

Arab Feminist Autobiographies: Nawal El Saadawi

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Every autobiographer approaches differently the challenge of remembering facts and events and then plunging them into the stream of days out of which meaning bubbles. The autobiographer does not necessarily search for the truth in her life but rather wrestles with it in order to discover what writing will reveal of that life's meaning. Autobiographical writing floats across the continuum between deeply personal reflection and public confession, between writing for oneself and for others. Without a reader perched on her shoulder, the autobiographer can write more easily because she is free to say whatever she wants. At the same time, the autobiographer is driven to commit memory to writing. Fyodor Dostoevsky elaborates: "on paper it comes across somehow more majestically. There's something inspirational about it, one's a stricter judge of oneself, it adds to the style" (Dostoevsky 39). Writing one's life may help others to understand and guide theirs. The responsibility to the reader and consequently the need to judge oneself more strictly, he adds ironically, enhances the aesthetics of the text. He may have laughed at the thought, but that attention to style may turn a mundane fact into an occasion for conjuring an event out of the depths of memory and giving it aesthetic shape.

Many have claimed that autobiography, regardless of its truthfulness, was a genre foreign to Arab sensibilities, but reality and recent research have proved otherwise. In 2001, Dwight Reynolds edited a volume of essays that more than any other publication contests this erroneous claim. Essays in this volume trace a millennial tradition of

Arab life writing from the 9th to the 19th centuries, from Hunayn ibn Ishaq (d. 873) to Ali Mubarak (d.1893). Many famous and not so famous men thought long ago that their lives were worth telling. Two such famous men are the Iraqi Imam Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali (1058–1111) and the Syrian Usama ibn Munqidh (1095–1188). They wrote their lives during a turbulent period in world history: The Crusades. Written after al-Ghazali had passed through a spiritual crisis, his *Deliverance from Error* is a classic example of a person writing a life that he considers important, aspirational and hopefully inspirational. In 1095, the year Pope Urban II launched the Crusades al-Ghazali renounced his brilliant career at the Nizamiyya Academy in Baghdad to perform the Hajj. He wrote his life in an attempt to make meaning of it and in so doing to attain the kind of certainty and truth that transcends reason. The 1178 autobiography of Usama ibn Munqidh, born the year that al-Ghazali set off for the Hajj, describes the weird and disturbing customs of the boors sent to recover Jerusalem. It was not necessary, Reynolds claims, to write an entire book for an author's ruminations on his (sic) career to count as autobiography; even only one or two pages might suffice. Reynolds' impressive list of autobiographies penned in a millennium believed to be devoid of them¹ includes three women only: one from the medieval period and two from the modern period. The autobiography of Aisha bint Yusuf al-Ba'uniya (d. 1516) comes in first person passages quoted in later biographical sources. These fragments, Reynolds writes, "suggest a lost autobiographical text" (Reynolds 272). One might ask: how many other women's autobiographies have been

¹ The volume includes an annotated bibliography of 130 autobiographies written over a millennium.

lost over the past millennium? The two modern autobiographers are Aisha Taymuriya (1840–1902)² and Huda Sha‘rāwi (1879–1947).³

In what follows, I briefly examine the art of autobiography, touching on a few modern Arab women’s life stories, and then turn to Arab feminist Nawal El Saadawi whose autobiography among others I missed in Reynolds’ book.

What Is Autobiography?

Is there such a thing as autobiography? Citing the German poet Heinrich Heine, Fyodor Dostoevsky dismisses the very possibility: “true autobiographies are almost impossible ... a person is bound to lie about himself” (Dostoevsky 39). Right, but this lying person had set out with the intention to write her life and in the gaps that memory refused to fill she had to insert guesses and assumptions. At the risk of defining what many critics⁴ insist defies definition beyond the hybridity of fact and fiction, I will start with what I believe autobiography is not.

Autobiography is not a testimonial with its political message designed to convince a court of law. Testimonials do not examine a particular life in its singularity and exceptionality. Even while telling that singular and exceptional life, the narrative threads through and in its relationship to others. Doris Sommer theorizes the difference between women’s autobiography and testimonial in terms of the writer’s illusion, intention and situation. Whereas the autobiographer “nurtures an illusion of singularity, an illusion of standing *in* for others,” the

² Taymuriya’s childhood vignettes describe her rejection of her mother’s insistence on domesticity and her longing for inclusion in her father’s circle of intellectuals.

