (*Ḥuḍn* 2: 79). Al-Zayyāt's autobiography *Ḥamlat Taftīsh: Awrāq Shakhṣiyyah* [*The Search: Personal Papers*] is similarly non-linear (Elsadda, *Gender, Nation* 107). Maggie Awadalla has commented on al-Zayyāt's unusual narrative structure in her memoirs. She notes that the lengths of the book's chapters are not uniform, rather they are "erratic" in size and show "a lack of any obvious sequence to them" by leaping back and forth in time, just as al-ʿAssāl's do (Awadalla 444). The effect of this technique on the reader is to highlight the uncertainty of a "reality [that] can no longer be presented as a whole entity but becomes fragmented" (Awadalla 444). This narrative technique is a conspicuous divergence from the tradition of Egyptian men's writing, especially men's life-writing, which privileges a straightforward, chronological and linear unfolding of events (al-Nowaihi 484).

A typical example of this kind of chronologically non-linear storytelling occurs in a scene in which Fatḥiyyah al-ʿAssāl sits with her newborn son Iyhāb on her lap is juxtaposed with a scene from approximately forty years later when he calls her, now an adult man living in Paris, to discuss the divorce she is undergoing with his father (*Ḥuḍn* 1: 256-7). A similar

pairing of non-chronological scenes occurs when the author describes how her then-fiancé ʿAbdāllah takes her with him to the university to meet his friends, and then subsequently transfers to another scene decades later when she is attending a conference and is on the same panel as one of the men she met that day with ʿAbdāllah (1: 263). The narration of this past event is interwoven with the period of her divorce three decades later.

Al-Nowaihi's study on the autobiographical works of Laṭīfah al-Zayyāt, Fadwā Tūqān and Assia Djebar indicates that this literary technique of aligning "seemingly unrelated incidents and characters from different periods" serves to "shed light on the incidents and, more importantly, on [the author's] reaction to them" (485). In the first case highlighted above, the two scenes act to show what Fatḥiyyah has retained from her marriage, namely her close relationship with Iyhāb, despite her impending divorce from his father. As for the second, it shows the significant intellectual and social gains Fatḥiyyah has made throughout her life. When she first arrives on the university campus she is just a shy, young girl who feels overwhelmed by the erudition of ʿAbdāllah and his law school friends. She barely speaks, but she is thrilled to be in the presence of the school and its students, as she has always had a deep thirst for learning. The conference scene which occurs decades later gains an entirely different tone in light of the scene directly before.

Now, Fatḥiyyah is a respected and confident member of the academic world who is invited to speak publicly to an audience which desires to hear and which respects her opinions. Even more significantly, she can now hold her own amongst more educated individuals; every single other member of the panel except for her has a PhD, yet she has been offered her place among them as an equal. She has, in a very real sense, arrived at the level of knowledge she had desired to seek so strongly as a girl feeling out of place on a university campus all those years before. What is more, she now no longer needs ʿAbdāllah

to act as her gatekeeper to the academic world as he did in the past. Thus, the pairing of these two scenes lends a sense of celebration what would otherwise appear to be a simple retelling of a mundane event.

Another telling example of the power of this chronologically disruptive circular narrative strategy can be discovered in another of al-ʿAssāl's stories of her divorce from her husband in 1982. The events surrounding the divorce, especially the incredulous reactions of her family and friends, are interwoven with events from 1946 when her family tried to find her a husband. At first the reader assumes the stories are linked because the husband she divorces in 1982 must be the man her family marries her off to in the mid-1940s. However, as time goes on, the reader realizes that it is not in fact ʿAbdāllah. The second suitor arrives and the reader undergoes the same experience, expecting him to be ʿAbdāllah, but he is not named, so we don't know for sure. Finally, a third suitor enters the picture, but he is not ʿAbdāllah either. Slowly the stories blend together in such a way that we see ʿAbdāllah is the second suitor, a man who she meets on the street, away from her family, and is not either of the two suitors her family proposes for her. This juxtaposition of early love and later divorce renders the narrative intensely bittersweet. Her and ʿAbdāllah's story of how they met, fell in love and got married in the 1940s is superbly romantic, so the reader feels sorrow for the pain of them parting in 1982 as the narrative flows between the two stories.

However, the presence of the two other pseudo-ʿAbdāllah suitors help Fatḥiyyah explain why she wants the divorce. It is a complicated situation, as she herself admits she is still in love with her husband, which is part of the reason everyone around her, most especially ʿAbdāllah, are stunned by her wish for a divorce. In context though, the reader feels sympathy because we see that she needs to separate from her husband, not because she does not love him, but because she feels she needs to be alone to discover herself after

decades of everyone deciding her identities for her. At this moment in the story she has just shown us how all the major decisions in her life have been continually directed by the needs of others: first, her family, then her husband, and finally their children. Since childhood her choices have been determined by those around her and as a result, now in the middle of her life she feels as if she does not know who she is or what she wants. Fatḥiyyah has always catered to the needs of others before her own.

It is now the 1980s and their two eldest sons are grown and married, and their youngest daughter while still at home is a self-sufficient, mature adolescent, Fatḥiyyah finally feels that she can strike out on her own to solve her identity issues. She is divorcing her husband to get closer to herself, not more distant from him, but to achieve the former she needs the latter. Thus the intertwining of the two stories has just the same effect of that al-Nowaihi identifies in Tuqan's work; that is, the non-linear chronology allows the author to express the connections and significations she recognizes between seemingly unrelated events spanning vast gaps of time.

Chronological loops and the inclusion of spirals of polyphonic voices are not the only circles I refer to by using the term "circular narrative". The circularity of al-ʿAssāl's writing is also evident from her use of repetition. Key phrases are repeated numerous times throughout all four volumes of her autobiography, and these rings carve their own significance deeper into the narrative every time they are reused. There are two of these phrases in particular I would like to focus on. The first is the question, "why did I divorce him?" which al-ʿAssāl asks herself over and over again throughout the first two volumes as she recounts her early life, falling in love with Adballah and their later divorce. Indeed, this inquiry is repeated so often that it seems that answering it is the driving force behind her writing her autobiography. Another repetition which recurs frequently suggests the answer to

the former question; al-ʿAssāl often says of her husband, especially when referring to their early days together, "I spoke with his tongue, I listened with his ears, and I saw with his eyes" (*Ḥuḍn* 1: 265).

It is noteworthy that this phrase often appears when Fatḥiyyah al-ʿAssāl is recounting how deep her love for him is, and it appears alongside glowing, romantic admiration for him like a dark smudge on clear glass. She is troubled by her inability to be independent from her husband, especially intellectually. She fastidiously documents many times in their early life together when she learns words and concepts from him that she had never encountered before, such as nationalism and colonialism. Her naiveté relative to her husband appears as a power gulf in which she remains eternally the student, and he, the teacher. For example, immediately after declaring how the early period of their marriage was one of the happiest of her life, al-ʿAssāl expresses the genesis of discomfort at how her own self was overshadowed by her husband's. "'ʿAbdāllah's views on life and politics," she says, "became the rule my life. To the point that sometimes I felt like I spoke with his tongue, I listened with his ears, and I saw with his eyes. I considered him my professor in every word he said" (*Ḥuḍn* 1: 265). The need to divorce him seems to stem from her desire to be independent from him, so that later when they reconcile it is as intellectual equals. It is significant that the incident which she cites as compelling her to divorce him is an intellectual and political issue, that is, his support for the Camp David accords which she opposes, rather than a private one.

Polyphony and Character Empowerment

Another circular narrative feature common among Arab women writers and evident in al-ʿAssāl's writing is a constant spiraling out from the central character or narrator's story to embrace the experiences of a large number of other real or fictional women. These authors seem not to privilege their own narrative voices or that of their stories' protagonists above those of other characters or individuals who appear in their autobiographical and fictional

literature. Rather, they seem to lend equal weight to all stories of the characters and persons mentioned, including their own authorial voice. In this way Arab women authors write in a manner that is uncannily similar to Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "polyphony." Polyphonic writing creates a situation where characters are empowered to tell their own stories in dialogue with the author, instead of having their stories *told* by the author.

In its most basic musical sense "polyphony" refers to the voices of many being woven together. However, Bakthin's concept of polyphonic writing does not simply refer to polyphony in this sense, but rather describes literature that allows for "a plurality of equally-valid consciousnesses" within the same work (89). This egalitarian plurality of voices does not only apply to the collection of characters' voices but also to the author's own voice:

> A character's word about himself and his world is just as fully weighted as the author's word usually is; it is not subordinated to the character's objectified image as merely one of his characteristics, nor does it serve as a mouthpiece for the author's voice. It possesses extraordinary independence in the structure of the work; it sounds, as it were, *alongside* the author's word and in a special way combines both with it and with the full and equally valid voices of other characters (89).