³ The memoirs of Huda Sha‘rāwi, pioneer of Arab feminism who established the Egyptian Feminist Union in 1923 and launched unveiling, did not come out until 1981, thirty-four years after her death. From diaries and memory, she “dictated her memoirs to her secretary sometime before her death in 1947. The last date mentioned in the text is 1935, and a journal in 1937 announced the imminent publication of the memoirs” (Baron 118). For further discussion of this memoir, see Ahmed (154–174).

⁴ See Nawar al-Hassan Golley’s analysis of Arab women’s autobiographies.

testimonial narrator has the illusion of “standing *up* among them” (Sommer 112; original emphasis). The testimonial “I” is woven into the tapestry of a communal “I.” Sommer contrasts the situation of the autobiographer with that of the testimonial narrator: the first is private and the second is public. Another element that Sommer highlights has to do with style and how that style affects reception. The autobiography “strains to produce a personal and distinctive *style* as part of the individuation process, but testimonial strives to preserve or to renew an interpersonal *rhetoric* ... the testimonial produces complicity... Once the subject of the testimonial is understood as the community made up of a variety of roles, the reader is called in to fill one of them” (118, original emphasis). This is true of readers of Nobel Peace laureate Nadia Murad’s story of her abduction by Islamic State militants and abuse in one of their rape camps. In her 2017 *The Last Girl*, she details her own experience but insists that this is not only her story but also that of so many other Yazidi women rape survivors (see cooke, “Murad”). This tension, Sommer writes, “between affirming her singularity and denying it in favor of the first-person plural” (123) is a crucial element in testimonials as is an “insistence on showing relationships. These can be among forms of oppression and among those who suffer or profit from it” (129). Accordingly, Murad reveals the most humiliating and shaming of all experiences a woman can endure, because hers is a human rights document and the truth of its details and their specificity must be credible. She knows that this narration of abjection is the only way to convince an international tribunal that it is their duty to seek justice on behalf of herself and her sisters. Sommer concludes her contrast between the two genres with a dramatic flourish: “Autobiographers, can enjoy the privilege and the privacy of being misunderstood, whereas those who testify cannot afford or even survive it” (130). Murad is fully cognizant of this fact that she deploys in her title: she wants to be the last girl with a story like hers.

These crucial differences between autobiography and testimonial suggest a re-categorization of the 1985 *L'amour la fantasia* by the Algerian Assia Djebar. She had claimed that the collective life story she narrated was her autobiography, but it should be considered testimonial. When she writes about her experience during the 1954–1962 Revolution and then links it to women's anti-colonial activism and their post-independence marginalization and then further connects these 20th century experiences to the erasure of women's contributions during the 132-year national resistance against the French, she is calling for transformed consciousness in her reader. To weave her own story into the stories of anonymous women fighters erased from the official story is not about exceptionalizing herself, but about recuperating lost voices that the world jury needs to acknowledge. Her project presents an alternative, subaltern history built out of composite bodies and identities deciphered between the lines of official history.

Autobiography differs from memoir as much as it does from testimonial. Memoirs recount for posterity an individual's participation in a noteworthy event. What is missing in the more historiographical project of a memoir is "the more personal dimension," the excavation of the private life (Monciaud 88). Read, for example, three of Nawal El Saadawi's memoirs that I do not consider autobiography. Her 1958 *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* attests to the role women played in the early post-independence Egyptian countryside. El Saadawi is the protagonist of a medical report rather than an autobiography. Like other carceral memoirs, Nawal El Saadawi's 1984 *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* documents the dailiness of jail with its frustrations and small successes and may provide models for survival in a space of abjection

without the intention of making sense of a whole life.⁵ Travel memoirs that vaunt the author's cosmopolitanism, like El Saadawi's 1986 *My Travels through the World*, may reveal personal experiences without plumbing those adventures in search for their deeper meaning.⁶

Nor is autobiography to be discerned in the interstices of Marianne Hirsch's postmemory, the neologism she invented for the traumatic memory transmitted from one generation to another, whose intensity and repetition render it so vivid that it becomes one's own in its narration (Hirsch).

Fragments nestled between the lines of texts that smuggle personal details into dry documents may be informative about the life of the author but they are not autobiographical. When I was researching the life of the early 20th century Lebanese pioneer of Islamic feminism Nazira Zeineddine, I looked everywhere for some word from her about the most basic facts of her life. All that I had were her two books of Qur'anic and hadith exegesis. In *Al-sufur wa al-hijab* (1928) and then in *Al-fatah wa al-shuyukh* (1929), Zeineddine argued for women's rights in an Islam that she showed men had twisted to their benefit. Pretty dry and not biographically useful, I thought. However, after interviewing her nephew and two sons in Lebanon, Kuwait and Italy, I began to discern autobiographical moments in her two theological tomes. When she wrote "*Ya shaykh/ya shuyukh*," I wondered if this second-person form of address might not be a rhetorical flourish but rather something she'd said to someone at some time. Using second-person singular and plural

⁵ Golley treats El Saadawi's memoirs as autobiographies, making the point that the memoirs reflect intensely on the author's experiences (Golley 131–165). This is true but each memoir focuses on the political context, rather than evaluating and imaginatively constructing an entire life that subsumes the external to the internal.

⁶ Even though she does not treat the text as a travelogue but as the author's "contribution to the question of identity" (180), I question Golley's inclusion of El Saadawi's 1986 *Raḥalātī fī al-‘ālam* (*My Travels around the World*) in her book about Arab women's autobiographies.

pronouns allowed her to participate in a polemical discourse that at the time was considered inappropriate for women. I began to discern the “I” in the exegetical texts and read passion where I had anticipated desiccated exegesis but had found none. This “I” and this “you” sent me to the places Zeineddine had inhabited and encouraged me to look at the items she had used, alert to biographical resonances in sites and things. The two theological books filled with complex life fragments were not autobiographical but rather, like memoirs, revealed her participation in a momentous period of history (see cooke, *Nazira*).

In our networked world, memoir can emerge out of an ostensibly political blog. A vivid example comes from an Iraqi IT specialist who uses the pseudonym Riverbend. Shortly after the American military invaded her country in 2003, she began to blog her impressions. She kept the world abreast of her reactions to social and political developments during the first years of the US occupation of her country. She interlaced Bush’s inarticulate speeches about the improvements in the lives of Iraqis brought about by the occupation with reports of US troops murdering Iraqi girls (Riverbend 153). Hyperlinks amplify her didactic purpose: she wants her readers to know who she and her people are. This referential process, according to Valerie Anishchenkova, creates the memoirist’s identity with “a continuous impact on the readers’ articulation of their personal identities and vice versa” (Anishchenkova 189–192). Such blogs, “provide a fresh outlook on the complex relationship between individual and collective: there is something very paradoxical about rendering highly individual, private narrative accounts in the highly public space of the WWW” (173). Like Zeineddine’s second person interjections, Riverbend’s narrative is dialogical, building bridges between cultures. Through threaded comments and responses, she at first inadvertently and then deliberately produces a memoir that outlines the silhouette of a life in a time of trauma.

Above all, autobiography must not be sought in women's works of fiction. But that is precisely what some critics do to disparage a female author's creativity. Women according to such critics cannot imagine anything beyond their own experiences. Yet, the life and writings of all authors are entangled. This fact is inevitable and, crucially, gender neutral. What is missing in this understanding of the imbrication of the author's life and a fictive text is the intention to write one's own life. The creative writer throws her/himself into the world of fictional others where they take over the evolution of the characters who dictate their thoughts, actions, and reactions. The critic's gender and standpoint may determine the judgment about whether glimpses of the life of the author in the fiction matter. For example, when some male critic picks up a novel by Fyodor Dostoevsky and lauds its art and imagination, readers accept that evaluation. They will not expect the critic to have picked through the text for those scraps of the Russian's experiences in a Siberian prison, or the Baden-Baden casino or Petersburg salons that will lessen the art of the novel. However, when this same critic picks up a Jane Austen novel he may scavenge it for indications of domesticity, a needle or a piano, and then triumphantly write: "In the center of every feminine novel, one discovers the author... Incapable of abstracting a fragment of themselves to constitute a whole, [women writers] have to put all of themselves into their work" (Larnac, qtd. in Miller 59). This denigration of women's creativity due to its autobiographical limitations has been universal. A disappointing example comes from a 1986 international literature conference held at Duke University. In conversation with me, the Lebanese critic and writer Elias Khoury opined that the many Lebanese women who had published books on the Lebanese civil war were not worth reading and that my project to analyze their works was as vacuous as theirs. These "dames de salon" had time on their hands and nothing better to do than scribble stuff about their empty lives.