Zeidan has argued that Arab women authors tend to write more inclusive stories recounted from multiple characters' points of views and in the voices of several narrators, rather than just telling a story from a single narrator's point of view (234), and in this sense Arab women's writing can be viewed as being polyphonic. Salwa Bakr's novel *The Golden Chariot*, for example, includes "female voices from various classes and affiliations [that] intersect and diverge in a communal performance" (Majaj, Sunderman and Saliba xxiv).

This kind of polyphonic plurality of equal voices is not unique to Arab women's fictional works; Arab women writers have used it to rewrite the "seemingly most individualistic of genres," that is, autobiography, by featuring many other women's stories alongside those of the author-subject (al-Nowaihi 477). Nawar al-Hassan Golley observed

that Arab women's autobiographies are characterized by "sense of solidarity and collectivity" with other women by the inclusion of the trials and tribulations of many different women within the main autobiographical narrative purporting to focus on a single individual's life (73). Writing of Moroccan author Fatima Mernissi, Melissa Matthes observes that her autobiography consists of "interlinking narratives" which branch out from the story of her own life to "[recount] the stories of the many women who peopled her youth and developed her sense of herself and her place in the world (73). The same technique appears in the Palestinian writer Hanan Ashrawi's autobiography which is made up of "a compilation of individual tales" which emphasizes the story of the Palestinian people as a collectivity over her own individual experience (Matthes 86-7). Egyptian Nawāl al-Saʿadāwī's life-writing is yet another example in which "[e]ach woman's personal story is only one of the many narratives which gets retold . . . from sisters, mother, aunts, cousins and neighbours" (Matthes 69).

In *Ḥuḍn al-ʿUmr*, al-ʿAssāl does not just tell the story of women she knows by converting their words into her own narrative voice, but rather she often replicates in dialogue the conversations in which she learned other women's life stories. In this way she allows the women to speak for themselves in a polyphonic collectivity. One example of al-ʿAssāl's inclusion of other women's stories within an autobiography is found when Fatḥiyyah al-ʿAssāl tells the story of her wedding night. She is ignorant of the mechanics of sexual intercourse, but shares her aunt and a friend's perspectives on and experiences of sexuality alongside the narration of her own first sexual encounter. Once alone with ʿAbdāllah, he tries to calm her fears by explaining to her that "both their blood must run on white sheets and that this is the symbol of their love" (al-ʿAssāl*, Ḥuḍn* 1: 236). She tells him how her aunt has always told her that when a man and a woman are alone in a room, Satan is there along with them, and that this is why she is uncomfortable (1: 236). She then recounts the story of a

friend of hers who once came to her because she had been "alone" with her boyfriend and then was terrified that her family would kill her (1: 238). She tells of how her friend finally found a solution and spread dove's blood on the sheets of her wedding bed to solve the problem (1: 238). While in this episode it is Fatḥiyyah's voice telling the stories of the other women, she is actually re-telling them; earlier in the book she had transcribed the two conversations from which she draws the stories, first from a conversation with her aunt and later from one with her friend. In those conversations the stories of her friend and her aunt were portrayed not through narrative but through straight dialogue, much like the text of a play transcribes speech. In this way the voices of the women who are featured are literally in dialogue with Fatḥiyyah's voice.

Indeed, the variety of voices in polyphonic literature are characterized by being in constant dialogue with each other, just as Fatḥiyyah's experience of sexuality is in dialogue with her aunt and her friend's experiences. This dialogic element means that the author does not simply write "*about* a character" but is in dialogue "with [that character]" (Bakhtin 94). "For the author the hero is not," Bakhtin writes, "'he' and not 'I' but a fully valid 'thou', that is, another and other autonomous 'I'" (93). This dialogic structure allows the character the opportunity to be "a carrier of a fully valid word and not the mute, voiceless object of the author's words" (Bakhtin 93). A character in polyphonic literature is thus a subject speaking his or her own discourse and defining his or her own identity.

In this way, polyphonic writing creates a dialogue that breaks down the hierarchies between the protagonist and the other characters, and between the author and all the characters. This "*fully realized and thoroughly consistent dialogic position*" inhabited by the author and the characters "affirms the independence, internal freedom, unfinalizability, and indeterminancy" of the characters vis-à-vis the writer (Bakhtin 93). In Bakhtin's view, "only

a dialogic and participatory orientation takes another person's discourse seriously, and is capable of approaching it as both a semantic position and as another point of view" (94). The equality of character and author discourses allows for "intimate contact" between them while preventing the author's voice from fusing, swallowing up or dissolving the characters' voices into that of the writer, hence the characters "retain fully [their] independence"(Bakhtin 94).

Bakhtin warns against misunderstanding the seeming contradiction between characters' independence in a polyphonic work and their supposed dependence on the author for creating their very existence (94). However, he argues that a polyphonic author creates the "artistic design" of a work of literature, that is, the world within which the characters live and act according to their own internal logic which "cannot be invented, that is, cannot be fabricated from beginning to end" (Bakhtin 94). Each "artistic image, of whatever sort, cannot be invented," Bakhtin argues, "since it has its own artistic logic, its own norm-generating order . . . the creator must subordinate himself to this order" (94). In such a polyphonic work, "the author acts as organizer and participant in the dialogue without retaining for himself the final word" of defining meaning (Bakhtin 96).

This polyphonic plurality is evident in all of al-ʿAssāl's literary corpus; she seems more interested in telling the complex story of the collective over the simplistic story of the individual, and she remains hesitant to assert authorial authority over her characters. The cast of characters in "Sign al-Nisāʾ" is immense and juxtaposes a great diversity of social classes, generations, backgrounds and dialects. The same is true of her autobiography, which does not privilege the narrative of her own life story, but rather spirals out to include the stories of many other women she has known. Al-ʿAssāl is highly aware of her power as a woman writer to represent other women, especially other women who are illiterate and therefore cannot represent themselves in writing. She consciously chooses to neutralize her own authorial

power by not subordinating the voices of the other characters under her own authorial voice.

In order to represent these women, both real and fictional, in her writing, al-ʿAssāl acts as a Bakhtinian "organizer" whereby she crafts the stage from which these woman can tell their own stories in their own words and according to their own internal logic. In "Sign al-Nisāʾ", for example, al-ʿAssāl creates a polyphonic text by looping a multiplicity of female characters' own self-narrated stories into an expansive web. Over the course of the play, every woman's story is told in detail, including those of minor characters. Upwards of a dozen major and minor characters tell the stories of what their lives were like before prison, how they became incarcerated, and what their hopes and dreams are now. Al-ʿAssāl deliberately carves out a narrative space in which each character has the opportunity to tell, in her own voice and from her own perspective, exactly what has happened to her. She creates the Bakhtinian "artistic design" which allows her characters a platform from which to speak.

This life sharing platform is communal and takes place in an intensely public way in al-ʿAssāl's play, as each woman shares her story in front an audience of several other prisoners. The community of women prisoners act as a receptive audience and offer the speakers a supportive space in which to share their stories. These polyphonic voices are equal; the many listen to the one and the speaker is never interrupted or overridden by the listening audience themselves, but only by outside events and emergencies. There is a great degree of reciprocal trust and respect between listeners and speakers which empowers every character by allowing her to tell her own story, and by providing the opportunity for her not to be defined by others but to define herself. The orality of the stories is another significant factor considering that the majority of women in the prison are illiterate. The illiteracy of the female characters that the literate author wants to represent definitively situates al-ʿAssāl in a position of power.

However, al-ʿAssāl is highly conscious of this power dynamic, and so chooses the polyphonic format she does in order to empower her own characters to tell their own stories.

Her desire to write polyphonically comes through explicitly in her World Theatre Day address, where al-ʿAssāl writes that she asked her pen to take an oath "to help [her] bring to the fore the greatest number of women whose lives I share, by drawing nearer to them and becoming their mouthpiece" ("2004" 1-2). She is their mouthpiece, but her authorial voice does not drown out or dominate the other voices in her works, and the relationship between her as the author and her characters is one of reciprocity and dialogue. "We would," she writes, "thus bare ourselves completely before each other" (al-ʿAssāl, "2004" 2). Al-Nowaihi observes a similar inclination among Arab women memoirists who "are interested in creating not simply a female autobiographical tradition but, rather, a tradition that specifically does credit to their need to authorize their voices without posing as authorities" (477). These authors hope to "[speak] for and on behalf of others without appropriating them or subsuming them into their own agendas" (al-Nowaihi 477).

It is significant that virtually all of the digressions into other people's lives and experiences in these Arab women writers' autobiographies are digressions into other *women's* lives and experiences. Almost none recount events in the lives of men, instead, it is aunts, female cousins, female friends, sisters, daughters and mothers whose stories feature alongside those of al-ʿAssāl and the other writing women. As members of a marginalized group which has been unfairly and inaccurately represented by male writers for centuries, these female authors are hesitant to exercise their power as authors to speak for others who do not write.