Neither fact nor fiction yet both, autobiography wrestles the meanderings of memory down to the flat ground of narrative. Autobiography entails intention to explore an entire life and in that exploration to unravel threads so tightly knotted they choke meaning. Autobiographers examine and create meaning out of the incoherence and chaos of daily living. In order to convince the reader of the truth of the represented life, the writer will sign on to Philippe Lejeune's autobiographical pact that requires the author's name to be identical with that of the narrator in order to confirm the "explicit project of sincere truth telling; a promise to the *reader* (original emphasis) that the textual and referential 'I' are one" (Miller 47). She affirms the story is true and hers alone because she uses her name.

However circular its structure, however repetitious its details, an autobiography will tell a story that somehow takes account of a beginning, a middle, and an end. This ending point marks the moment when the author has set herself an almost impossible task: to make meaning out of a life filled with chaos, contradictions and complexities. But even that ending point in the narration of a life is only a pause in the lived trajectory and it is from there that the life is written.

Autobiography is a present construction of a past life. Karl Weintraub argues that writing a life invests it with

a meaning it did not possess before. The meaning of the past is intelligible and meaningful in terms of the present understanding... Facts are thus placed into relationships retroactively in which they did not stand when they were first experienced... Past life is being rearranged because it is being interpreted in terms of the meaning (or meanings) that life is now seen to possess. (Weintraub, qtd. in Monciaud 87)

To write one's life, in other words, is to create it at the moment of writing when past people and places are recovered and extricated from

the folds of memory. To narrate a dimly recalled event shines a light on to the surrounding debris that over time had lost its color. But when the words dance on to the page, and the penumbra of things lived long ago and thought forgotten glimmers, the color returns. In the chiaroscuro of life writing, absolute truth dissipates into workable truth and irrelevance. Nawal El Saadawi articulates the impossibility of autobiographical truth in lyrical terms when she meditates on her hope that “there should be no difference between the letter of the words and the truth, but the words written down on the sheets of paper were never the truth” (El Saadawi, *Daughter* 52). Does it matter that we can no longer distinguish between what actually happened and what time leads us to believe must have happened? It is not absolute truth but many workable truths that is sought.

The decision to write one’s life signals a perception that one’s experiences are exceptional or interesting or inspirational. In the latter case, an autobiographer like Augustine will invite readers to see and understand the meaning of their lives through the lens of this emblematic tale. Conversely, Nawal El Saadawi wrote her life to understand herself and the child who never left her and, she believes, contributed to the evolution of the leader she became. This may be the child we must all recover to allow the meaning of our lives to emerge.

Nawal El Saadawi’s Life and Papers

In the early 1990s and far from home, Nawal finally wrote her autobiography. She was living in exile at Duke University after Egyptian Islamists had put her on their death list. I read the first volume only since it is there that we can read the writer building brick by brick the foundation of the life of a fearless feminist. In my analysis of this autobiography, I am less concerned with the “what”—and whether that “what” is true or not—than with the “how” of this autobiography. How

does Nawal El Saadawi narrate her life and identify turning points in the evolution of an Arab feminist heroine?

In her 1995 *Awraqī Hayātī*,⁷ Nawal El Saadawi signs on to Philippe Lejeune's autobiographical pact. From the first sentence, she not only mentions but also writes about her name, asserting that the life about to be penned is hers: "It was my mother who taught me how to read and write. The first word I wrote was my name, Nawal. I loved the way it looked. It meant a 'gift.' My name became a part of me" (El Saadawi, *Daughter* 1). Her name and, flowing out of it, her life fills her with wonder at the woman she became and the child that survived.