The ubiquity of the circular narrative technique in women's writing in Arabic suggests that Arab women's inclination towards circularity in their narratives may also stem from the gendered literary marginality they experience. Women's exclusion from the Arabic literary canon has also "denied [Arab women writers] the right to create their own images of

femaleness" (Manisty 153). Zeidan's study of Arab women's novels shows how the female characters portrayed by prominent male novelists of the twentieth century, such as Najīb Maḥfūẓ, were limited to depicting two caricatures of womanhood, that is, "the "angel" (usually a mother), passive, submissive to her husband and devoted to her traditional role within the family; and the prostitute" (233). Arab women writers have worked to collapse these binary caricatures by portraying a significantly wider scope of female identity in all its diversity and complexity beyond the simplistic pure woman or harlot paradigm (233).

As members of a marginalized group whose stories have long been ignored, or appropriated and told from the dominant, patriarchal viewpoint, Arab women writers appear to be more sensitive to the contingent nature of identity, more aware of the influence of others on their own personal formation, and more hesitant to position themselves as the paramount subject, even in their own memoirs. The focus al-ʿAssāl and other female writers direct towards depicting many different and complex female voices subverts the more simplistic representations of women produced by male-authored literature in Arabic. As Karen Hohne and Helen Wussow argue, the fragmented and "multivoicedness" attributed to women's creative expression "are not so much essentially feminine as they are a mark of any oppressed group of people who, having experienced the pain of silence, are determined not to impose it on others and thus allow different voices to be heard" (xii).

I would argue that a strong commitment to represent diverse women through an egalitarian and balanced mode is demonstrated by the proclivity of Arab women writers to use the technique of polyphony. By continuously looping out from their own personal stories to those of other women around them, female Arabic authors allow "the disenfranchised collective seeking to articulate itself to power" a venue to speak and be heard in (Matthes 69). This seamless move from the collective to the singular and back inscribes the unwritten lives of women back into the official written history. Marilyn Booth contends that the figure of a

"woman as storyteller" is a "consistent motif in writings by women in Egypt," and that the female storyteller's tales act to create a sense of community between women by narrating alternate, highly transgressive and gynocentric anti-histories that challenges the official histories endorsed by the patriarchal power structures ("Translator's" xv). Al-ʿAssāl's body of works certainly does.

V. Gender Justice On Stage and On the Page

> She grew to the realization that to reach womanhood was to enter a prison where the confines of one's life were clearly and decisively fixed.
> - Laṭīfah al-Zayyāt[13]

This chapter moves away from the study of form in al-ʿAssāl's works to examine more closely how the content of these same works acts to strengthen the principles embodied in her style. The pervasive commitment amongst female writers to use literature as a tool to fight for social justice is a characteristic of Egyptian women's writing that al-ʿAssāl's works clearly embody. Caroline Seymour-Jorn concludes in her book *Cultural Criticism in Egyptian Women's Writing* that one of the major differences that distinguish women's fictional writing in Egypt as unique discourse is their universal criticism of unjust aspects of the social and cultural fabric that surrounds them (16). The fact that women experience discrimination on a day to day basis often sensitizes them to other forms of discrimination and inspires many of them to commit to changing unjust social practices. Experiential bonds of gender injustice create a strong undercurrent of activism in Egyptian women's literature, particularly in favour of women's rights. "Recognizing that the master narrative does not include the stories which will liberate women" (Matthes 74), women authors in Egypt write against the grain and craft a "discourse . . . [that] affirms women and women's subjectivity" (Ahmed 196-7).

Selaiha and Enany have shown that gender justice issues have always been at the forefront of women's theatrical writing in Egypt. In fact, the very first play published by a woman in Egypt in 1922 was May Ziyādah's "Yatanaqqashūn" [They Discuss] and features a dialogue among men and women on the issue of gender inequalities (Selaiha and Enany

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13. *The Open Door* 24.

628-9). In light of this, we can view "Sign al-Nisāʾ" as a continuation of the long tradition of Egyptian women writing against gender injustice in their plays in order to spur audiences to action in the real world off-stage. Similarly, Marilyn Booth defines feminist biographies according to two criteria: firstly, "the recognition that social experience is gendered through social practice and that this has placed gender-specific restraints on women," and secondly, an "engagement in attempts to remove or temper such restraints" (*May Her Likes* xxx). This description aptly captures *Ḥuḍn al-ʿUmr* as well, as the book chronicles al-ʿAssāl's difficult early life at home and her slow drive towards independence, even at the cost of divorcing the husband she loved.

The first scene of Fatḥiyyah al-ʿAssāl's play "Sign al-Nisāʾ" illustrates the importance of her commitment to gender justice. The play opens with a group of dancers of all ages, and including both men and women, rushing the stage from the back of the theatre (al-ʿAssāl, "Sign" 278). Their gestures and facial expressions have been directed to convey insurrection, rebellion and uprising (278). What is more, their actions are accompanied by "a song expressing humankind's longing for justice, equality and freedom" (278). As they approach the stage, they pass by and become one with the audience sitting comfortably in their seats. This unexpected rupture of theatre's fourth wall serves to viscerally link viewers with the events occurring around them. They cannot be passive observers, but are wrenched into the action as their spectator space is invaded by actors. What will happen next? Their guard is up. Audience members are thus jerked out of their apathy and forced to consider the role they have to play in the events at hand.

The entry of a second group of dancers reveals what role that is; al-ʿAssāl specifies in her stage directions that this new company attack the first group, and that their movements and expressions communicate "authority and dominance" (278). The two groups battle it out,

and when their hostilities reach a climax all the actors freeze and the stage is suddenly bathed in darkness (278). This short scene sets the stage for the rest of the play and the social issues that undergird it. In performance, the audience's unwitting involvement and proximity to the action at the very beginning of the play demands of them to consider their own position in the miniature war they are witnessing. Are you for freedom and human dignity? Or do you support oppression and subjugation? The first group represents the essential equality of humankind, while the other group symbolizes those who seek to ignore equality and crush others in order to gain and maintain power. The initial conflict between these two groups anticipates the central themes of the play, which are, quite simply, justice and equality.

Indeed the root meanings of the names of the first two characters we meet in the opening scene in the eponymous women's prison, ʿAdlāt and Anṣāf, are literally 'justice' and 'equality' (296). The symbolism of justice and equality being locked behind bars is unambiguous. As the play proceeds, it becomes evident that virtually all of the characters we meet in the women's prison suffer from a lack of recognition of their essential human dignity and worth from the society they live in. Their rights to justice and equality have been categorically denied. The two main social structures responsible for their oppression are either patriarchy, class hierarchies, or a combination of the two. Several of the women have been wrongly imprisoned for crimes committed by men, or for crimes that their husbands or fathers forced them to commit. In most cases poverty plays a large role in creating the situations which leave these women no other option but to commit an act deemed criminal by society. However, al-ʿAssāl shows that the real crimes are perpetrated by social forces that conspire against financially, socially or physically vulnerable women.

As the first two paragraphs of *Ḥuḍn al-ʿUmr* reveal, the origin of the author's impulse to write her autobiography is similarly gender justice-oriented. Whereas the opening scene of

"Sign al-Nisāʾ" conveys this theme opaquely through symbolism and dance, in *Ḥuḍn al-ʿUmr* the author explicitly states her aim is to depict the daily difficulties and injustices Egyptian women face. In these opening paragraphs, Al-ʿAssāl describes sitting and drinking tea with her daughter Ṣafāʾ while they discuss "the woman's cage I live in" which is the source of "the hollow in the depths of [her] soul" (*Ḥuḍn* 1: 5). This is the conversation that leads Ṣafāʾ to urge her mother to write her own autobiography, presumably to enlighten people about "woman's cage" and how it carves holes in women's souls (1: 5). This sentence is the very first in the book and its prominent position reveals the driving motive for al-ʿAssāl's decision to engage in an autobiographical project: to address issues of injustice committed against women by highlighting her own experiences as a woman and the experiences of her female family and friends, and to show how their gender has altered the course of all of their lives. This aim in writing is further corroborated a few lines down, where she mentions how at that time in her life, she could not write her autobiography because she was too weighed down by "tons of oppression and subjugation, that made fear take root inside me, making impenetrable barriers that suffocate the truth and awareness deep inside me" (1: 5).

However, it is equally true that *Ḥuḍn al-ʿUmr* also celebrates al-ʿAssāl's own success in overcoming the obstacles she faced as a woman. Similarly, "Sign al-Nisāʾ" honours and reveres women's individual strength and perseverance in the face of adversity, as well as the power of womankind to act as a collective safety net in which women support, comfort and encourage each other. Al-ʿAssāl's body of gender justice-oriented, realist literature both reflects and refracts reality by showing life as it is, and more importantly, as it could and should be. Hence, my discussions of *Ḥuḍn al-ʿUmr* and "Sign al-Nisāʾ" will also aim to highlight this important and inspiring current that runs through her works.