The first incident in the autobiography notes the child's dismay that God did not acknowledge a letter she had written to Him. When her mother tells her that God cannot read or write, she sends Him no more letters. Who is this God? Is He the God that her father and brother think they own? Does their God punish girls? Surely He must, because already as a six-year old child, she notices that when her clitoris is "pulled out from between my thighs" and cut, the women invoke Him, so He must approve (11). In that year of her excision she makes a terrible connection: "I learnt these three words by heart and they were like one sentence: 'God, calamity, marriage'." (40) With time she comes to believe that this misogynist God is not the real God, for her illiterate grandmother taught her that the real God is the God of justice. In the sections about her childhood God appears often, but by the end, God has disappeared from her pages. Religious authorities had undermined her spiritual life and "betrayed" the Qur'an by choosing "meanings that one's reason refused" (247–252). They made her hate religion.

Diving down through sixty-two years, she retrieves her childhood in Kafr Tahla, a poor village by the River Nile. Meandering through the

⁷ The Arabic means My Papers My Life. Her then-husband Sherif Hetata translated the book into English with the title *Daughter of Isis*.

village pathways and trusting the events that present themselves in all their wild woolliness, she chronicles the phases in her defiance of the gendered expectations of her rural society. Rejecting systemic gender injustice, she signals the first moment in her feminist trajectory: her refusal of a proposed suitor when she was still a child. Unlike her cousin Zaynab who married young and remained in their birth village (128), Nawal left for Cairo to attend school. After graduating, she continued her education at Cairo University, earning a medical degree in psychiatry.

This autobiography is surprisingly vulnerable and confusingly contradictory. The young teenager felt shame when she had her first menses, afraid that people would know that her body was in a state of shame (64). Years later, seated in the Duke University library surrounded by students the older woman again describes feelings of shame about her body because it is old, the veins “stand out under the skin of my hands” (48). The feminist we expect not to need her mother needs her to the end of this book. Even now in the now of the autobiography when she is 62 and fifteen years older than her mother was when she died, she recalls her mother’s despair (how can she except through an act of daring imagination?) when she hears that she has given birth to a girl (18–22). She still mourns her mother’s inability to express love for her children even if this love burns “like a flame but held back” (152). All of this repressed love hurts those who were deprived, and her longing for her mother’s touch aches on the page, the memory of her mother’s hand on her child’s face returns as a refrain often accompanied by details of her death. In such a world of suppressed love, women become cruel to each other. The midwife who cuts the clitoris of young girls seemed to feel satisfaction in the action: “a mixture of joy and revenge” (61). She is not alone in that bizarre attitude. This woman’s cruelty “was the cruelty that had grown in them through suppression, the steam held back under pressure until their bodies were filled with it to bursting point. It was a black cruelty under a smooth skin from which the hair had been ripped

off to leave it with the smoothness of a snake" (195). Love repressed turns lethal.

The contradictions in the autobiography stand out, stopping the reader: "But you just wrote the opposite!" These contradictions, however, should be read together to understand the ambivalence in the text and of course in her life: "I loved school despite the cane stick with which Ismail Effendi beat me over the tips of my fingers" (46). School represented freedom and a future but also a torment (217, 164). In sections referring to her medical profession, she confesses confusion about her contradictory feelings: "The word doctor had a magical ring in my ears. It seemed to rescue me from the stares of the men, carry me up to the heavens, where I soared like a winged bird" (100). But later, she writes: "I hated the doctors, especially the medical inspector" (172-173). The idea of medicine is magical, its reality quite other. She makes fun of her fellow medical students who flirted with each other over the cadavers they were dissecting. But she admits to her fear, her dread of sickness, especially the cancer she was supposed to treat (204). Not only do doctors fail to cure, they can only work with one person at a time. Boxed into their specializations, they can neither treat the whole body nor can they discern the links between sickness, poverty and politics (291-292). It is through the writing of this text that both writer and reader can better understand why Nawal left the medical profession.