Female Bodies, Honour and Chastity

Female honour and chastity are important themes in al-ʿAssāl's own life story, and in those of her characters in "Sign al-Nisāʾ", in that events and perceptions affecting chastity have the potential to completely alter the trajectory of a woman's life. Almost every prisoner's crime is somehow related to violations of her chastity and honour. Indeed, loss of honour seems to be the worst crime of all. At various points Anṣāf (al-ʿAssāl, "Sign" 375), Thawānī (306), Ṣurṣārah (346), and Lawāhiẓ (302) all explicitly defend their honour and chastity in response to accusations of being whores, either from their husbands or other prisoners, while still admitting openly their guilt of having committed other crimes. The strength of these women's fear of being accused of loss of sexual honour is palpable. For example, when Laylā first enters the prison all the prisoners gather round her and try to guess what her crime is. Murder? Drugs? Forgery? Laylā only mutters 'no, no' under her breath to all of the charges (300). It is only when someone guesses prostitution that Laylā reacts strongly, shouting that she is most definitely not a prostitute (300)!

Although Laylā virulently rejects being associated with prostitution in the slightest way, she is later compared to Thawānī, who was actually forced to work as a prostitute. Being forced into sexual acts they did not desire is the crucial link between Thawānī and Laylā's stories. As a young girl living in poverty, Thawānī was sold by her father to another man for fifteen hundred guineas and forced into sexual slavery (378). Immediately after Thawānī finishes telling this story, a spotlight shines on Laylā which highlights her face (380). Music rises to reflect the emotion of the scene as she walks slowly around the stage lost in a daze of her memories (380). The lights on stage change and a gap in the wall on stage opens to reveal Laylā's apartment while Salīm arrives home and sexually assaults Laylā (380).

The sexual intent of his attack is clear from their short exchange in which Laylā pleads

with him not to sleep with her because she is tired (380). “I can’t,” she says (380). “But I can,” he responds (381). “I don’t want to,” she says (381). “But I do,” he says (381). At this point the lights dim and a spotlight focusses on Laylā alone (381). The stage directions instruct the scene to show that Laylā “has submitted her body coldly to Salīm. We hear the sound of Laylā, like a slaughtered animal. She has put the sheet in her mouth so as to not let the sounds escape” (381). And with that horrifying image, the scene ends.

The following scene picks up the same story in the present as it opens by showing Laylā waking as if from a terrible nightmare in her prison cell with a sheet clenched in her mouth (382). Soon after she asks Salwā “an embarrassing question” (384). Has she ever slept with her husband when she did not want to? Salwā is shocked by her question and replies, “no, of course not” (384). “Moments of love,” she continues, “are some of the most beautiful moments in life and they have to be lived . . . with trust and warmth and both of you wanting . . . without this it would be horrible” (384-5). With this Laylā bursts into tears.

It is significant that the specific word used for horrible is *faẓīʿ*, which could also be translated as repulsive or abominable, is the very same Mona used just a few pages before in response to Thawānī’s life story of forced prostitution. “Horrible . . . horrible . . .” she says, “to give your body to a man when there is nothing between you and him, no feelings” (379). To this Thawānī retorts by saying she has thrown feelings away a long time ago, and that now her body is cold, but she does have a furnished apartment and some money (379). As she puts it: “he pays and I give” (379). The proximity of the two stories, along with the use of identical terminology to describe the two women’s situations suggests that Laylā and Thawānī’s lives are much more similar than they appear: both offer their bodies without pleasure to men who pay for their material needs. Fur coats and a house in Greece are all, it seems, that sets Laylā apart from Thawānī. Al-ʿAssāl shows the hyprocrisy of the sexual

honour code in Egypt, where a lower-class woman like Thawānī is branded unchaste by society and rejected as a whore, while a wealthy woman like Laylā is accepted as a respectable woman, although she too sells her body.

In fact, earlier in the play Thawānī herself had commented on this same class hypocrisy. While discussing her "livelihood" as a prostitute with ʿAdlāt, Thawānī "tightens her dress to highlight her beauty" and her body (399). ʿAdlāt then makes a remark about "beauty wanting a decent home," that is, beauty is found in an honourable woman's body (399). To this Thawānī responds by saying, "you mean the house of wealth," i.e. only the wealthy can afford to stand by their morals and protect their honour (400). As Laylā's marital rape shows, even wealthy woman are not able to maintain their own bodily integrity and dignity.

The issue of honour plays a similarly dominant role in Anṣāf's life and suffering. While we never find out what Anṣāf did to be put in prison, we do know that she is worried that the means her lawyer used to get her released from prison may call her honour into question with her husband (396). She is afraid her husband will not believe in her chastity and will divorce her because of this (396). Her fears prove to be founded when, as she celebrates the *subūʿ* ceremony for her newborn son, the prison authorities come to take her son away from her (375). Her husband is divorcing her and will forbid her to see her four other children again (375). In her own defence, Anṣāf says she cannot convince him of her honour and that she has never touched or been touched by anyone else (375). "Tell me ladies, where was his honour," she scoffs, when she had to go out working from dawn until late at night to make up for his inability to provide financially for their family? (375). Not only was she "knocked about" in public, but she had to still scrub and clean and cook at home, as well as feeding, clothing and caring for their children (375). Anṣāf simply cannot believe his ingratitude for all her years of hard work and devotion. Like a puff of smoke it is all blown away by the

slightest hint of dishonour and she is abandoned.

Lawāhiẓ's honour was, like Anṣāf's, called into question by her criminal activity. She recounts the role honour plays in the story of her crime to her fellow inmates. She admits openly to being a thief, and says that one night she snuck into an apartment belonging to some prostitutes and stole gold from them (301-2). However, as she made her escape and was slipping out the door, she met the morality police who had come to arrest the prostitutes and was arrested along with them (302). Terrified that her husband would think she was a selling herself too, she "did the impossible so my husband would know that I am innocent and honourable and chaste (302). So the first thing she does when she gets to the police station is to run to the washroom to hide the gold in "a sensitive place" (302). She knows as long as she can produce the gold to show her husband, then he will believe her story, but if it gets confiscated he will divorce her. She manages to successfully hide this gold in her "sensitive place" until she has been transferred to jail and receives a visit from her mother. Lawāhiẓ then gives the gold to her to show Lawāhiẓ's husband (302). It is only after this confirmation of her chastity that her husband visits her in jail too (302).

Wife, Mother, Hesitant Writer

For Fatḥiyyah al-ʿAssāl the physicality of her womanhood also embodies her gendered identities as a wife and a mother. In the first volume of *Ḥuḍn al-ʿUmr* al-ʿAssāl displays anxiety about how her identity as a writer threatens, or might be perceived to threaten, her capacity to fulfill what society considers her more important responsibilities as a wife and mother. To assuage this apprehension in herself or in others reading the work, she devotes the first three chapters of this publication to stressing the support and encouragement she received from her children and her husband to write this autobiography, thereby redeeming her positions as mother and wife.

As discussed above, the first chapter of volume one documents Fatḥiyyah's daughter Ṣafāʾ pushing her to write the book. The chapter that follows recalls an evening in 2000 when Fatḥiyyah and her husband are celebrating their fiftieth wedding anniversary in a hospital where ʿAbdāllah is convalescing from an unnamed "wretched disease" (al-ʿAssāl, *Ḥuḍn* 1: 7). The couple are joyfully recalling memories and swapping stories from their life together, and the whole scene is accompanied by a great deal of laughter and tender affection (1: 7). ʿAbdāllah asks her to "copy the fragrance of this night" and "to express all of of these anxieties that they are feeling now" in her future autobiography, the possibility of which they have evidently discussed before (1: 7). He says that he hopes to extend his life long enough to read it with her, just as she read his two autobiographies with him (1: 7).

At this moment Fatḥiyyah promises her husband that she will write her own autobiography and to "reinforce it with honesty and candour in every word I write in it. And when I finish writing it I will dedicate it to you" (1: 7). She does in fact write the dedication to him then and there (1: 8). This dedication is not, however, set apart from the text at the front of the book as convention dictates and as the dedications to the other three volumes of the autobiography are. Instead, it is embedded as a paragraph in this second chapter heralding "the love of her life" for fifty years through "the hardest days and the sweetest" (1: 8). Unfortunately, ʿAbdāllah al-Ṭūkhī died the next year before al-ʿAssāl had begun writing *Ḥuḍn al-ʿUmr* (1: 8). In fact, following his death she evidently found it too painful to write her autobiography and instead decided to forget it (1: 8).

The chapter makes it abundantly clear, though, that she had her husband's full support and encouragement to write the book. The emphasis here is on safeguarding her roles as a proper wife and mother. In fact, to be her husband's ideal wife would mean writing the book. Her apparent need to show her husband's sanctioning of her writing may seem contradictory

to her avowedly gender justice aims in that it appears she needs her husband's authorization to write. However, her inclusion of the scene where her husband is urging her to write could also be read as her celebrating the support and encouragement she received from him to pursue her dreams of writing, thereby honouring him as a proponent of gender justice.