She tells in loving but also harsh detail contradictory stories about her family and wonders at her sometimes inexplicable anger: "It is normal when we show anger and rebel against those whom we hate, but when our anger and rebellion are directed against those whom we love, what will the words be like when we express them in writing?" (15) She chafes against her inability to stay steady in her emotions, especially when she thinks about her parents. The contradictions that characterize her relationship to her parents may share a single paragraph in a

rollercoaster of love and hate, admiration and repugnance. While her father excludes her from God's sacred circle, he also insists against his wife's remonstrance that Nawal and her sisters be educated. However, no sooner has she started to succeed at primary school than he wants her to come home to help her mother who now refuses to take her daughter out of the school she had not wanted her to attend. When Nawal turns eleven it is time to go to secondary school, and her parents quarrel over whether this child can go to Cairo alone. Her mother insists she can, since she will stay with her aunt who over the course of the autobiography turns into a bit of a monster. Whatever quarrel she had with her father pales in comparison with her pride in his nationalist activities, especially during the 1919 Revolution against the British (107). This father is the man who reassured her of her creativity after her Arabic teacher denounced her (215-216). He was, we learn toward the end of the autobiography, "a very gentle father" (207).⁸

The autobiography follows the trajectory of a feminist's coming of age. It traces moments of transformation that shaped this emblematic feminist activist of the Arab world. We read her dedication to changing the gendered values and norms of the world in which she lives. This world is not restricted to her residence in Cairo but rather extends to the many cultures and societies she had encountered in her numerous world travels.

From the very beginning we read her indignation that her name does not include her mother's name. She denounces the different treatment that she and her brother receive at home, although she is the smart one who has succeeded at school and her brother consistently fails. Unlike the girls around her who tend to their femininity, young Nawal cannot understand why women tear the skin off their bodies as

⁸ Her novels are full of dreadful men, mostly father figures. When I once asked her about her father, she laughed: "people think that because I am critical of men in my writings that my father must have been a terrible man." No, he had always supported her.

they remove hair from their arms and legs with a sugar wax (106). Girls in her village became nubile before puberty, but already at eleven Nawal refused to be married, turning away suitors by her deliberately unkempt appearance and offensive actions.⁹ As she watches injustice to women, anger grows,

rising up like a compressed steam ... Anger had never stopped accumulating in me since the day I was born ... the anger of a child is the most powerful, the purest, the truest of all angers. It accumulates in the body, multiplies over time. (163, 206).

This anger motivates action against injustice. In high school, she is recognized as a leader when she and some friends participate in a demonstration. Breaking through the locked school gates, she leads them, shouting:

Long live Egypt in freedom... My country, my country, I give you my heart and my love... At moments like this the subconscious, the giant doormat under the conscious mind, bursts out... At that moment I realized how powerful I had become. (228–232)

She notes the evolution of a schoolgirl into a national leader. When the demonstrators appoint her the school's delegate, her headmistress accuses her of "causing a riot" and she is proud of the accusation (228–232).

She does not write of this feminist awakening as a deliberate process that can be followed. She pours stories into the stream of days, *ayyām*, battles¹⁰:

Writing became a weapon with which to fight the system, which draws its autocratic power exercised by the ruler of the state, and that of the

⁹ When Uncle Mamduh tried to kiss her when she was a teenager she derided him for his wealth that he thought would get him what he wanted and for his illiterateness (177).

¹⁰ Her admiration for Taha Husayn's autobiography *Al-Ayyam* can be read in the almost tactile quality to her writing that distinguishes his description of a blind child's world (131-132).

father or the husband in the family. The written word for me became an act of rebellion against injustice exercised in the name of religion, or morals, or love. (292)

Creativity in life and writing mirrored each other in the battle to seize the rights due her as a woman who actually fought with arms (288).

This feminist leader and writer is no advocate of simple sisterhood. Nawal sees that women do not support each other in the class-patriarchal system that marks the world today. It is women who cut little girls' clitoris. She is not in awe of women leaders no matter how influential they had been in fighting for women's rights. A remarkable example comes in her description of the Nabawiyya Mūsā Secondary School she attends in Cairo's Abbasiya district. Readers might expect her to admire the school's headmistress and namesake Nabawiyya Mūsā, who with Huda Sha'rāwi had pioneered Egyptian feminism and women's education in the 1920s. But those readers would be wrong:

For me she was never a pioneer or a model ... (she) was like German headmistresses under Hitler, or French headmistresses in schools run by nuns. And she hated the girls. When our eyes met I could read the hate in her look, read hate for the self she carried around in black. School under her had become for me like a funeral where everything was the color of mourning. (161)

The hatred of the schoolgirl is not moderated with the years. The 62 year-old Nawal cannot forgive this courageous woman for the bitterness she spewed on the schoolgirls.