Likewise, the second volume of *Ḥuḍn al-ʿUmr* begins with al-ʿAssāl explicitly addressing this seemingly guilt ridden connection between her role as an author and her roles as a wife and mother. The opening dedication is addressed to her husband, "the love of her life," and once again emphasizes that her autobiographical project stems from a promise extracted from her by him to undertake it, and not from any individual desire to self-aggrandize (al-ʿAssāl, *Ḥuḍn* 2: 3). Halfway through the page long poetic dedication she switches gears and begins addressing her children as well. She calls them "*ābnāʾ ḥuḍn al-ʿumr*," or "children of the womb of life" (2: 3). Of course, the phrase "*ḥuḍn al-ʿumr*" is also the title of the autobiography itself: *The Womb of Life*. Al-ʿAssāl appears to be explicitly bequeathing the work to her children, once again displacing herself and foregrounding her function as wife and mother. Two lines later she confirms this endowment when, after listing her four children's names, she writes, "I dedicate to you . . 'myself/me'" (2: 3). It is as if it would be inconceivably selfish to write about herself, and having done so, she must now absolve herself of guilt by transforming the writing into a selfless act by bestowing *Ḥuḍn al-ʿUmr* as a gift upon her beloved children.

However, the final three lines of the dedicatory poem seem to upend and challenge the previous twelve. Immediately following Fatḥiyyah al-ʿAssāl's dedication of herself and her books to her children, she writes that she does it "so that you become acquainted more and more with 'Fatḥiyyah / the person' . . and not the mother and the wife / only . ." (2: 3). These last three lines in the dedication complicate everything that came before, coming as they do

immediately after she has framed her autobiographical project as, firstly, a promise to her late husband fulfilled, and secondly, as a selfless gift to honour her children. Suddenly she asserts her identity as an individual, as the unique composition of traits and experiences that makes her a distinct person above and beyond her domestic roles (2: 3). Writing this autobiography then, appears to be a way of defining her identity by expanding it beyond her familial roles and encompassing all that she considers makes her an individual person.

Each of the four volumes of the autobiography follow the precise trajectory outlined in the dedication of the second volume analyzed above. That is to say, they move successively from defining her purely in terms of her roles as mother and wife, towards identifying her as "Fatḥiyyah / the person" independent of those roles (2: 3). The first volume opens, as discussed above, with a lengthy justification of why she is writing, that is, largely because her husband and her daughter insisted on it. There is very little discussion of herself, but much detail imbued into setting the scenes in which they demanded of her to write the work: her daughter when they were sitting together in a cafe, and her husband in a hospital bed on their fiftieth anniversary.

In the opening scene of the second volume we find Fatḥiyyah sitting alone in the offices of the Egyptian Writer's Union listening to her daughter read aloud from her father, ʿAbdāllah al-Tūkhī's, autobiography at a memorial event honouring him soon after his death. This section of *Ḥuḍn al-ʿUmr* includes some of Fatḥiyyah's own internal reflections on her emotions of deep sorrow at this moment, but really the lion's share of the chapter is devoted to quoting more than two pages from ʿAbdāllah al-Tūkhī's text. She even provides a page reference for easier referral to his book. The lines Ṣafāʾ is reading are taken from ʿAbdāllah's autobiography where he narrates his first experience of prison. This topic connects the first and second volumes of *Ḥuḍn al-ʿUmr* chronologically, as the first volume closed with the

scene of ʿAbdāllah being arrested. The last line of the introduction, following the long sections of ʿAbdāllah's writing, says, "I began to write the second part of my autobiography." It is as if, once again, ʿAbdāllah's having already written his autobiography authorizes her to write her own, and she seems to be paying homage to him as a writer *and* a husband.

What is more important is the physical distance between Fatḥiyyah, and her daughter and husband. Where in the first introduction ʿAbdāllah and Ṣafāʾ were physically present when encouraging, and in some ways authorizing her, to write her own life, here in the second introduction neither is really present and Fatḥiyyah is portrayed as being alone, although the message from her husband and daughter remains the same: you should write your autobiography. This gradual shift/distancing away from motherhood and marriage and closer towards a more diverse and complicated individual identity continues in the opening and closing chapters of the second, third and fourth volumes.

In the closing chapter of volume two of *Ḥuḍn al-ʿUmr* al-ʿAssāl describes the joy of being reunited with ʿAbdāllah in 1955 after he is released from two years in prison, as well as her inability to express to him all she has undergone and experienced while he has been away (2: 193-199). The opening of volume three continues this scene with details of her joy at ʿAbdāllah's reentry into their apartment after his years in prison, yet as she is writing the scene she is interrupted in the present with a knock at the door (al-ʿAssāl, *Ḥuḍn* 3: 5-11). Fatḥiyyah finds ʿAbdāllah at her door after he has returned from a visit to France and Finland to see three of their sons (3: 7-11). He begs her to reconsider and says that she is his life, just as he is hers (3: 9). Still, she holds firm says that she must see the whole experience of the divorce through (3: 9).

Volume three closes with an account of the genesis of their divorce; Fatḥiyyah and ʿAbdāllah are experiencing a deep disagreement over political issues. ʿAbdāllah feels that the

issue of Palestine must be settled and so supports the Camp David Accords as the only way of preventing other wars, but Fatḥiyyah is vehemently opposed to the idea of any rapprochement with Israel and demonstrates against the proposition (3: 135-6). Their relationship has become so strained that they cannot discuss anything without quarreling so that their conversations are limited to issues regarding their children or the house (3: 137-9). As the economy opens up to Israeli businesses and travelers, Egyptians come face to face with Israeli tourists in the streets (3: 139). This additional strain tells on their relationship even more severely and the quarrels start to erupt into full-blown fights and their children even begin to notice the discord between Fatḥiyyah and ʿAbdāllah (3: 139-140).

The tension between them truly explodes one day with ʿAbdāllah screaming that he opened her eyes to everything in life and that it was he who opened all the doors for her (3: 140). At this appropriation of her own successes in life and the implication that he was the means by which she achieved those success, Fatḥiyyah finally snaps and screams back at him: “Divorce me! Divorce me!” (3: 141). At this dramatic moment the narrative draws back to the present moment of writing, and Fatḥiyyah describes how unsettled the memories have made her and how her daughter Ṣafāʾ comforts her and tells her to calm down before she tries to begin writing the fourth volume (3: 140-1). To this Fatḥiyyah replies, in the last line of the book: “But what is coming is even more dangerous than what has been, and I must tell it” (3: 141).

The fourth volume opens with Fatḥiyyah explaining that when she yelled at ʿAbdāllah to divorce her, it was the first time she had ever said the word “divorce” to him (al-ʿAssāl, *Ḥuḍn* 4: 145). She writes that she is overcome but the memories of the “flood of love” that had been between them and she rejoices in the thought of the children they made together, but she also remembers the bitterness (4: 145). Al-ʿAssāl recalls the disappointment of her

children when they learned that she was divorcing their father and the difficulty of explaining that the divorce was because of political reasons, although her love for him never wavered (4: 146). Tears fill her eyes, dropping on the page and preventing her from writing (4: 146). Ṣafāʾ finds her like this and takes the pen away from her mother, patting her gently and telling her once again to stop writing the third volume, and to only begin the fourth once she has calmed herself because it covers the most difficult part of her life and will be the most difficult to write (4: 146-7). As in the other volumes, al-ʿAssāl is careful to emphasize the support she has from her children, in this case embodied by her daughter, to write her life story. Ṣafāʾ acts as a supportive guide throughout her writing process as ʿAbdāllah's influence recedes to the background.

Although it was the first time she said it aloud, Fatḥiyyah admits that the idea of divorce had long been secretly held inside her, but she had been to ashamed to listen to own desires (4: 147). The progression throughout the four volumes has culminated in this expression of her own intellectual independence from ʿAbdāllah. It is significant that their divorce has its origins in their personal stances on a very public issue. So too is it crucial to note that the bitterness and discord between the couple only escalates into a real divorce at the point when ʿAbdāllah appropriates Fatḥiyyah's own achievements as his own. Her decision to divorce him can be seen as an assertion of her own intellectual and personal strengths after a lifetime of living in his shadow.

However, the fourth book closes with reconciliation between ʿAbdāllah and Fatḥiyyah late in life. She recounts the difficulty of watching her beloved's body being ravaged by the unnamed "wretched disease" and how the process of watching the light fade from his eyes leaves her feeling helpless and deficient for the first time in her life (4: 263). This takes readers full circle to the opening scene of the first volume, where ʿAbdāllah is suffering from

this same disease and where he makes her promise him that she will write her autobiography. Another circle is completed as well; just as she was in the opening pages of the first volume encouraging her mother to write her life story, and as she has been at other difficult times throughout the process of writing the book, Fatḥiyyah's daughter Ṣafāʾ is there in the present to comfort her mother and to offer the support she needs to keep writing (4: 263).

A year after his death she writes that she visits his grave often to salve her grief, but this day is different (4: 266-8). When she returns home she sheds her black mourning clothing, takes a shower to let the warm water cleanse her sorrows away, and reemerges into the world in white clothing (4: 268). The final lines of the book are: "one phase ended, and another began" (4: 268). She has been a wife and a mother, but she is no longer a hesitant writer. Rather, she has fulfilled her promise to ʿAbdāllah and to their children by completing her autobiography, and the story of her as Fatḥiyyah the independent person is complete.