Comparing Two Arab Feminist Autobiographies

Nawal is not the only Arab feminist to have tackled the autobiographical project. Many others over the 20th century wrote their lives. Note how differently Nawal's friend and fellow in arms, the Moroccan aristocrat Fatima Mernissi writes her life. Her *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem*

Girlhood published in 1994 differs radically from *Daughter of Isis* that was published the next year. Born into an upper class family in Fez, Fatima stayed in her palatial home until leaving the country to earn her BA and PhD degrees in France and the U.S. She depicts her childhood in a harem—a term that recurs throughout the book.¹¹ Her *harem* childhood circumscribed by *hudud*, or limits on women's freedom, did not disturb her. She had been "happy because the frontiers were crystal clear" (Mernissi 3). Her earliest memories, filtered through veils and gates, turn her childhood in an aristocratic harem into an Orientalist fantasy.

While both writers concentrate on their early years, their dreams and feminist lessons, the structure of the autobiographies are worlds apart. Fatima's autobiography is linear; she leaves the child behind when she grows up. In contrast, Nawal's sometimes rollicking and sometimes tragic journey takes her wherever it will back and forth in time. She begins and ends with and keeps circling back to the child she is surprised to still know. Each autobiographer presents the child she was before becoming a revolutionary. As noted above, Nawal's tempestuous, loving child accompanies the woman throughout her life reminding her of her mother's tender touch on her cheek. Fatima's child is remembered from a distance: "when someone annoyed me, I just cried and ran to hide in my mother's caftan" (Mernissi 9). Fatima does not search for that place where memories erase the distance between today and yesterday. Her yesterdays are past.

Where Nawal writes of political events in which she or her relatives had participated, Fatima fills her story with fantastic reminiscences and informational parentheses about Moroccan history and society, and Islamic law. She lists her feminist models like the queen Shajarat al-Durr, Scheherazade heroine of the *1001 Nights* and the

¹¹ For a discussion of the inescapably Western and Orientalizing meaning of "harem," see Golley 18-19.

beautiful and bewitching—adjectives deemed relevant to the success of a feminist revolutionary—Egyptian Huda Sha'rāwi. Nawal also had strong models when she was a girl; she “dreamt of riding a white horse like Joan of Arc, my eyes like the eyes of Zarqa al-Yamama [a pre-Islamic Arabian warrior] ... my lips reciting line after line of poetry as though I was Al-Khansa'a [a pre-Islamic poet and judge of poetry competitions]” (El Saadawi, *Daughter* 209). But later, she turned away from these humans to one female model with whom she never quarrels: the goddess Isis.

Nawal evokes moments of fury and passionate resistance against social norms, but Fatima wraps her revolutionary ardor in velvet: “I decided then and there that if I ever led a battle for women’s liberation, I definitely would not forget about sensuality... Why organize a revolution, if the new world is going to be an emotional desert?” (Mernissi 133) Beauty, enchantment and sensuality pervade this text in a way that would have been anathema for Nawal.

The key difference between these autobiographies may be found in the photographs. A comparison of their choices and placement in the texts highlights the different approaches of these two women to writing their life stories. Scattered through the first one hundred or so pages of Nawal’s text are family images, then nothing for about 150 pages. In the last thirty pages, four professional photographs trace the trajectory of her ambitions from serious medical student to country doctor to equality with men at the top of the Egyptian medical profession to activist writer urging young women to find their creative voices. On page 263, the twenty year-old is seated at the head of a table with slightly amused and distracted medical students on both sides; the caption reads: “Nawal (center) in the dissecting room at the Faculty of Medicine, Cairo University, in 1951.” On page 292, the 26 year-old Nawal stands in front of a cornfield wearing what look like slippers and a white coat with short sleeves: “Nawal as a village doctor, Taha, 1957.” The look on her face

suggests that the photographer has importuned her, and she has agreed to leave the clinic very, very briefly so as not to keep her patients waiting. Six years later, she is wearing a fashionable overcoat and carrying a medical bag: "Dr. Nawal El Saadawi, among the male doctors, Ministry of Health, Cairo 1963." Taller than most of the men around her and quite relaxed, she beams a toothy smile at the photographer. The last image on the last page represents what she considers to be her crowning achievement. Seven women sit in rapt attention around a standing Nawal, who ignores the photographer: "Nawal inaugurating the Egyptian Women Writers' Association in Cairo, 1970." Four photographs sum up nineteen years in her professional development from aspiring medical student to passionate activist writer.