Prison Realities and Metaphors

Marriage, as the most identitifiable vehicle of patriarchy in any society, plays a huge role in delineating women's freedoms and perceived capabilities at a family level. In al-ʿAssāl's writing men remain the heads of households and the main decision makers. As the husband or father is to the family, so is the ruler to his citizens. Al-ʿAssāl makes this link between the patriarchal family and the patriarchal state government in the opening scene of "Sign al-Nisāʾ" by drawing parallels between a husband abusing his wife and the state oppressing its citizens.

The first scene of "Sign al-Nisāʾ" occurs in the house of the protagonist, Salwā. She has just returned and rushes into her home "as if she were being chased" (al-ʿAssāl, "Sign" 279). Salwā is clearly afraid of something or someone she fears may be in pursuit of her. As the scene progresses we begin to get a picture of who this character is. Al-ʿAssāl defines Sal-

wā as a political activist before she has even spoken a word. It is clear from the books overflowing from her bookshelves that she is an intellectual, just as the stage directions that her walls be decked with portraits of "local and international nationalist figures," such as Gamāl ʿAbd al-Nāssar and Che Guevara reveal to the audience her interest in political, and especially nationalist, causes (279).

That she may be a political dissident becomes even more likely when we overhear her telephone conversation with her husband Kamāl; it seems they both think it likely their phone is tapped by government authorities because when she starts to explain what happened at the demonstrations Kamāl immediately stops her, saying "don't explain this completely on the phone" (280). Our suspicions are further confirmed when she opens a window and the sounds of explosions, along with the calls of newspaper vendors, waft in (279). They are hawking the evenings news about "the demonstrations from Alexandria to the Aswan border . . . the central security forces have surrounded the demonstrations . ." (279). These suggestions of violence, together with her obvious fear of the authorities, link Salwā and her injury to the demonstrations; when she enters the apartment she is limping and moaning in pain, and the first thing she does is to sit down, take off her shoes and examine the injuries on her feet (279).

This moment, in all its details, is soon replicated when Salwā's old friend Laylā arrives at her door. The similarity between the two events implies that the state violence Salwā has experienced is parallel to the domestic violence Laylā has suffered. Laylā, like Salwā, rushes into the apartment gasping as if someone is in pursuit of her (282). Laylā is also injured, and "it appears that she is the victim of a beating" (282). The physical evidence of this violence is written on her body in her dishevelled hair and torn clothing (282). Her injuries are also visually represented by her limp and by the single shoe she holds in her hand, just as

Salwā's injuries were indicated by removing her shoe (282). Laylā attempts to sit on the couch but she is unable to without exclaiming in pain; her husband has beat her so badly that everything hurts - her feet, shoulders, back, hands, neck and tailbone (283).

When Salwā asks who has hit her Laylā informs her it is her own husband who has done this to her and goes on to say that "there are no parts of my body left intact . . he has shattered me" (283-4). At this point Laylā is so distraught she is afraid of all men, including Salwā's husband Kamāl and she pleads to know whether or not he is home (284). Once she discovers that he is not, Laylā relaxes, but comments that "trusting men is like trusting water in a sieve" (284). To this Salwā responds with a teasing smile saying, "which man and which sieve . . what empty words" (284). Laylā's cynical rejoinder to Salwā's comment is: "you don't know men. Ask me about them" (284).

Following this comment, their discussion is diverted to the situation outside the apartment by loud explosions of tear gas canisters being used against the demonstrators (285). Laylā exposes her gross ignorance of the political situation in Egypt by revealing she had no idea that the crowds she passed coming here were demonstrators, nor does she have the faintest clue what they could be complaining about (285). Salwā must explain to her ignorant friend the fact that living conditions for many Egyptians are appalling, and that this is why the marchers are demonstrating. Laylā then points at herself and compares her own situation to that of the demonstrators, thereby explicitly aligning her tyrannical husband with the autocratic state:

> like me, sister. I was also screaming from his madness and I said to him 'shame . . it's shameful to do that . . I live with him through the good and the bad . . he tells me to go right and I say, okay, he tells me to go left and I say, sure . . and after all that, look Salwā, look, what does that despotic, ruthless man do? (285).

At this point Laylā lifts some of her dress to show Salwā the bruises covering her body (285).

Limping and running away from violence, both women embody the oppressive circumstances they live, whether at the household or national level. The violent actions of husband and state are imprinted on their bodies.

This analogy between the domestic violence of the husband and the brute force of the repressive state is carried further with the arrival of the police. Both are forces of repression and sources of physical violence inflicted against those under their power. What Laylā says in reference to her husband beating her could equally be said for the state attacking peaceful protestors like Laylā: “the strong rule the weak” (283). When the first knock on the door comes Laylā quakes with fear and is positive that it is her husband come to find her (286-7). When it turns out to only be the dry cleaner, a perplexed Salwā has a chance to ask her friend how her husband could possibly know where her apartment is, seeing as she has never met the man, and why Laylā is so deathly afraid of him (287).

The answers to both questions are disturbing. To the latter the answer is simple. “If he knew that I came to you,” Laylā says, “he would kill me” (287). The answer to the former, however, is more complicated. As it turns out, Laylā’s husband probably could easily find out where Salwā lives because he used to work in a “sensitive area” of the government, probably referring to the secret service or some other high level military position (287). We do not find out where exactly because it is so secret that Laylā leans in to whisper the exact name of the area in Salwā’s ear (288). He no longer works there and is now a prominent business man (288), but it seems from the intensity of Laylā’s fear that resigning his post has not left him without strings to pull when he needs to track down a wayward wife. As for why he would be so angry that Laylā went to Salwā and not just to any other friend for refuge, it seems that Laylā’s husband Salīm is both virulently pro-government and acutely aware of Laylā’s past friendship with an anti-government agitator like Salwā. Laylā informs us that he always calls

Salwā and her fellow political activists "fleas" whose ideas "jump from brain to brain" like an infectious disease (287).

A final parallel in this scene found in the details Laylā shares about her suffering under her husband. We learn that he pulled her by her hair and literally imprisoned her; he locked her into a room day and night until she broke out through the door with a hammer and made her escape to Salwā's (288). The synchronicity is present in the fact that Laylā tells this story just moments before the police arrive to send both her and Salwā behind locked doors day and night, although there will be little possibility Laylā will be escaping the prison she is headed to as easily as she did from her domestic prison.

Later in the play when Salīm comes to visit Laylā in prison, he is once again linked with the power of a repressive government in his tactics, values and violence. The scene plays out like an interrogation in which Salīm feeds Laylā false information to try to get her to inform on her friends Salwā and Munā. In this very real sense Salīm appears to be representing the state. Salīm says, "I discovered what was hidden, your deceit, and so did the authorities" (355), thus Salīm is aligned once again with the state's power of surveillance.

Women Oppressing Women: Class and Generation

Class issues of alienation and subjugation between women are omnipresent in "Sign al-Nisāʾ", as is the subtext that cross-class solidarity would help all women improve their lives. The first example of this theme in the play arises in the first act with the juxtaposition of Laylā and Salwā. Where Salwā is middle class and engaged in agitating for change to improve the lives of Egypt's poorest citizens, Laylā is upper class and completely ignorant of the masses below her. This characterization of their class positions, as well as their personalities, is initially achieved by the differences obvious in their material and physical realities. Salwā's home is decorated in a natural, tasteful and minimalist style, while her

clothes are simple (al-ʿAssāl, "Sign" 279). Laylā, on the other hand, is dressed in garrulous, colourful, and expensive clothing (282). Al-ʿAssāl specifies that Laylā be shown to have "taken exaggerated care" in her various "adornments," that her face be covered in a heavy layer of makeup, and that her hair be dyed blond (282). She is excess and artifice where Salwā is practicality and authenticity. Al-ʿAssāl's intention to represent these two characters as polarities of each other is even noted in the stage directions when she states that Laylā "differs from Salwā in appearance" (282).

These superficial differences are later shown to be symbolic of real disparities between their deeper values. It is obvious that Salwā participated in the anti-government protests raging outside and is involved with reform movements to the extent that she fears arrest. Later we learn that she is a journalist who has already been imprisoned twice. Laylā, on the other hand, is completely oblivious to the social reform movement sweeping the nation "from Alexandria to Aswan" (280). She shakes in terror at the esclating sounds of explosions emanating from the city outside Salwā's window and asks in astonishment what the sounds are (284). Equally astonished, Salwā turns to Laylā and asks her how it is that she could possibly not know what the sounds are (284). Laylā cluelessly responds by asking if it is a war starting (284). Of course, Salwā must inform her that it is only the sounds of tear gas canisters exploding, to which Laylā again responds with a clueless "why?" (284).

Incredulous that someone could be so removed from reality, Salwā asks Laylā, "when you were coming you didn't see the city on fire and the demonstrations filling the streets?" (285). Laylā's reply is vague and indifferent: "oh . . true, I did see . . ," she says, "I saw a lot of people . . rows . . rows side by side and they were shouting something, I don't know what . . why are they shouting Salwā?" (285). Salwā, rather philosophically, replies that "pressure generates explosions . . people are exploding because of the conditions they live in . . so they

come out shouting" (285).

The differences between Salwā and Laylā's personalities are even more apparent at the moment the police arrive at Salwā's apartment. They are both limping at this point and so are both equally handicapped in their relative situations. Both are afraid of the possibilities that might await them behind the door; for Laylā an abusive husband and for Salwā the possibility of serving a prison term. However, the two women's reactions to the knocks on the door are polar opposites. Laylā trembles with fear at the first knock, begs Salwā not to answer the door but to help her hide first (286). When Salwā will not acquiesce, Laylā hobbles to and fro yelping from the pain of walking, then rushes to hide herself behind a folding screen (286). Conversely, Salwā remains calm and collected. She too has an injured foot, but she limps silently and stoically to the door (286). She is determined to answer it and to face her fate, come what may, whereas Laylā elects to hide at all costs.

After this false alarm, the real police knock arrives and once again Salwā and Laylā react to the same situation in completely different ways. This time, Salwā hesitates, knowing that every minute that passes increases her chances of being caught. Still, she approaches the door calm and collected, unfortunately only to let in a horde of soldiers and secret police (288). Al-ʿAssāl uses her stage directions to show Salwā's difficulty in facing this new predicament, as well as her ability to overcome it: "Salwā almost loses her poise in front of the large number of secret police and soldiers but she maintains control of herself" (289). Laylā on the other hand "is frozen in her place with fear" (289). Then, the lead officer draws his pistol and orders everyone not to move (289). Once again, a crisis moment distinguishes the two women. Salwā disregards his command, approaches the officer, faces him bravely to demand to know what right they have to invade her house (289). All the while Laylā merely stands still, trembling (289).

The contrast between the two could not be stronger. As the play progresses, we see how telling this early scene is. Salwā's strength in every situation shows her commitment to fight for equality and justice for everyone, even if it costs her her own life. Salwā continuously stands up for herself and for her beliefs courageously, and faces any difficult situation with equanamity and composure. Laylā's composure, on the other hand, completely dissolves in the face of adversity to the point where she is even unable to speak for a period when they are first admitted to prison. Laylā's class barrier is like a shell protecting her, and once she has been mistaken for the dissident Dr. Amīnah and thrown in prison, thereby being stripped her of her privileged identity, she is completely unhinged. Where before she was able to ignore injustice around her because of her sense of class entitlement, when she becomes the object of injustice she is lost and cannot even fight for herself.

However, Laylā does develop a great deal over the course of the play. She moves from willful ignorance, submission, self-deception and apathy to being an engaged person committed to informing herself, questioning authority, fighting for justice and aiming for complete honesty. Laylā's positive story of personal growth, despite being upper class and wealthy, is contrasted with Ilhām and her refusal to feel compassion for anyone but herself. Ilhām's cruelty and selfishness, combined with her utter devotion to the class hierarchy and commitment to exploitation of others is horrendous. There are plentiful examples of her cruelty throughout the play, but it is in the final scene when her truly hideous nature is revealed. Here al-ʿAssāl shows just how oppressive the class system can be for disadvantaged women of the lower classes.

All the prisoners in the women's prison admit to having committed the crimes they are accused of, although in all cases there are extreme extenuating circumstances which mitigate their guilt, such as ʿAdlāt murdering her husband after she found him raping her son and

Thawānī being sold into prostitution by her father. All of the prisoners are also lower-class and poor, with the exception of the political prisoners Salwā and Munā who are middle-class, Laylā who is upper-class, and Ilhām who is not a political prisoner but who shares Laylā's high social position. Ilhām is a wealthy, privileged woman who had no real reason for committing the crime of trafficking heroin except for greed for money and power. She is also unique in that she is the only prisoner to be released without serving her term. How she accomplished this is shockingly exploitative.

Everyone is surprised when the release papers come through for Ilhām and all of the four girls who have been acting as her servants in jail (al-ʿAssāl, "Sign" 403). At the same time as Ilhām and her gang are preparing to leave a slim young peasant girl called, rather ironically, Saʿdiyyah or 'good fortune,' is admitted to the prison (404). Laylā immediately recognizes her as a servant who works for Ilhām (404). When asked by the other prisoners what her crime was, Saʿdiyyah recited a story about how she was transporting a bag of heroin at the airport, and then maliciously passed it to Ilhām who was caught with it (404-5). Khūkhah is suspicious and asks her "who was it that made you memorize this stupid speech?" (405). Saʿdiyyah then denies her story is false.

That is, until the other prisoners inform her that there is a life sentence, and possibly also a death sentence, for trafficking heroin (405). The girl, a country peasant, had no idea this was what she was getting into, and when she finds out how grave the predicament is that she is in, she panics (405). Ilhām enters the courtyard to take a few more cruel jabs at the other prisoners before leaving, then "she barely glances at the girl in contempt" (405). As she turns to leave Saʿdiyyah runs to stop her from leaving while shouting "No! No! I cannot stay stay here while you get out. No, take me to the lawyer. Take me to the police!" (405). When her shouting is to no avail she turns to Laylā and says that she must know that it was her

husband Salīm who got her into this trouble (406).

Now the truth comes out and we learn that Laylā's husband Salīm conspired with Ilhām to bribe Saʿdiyyah and her poor family with ten thousand guineas to repeat the story she has just told to a lawyer (406). He convinced her mother that all Saʿdiyyah need do is memorize a short speech and say it to a lawyer to help get Madame Ilhām out of prison (406). Saʿdiyyah's family is so poor and uneducated that they do not even know what a lawyer is, so they are entirely unaware of the severity of what they are committing their daughter to (406). When they ask Salīm to explain more he lays guilt on them and says "you ate bread and salt at Madame Ilhām's and all she wants from you is a simple service" (406). As Saʿdiyyah says, ten thousand guineas was more than her entire family could earn in their whole lives, so how could she refuse (406)? As if that was not exploitative enough of Salīm and Ilhām, Khūkhah, whose husband is a drug dealer and who is street saavy, informs the girl she has been duped and that no one would do what she did for less than a hundred thousand guineas (406-7)! Frantically, Saʿdiyyah yells for the police, or a lawyer, or even the government to listen (406), but of course those services only serve the rich so she is ignored.

In the final scene of the play, however, justice is served in one sense when Laylā proves how far she has come. After she learns the truth about Ilhām's deception of innocent Saʿdiyyah, Laylā attacks Ilhām. She who was shivering in fear at the beginning of the play has finally stood up for justice for another, and now submits calmly and gracefully to being taken by the guards into solitary confinement (409-10). She confesses to Salwā that Salīm had offered to get her out of prison if she would inform on Salwā and find out from her Kamāl's hiding place so he could be arrested (410-11). But now, Laylā says, she can see that Salīm is wrong and that Salwā and the other social justice activists are not "enemies of the state" (410). It is Ilhām and her like who are the real enemies (411). She declares that she will

divorce Salīm and that she will never be silent about oppression again (411). A final symbolic proof of her internal transformation comes when she strips the fake blond wig off her head and reveals her black hair beneath (411). She is now her true self, without artifice, and is committed to helping others and fighting for justice. Salwā proclaims this is the Laylā she knew in their youth and says how much she has missed her (411-2). The two women embrace and all the other women in the prison surround Laylā and kiss her. Laylā has now joined with her lower-class sisters in solidarity.

Class is not the only divisive factor in the community of women who live in the prison. There are two character pairings in "Sign al-Nisā'" which illuminate the roles the generational divide can play in rupturing and repairing ties of solidarity among women. The first set of these characters is Salwā and her daughter Hudā. The variance between these two women centres primarily around the question of chastity. Salwā represents a more traditional, conservative interpretation of female sexual honour and tries to impose this view on Hudā, with violence if necessary. Hudā on the other hand, represents a younger, more liberal interpretation of what the actions and boundaries acceptable for a respectable woman are. The tension between these two comes to a head when Salwā physically assaults Hudā after discovering her visiting a young man.

However, the second pairing of Salwā and Munā, works to resolve the tensions between Salwā and her daughter. Salwā and Munā are similar in their outlook and values; both are activists utterly committed to improving their country. Yet, no matter how liberal Salwā may be in pursuing her progressive activist goals, she still retains the traditional mindset when it comes to her daughter's chastity. Munā, on the other hand, shares many commonalities, including age, with Salwā's daughter Hudā. She is Salwā twenty years ago and helps to gently guide Salwā to understanding her hypocrisy about her daughter's honour. In this way

Munā acts as a bridge between the two generations.

The contradiction between Salwā's views on women are revealed at the very beginning of the play. In the second scene of the first act when she has just returned from the demonstrations, we overhear a conversation between her and her husband on the phone and he speaks quite brusquely to her. Salwā registers her discontent right away and so Kamāl apologizes (al-ʿAssāl, "Sign" 280). This little exchange shows us that respect and dialogue is an important part of their relationship. However, directly after this Salwā says something very curious. Kamāl is anxious, given the chaos and violence in the streets at that moment, to know the whereabouts of their children and Salwā has just informed him that they safe at her mother's. Then, despite the urgency of their discussion and of its pertinence to the situation at hand, she adds a comment about the "dangerous age" their daughter is in, and how they must "raise her properly" (280). Kamāl responds that there is no time for talking about this issue now and returns the focus of the conversation to the dangers of the present.

The pair are evidently well known to the authorities for their political activities, for Kamāl speaks to her in code at this point, presumably to avert any authorities who may be eavesdropping on their phone line. Indeed, as mentioned previously Kamāl had earlier cautioned his wife about revealing any information on the phone, and later in the conversation he refuses to tell her where he is going to seek safety because he will not say it on the telephone (281). In code, Kamāl asks his wife to dispose of any evidence of their political involvement by telling her to "sweep the house and be careful not to miss anything," and then to leave the apartment as quickly as she can to avoid meeting the unnamed agents who will "arrive unexpectedly at any moment" (280-1). The hidden meaning of his message becomes clear the moment she hangs up the phone and begins to frantically collect papers hidden in books, inside statues, behind paintings, in vases and then proceeds to burn them all

in a metal trash can and hide their ashes in a secret compartment in the desk (281). Clearly, they both suspect their home is about to be raided (as it subsequently is) so Salwā must dispose of any incriminating evidence.

In the context of this level of very real danger, with the threat of prison for either or both of them hanging in the air, Salwā's concern with her daughter's sexual propriety seems misplaced. Later, we learn that this is merely the first indication of a contradictory trend in Salwā's character. While she fights for equality on all fronts, including on the home front between herself and her husband, she seems unable or unwilling to shake off the conservative view that her daughter's chastity is a vessel of the family's honour.

During her time in prison we learn more about what has occurred to make Salwā so concerned about her daughter Hudā. One day Salwā returns to her cell from a visiting day and Munā is puzzled to find her unhappy. Munā asks what is the matter and Salwā confesses that she has quarreled with Hudā, so her daughter is refusing to visit her in prison (367). At first Salwā will only say their quarrel stems from Hudā's inability to understand "what it means for a mother to fear for her daughter" (367). However, as the conversation proceeds and Salwā becomes more candid, she reveals the true nature of their quarrel to Munā.

As it turns out, Salwā received an anonymous phone call one day that informed her Hudā was spending time at the home of a boy named Hishām (367). Salwā rushes to the address, burning with rage and finds Hudā there (368). "Of course I felt I had to beat her and kill her too," Salwā says, and as for Hishām, she "wanted to grab him by his windpipe and kill him too" (368). She then pulled Hudā out of the house by her hair and beat her until Hishām's mother came out and "gave her a lesson in humiliation" by scolding her for being so hard on her daughter (368). Munā is surprised Salwā does not see the obvious hypocrisy in her actions, so she feels compelled to point it out to her:

> let me tell you lady, that you live a strange contradiction. You are a progressive woman who fights for the nation and yet you live a flagrant contradiction. Are you a liberated woman, really? Don't you still see Hudā as just a girl whose hymen you must worry about? (369)

Salwā's response is shock: "Hymen! Why do you bring the hymen into this now?!" (369). But with time Salwā's shock transforms into acknowledgement that Munā is right about the contradictory nature of her words and actions, and even admits that her husband has also been accusing her of the same hypocrisy but she did not listen to him (369). The younger generation has succeeded in challenging the social hypocrisy of the older one.

VI. Conclusion

In this thesis I investigated how being a woman writer has affected Fatḥiyyah al-ʿAssāl's body of writing. I argued that al-ʿAssāl's creative corpus corroborates the idea of a discrete female tradition of Egyptian writing. I discovered that there are some key commonalities in the artistic strategies and responses of women writers to a literary environment that is, by and large, hostile to female writers. This hostility, which forms a real barrier to female artists, is the product of a complex web of interwoven historical and social forces. The subject position of being a woman writer in a patriarchal society whose literary norms are largely defined by the male literary elite places al-ʿAssāl and other female writers in a marginal position. This gendered marginality has impacted her body of writing, and that of other female Egyptian writers such as Salwā Bakr and Laṭīfah al-Zayyāt, in both stylistic and thematic terms.

By delineating the contours of three of al-ʿAssāl's most distinctive stylistic choices, by demonstrating the social justice bent of her writing, and by linking these choices to similar choices made by other Egyptian women writers, I have here intervened in the debate about the existence of a discrete tradition of women's writing in Egypt. I assert that considered as its own tradition, Egyptian women's writing differs from that of Egyptian male writers in several notable ways; that these differences result from the relationship between gender and literary marginality in Egypt; that this marginality influences the style and content of women writers; and that these common features of women's writing in Egypt recur with sufficient frequency to indicate a distinctive literary tradition propagated by women writers. Most of all, I argue that these distinct literary choices add to the complexity and intricacy of Egyptian women's writings.

The common links between these women's writing are, first and foremost, their extended use of the Egyptian dialect for written literature. This choice of the subordinate dialect, associated with the traditionally female controlled domestic sphere, over the prestige language which reigns supreme in the traditionally male-dominated public realms of media, politics and religious leadership is highly significant. The gendered nature of linguistic hierarchy in Egypt is generated by educational norms which prevent a large proportion of women from attaining fluency in the written "high" language of *fuṣḥā*. In this context, writing in the "low" Egyptian *ʿāmmiyyah* becomes an act of solidarity with the poor, the uneducated and the downtrodden - among whom women make up a disproportionate number. Marilyn Booth comments that al-Zayyāt's *ʿāmmiyyah* passages in *The Open Door* are "lively, precise, *female*" in their celebration of the beauty of everyday speech ("Translator's xxvi-xxvii). The same is true of al-ʿAssāl's writing, in which she validates the creativity and expressiveness of spoken Egyptian by enacting it as written discourse.

Another stylistic choice common to Fatḥiyyah al-ʿAssāl and many other Egyptian women writers is the creation of a fragmented, tangential and interruptive narrative structure. This form of circular narration is closely linked to the politics of using the spoken Egyptian language as a medium of literary expression, as this style of writing closely mimics everyday speech patterns, once again celebrating the quotidian over the epic, formalized generic conventions of the traditional canon of Arabic literature. In a similarly revisionist vein, by representing a wide spectrum of female characters, these authors counter the historic tendency of Arabic literature to represent women as uncomplicated, stereotypical character types, such as the "angel" or the "whore." Moreover, by allowing these characters to speak for themselves and by preventing one character's discourse from towering over the rest, even to the point of deflecting focus from the subject-author character in the genre of autobiography to other women, these Egyptian women writers represent a distinctly female

attempt to integrate gender and social justice aims into the very structure of their works.

As with many other Egyptian women authors, we find in al-ʿAssāl's works a distinct focus on gender justice issues that recur in her autobiography and in her play "Sign al-Nisāʾ". Deploying the theme of female imprisonment which occurs on both real and symbolic levels al-ʿAssāl explores the limitations inhabiting female bodies place on women in the social sphere. Women's bodies are the first prison women encounter and this imprisonment is socially driven by the concept of women's honour and chastity. Zeidan has observed that women writers must "come to terms with their ambivalence toward their own bodies" which are both "symbols of their individual existence, but also constructed as objects by their culture and therefore simultaneously limiting to them as individuals" (6). This statement rings true in the case of the author's own life and the experiences of her characters. But society is also a prison in which men are the "guards" holding the majority of the power and women are the "prisoners" under the guards' control.

Al-ʿAssāl also demonstrates the methods by which social conventions become just as restrictive to women's movements and development as concrete prison walls would be. The successive introductions to the four volumes of her autobiography demonstrate her own difficulties with reconciling her roles as writer, wife and mother. Moreover, she makes a strong analogy between the oppressive measures of the autocratic state and the oppression some women experience in marriage. It is patriarchy on both a minor and a major scale, with violence and coercion being the main forces used by both structures to control women. However, patriarchy is a complex phenomenon and so al-ʿAssāl does not lay all the blame at the doors of men, but explores the complexity of women's involvement in oppressive social structures which can unite or divide women, such as class and generation.

Al-ʿAssāl is a pioneer of women's dramatic writing in Egypt and she leaves a powerful literary legacy behind her. The fact that a television production of "Sign al-Nisāʾ"

was released on Egyptian television in 2014 shows that al-ʿAssāl's dramatic works are still relevant, even decades after they were composed. There is a certain satisfaction in this closing of the circle in the sense that her most notable play will finally reach the platform in which she perfected her theatrical art: television. Through this medium she can continue spreading her message of social and gender justice to a much wider audience than the stage permits.

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