In contrast, Fatima's photographs are strategically placed to open each chapter that describes a period in an enchanted world of women. The first image is of a closed door in a medina wall that can be locked from the outside. Chapter Two "Scheherazade, the King, and the Words" takes us inside the palace and into the world of *1001 Nights* that becomes a leitmotiv. The reader sees a damask-covered single bed with a floral curtain that may be drawn—protectively or prohibitively—around a royal sleeper. "The French Harem" features a woman from behind, talking through a wrought iron trellis with four women. From the edge of the profile we recognize Fatima. In the next image, she stands with another woman, both backs turned to the photographer who has pulled away far enough to capture a meters-high wall decorated with intricate tile work and elegant carved gypsum, evoking a gilded prison. The women contemplate through another wrought iron trellis a garden that appears out of bounds. In Chapters Eleven and Eighteen only, the opening image is not of the locked harem. Sometime during World War II, the photographer has climbed up on to the roof terrace to snap a picture of the surrounding medina. In Chapter Twenty for the first time we see Fatima from the front, through yet another wrought-iron gate.

Wearing long strings of pearls, she looks away from us as though sleepwalking or at the very least dreaming. Fatima turns to face us in the last chapter. Her gaze through lace reinforces the self-orientalizing aspect of what she calls “the tales in this book,” tales that echo the *1001 Nights* her mother read to her as a child. Where Fatima almost embraces her society’s boundaries represented in the high walls of the Fez palace, Nawal rebels against the rules and regulations of her society. Fatima rarely interrogates a memory but presents moments from her past as exotic artifacts.

Some autobiographers write for themselves in their struggle to make sense of the person they have become. Others, hoping to land on an international bestseller list, narrate their lives in ways calculated to appeal to curious outsiders wanting to take a peek at less known cultures. Writing in Arabic, Nawal writes first for herself as memories gush on to the page and then are tamed into eloquent sentences and paragraphs; only then does she think about her Arab readers. Writing in English, Fatima has an English or American reader in mind who will be fascinated by exotic lives in harems. Lifelong advocates of women’s rights, Nawal and Fatima narrate their lives with a different sense of the person they want to create and the reader they want to attract.

Conclusion

From as far back as she can remember she’d had dreams of flying even if without known destination: “It was an ancient dream, more ancient than memory, than history. The truest of my dreams was born with childhood... It is reborn as [the years] go by, gives birth to itself, for like the gods it is self-creating” (116). Toward the end of the autobiography this childhood dream transforms itself into a more concrete vision and hope for herself and the world:

I dream of facing the world openly, being myself as I really am... I dream of a different world, of a time when I will break through my shell, through the walls that hold me back, and prevent me from speaking, from saying what I want to say. (186)

But, of course, this autobiography proves that her dreams can come true because no one can prevent her from speaking, from writing.

For over half her life, her autobiography had lain in wait under a sea of novels. Why a sea of novels? Her answer: whenever she had picked up her pen to write her life she quickly realized that she could not go on because the demand to adhere to some form of truth however changing might damage others but also her (El Saadawi, *Daughter* 202). Around page 10, she once told me the autobiography would morph into a novel with composite characters sufficiently altered and newly independent not directly recognizable. This time, however, she stuck with the autobiographical project to the very last page, wondering at that point about the project that she had thought so different from the art of fiction and in writing realizes it is not:

in some ways autobiography is more real, more true than fiction, more creative, and more steeped in art... My pen has been a scalpel which cuts through the outer skin, pushes the muscles, probes for the roots of things. Autobiography has lifted me above the daily grind to see my life emerge under a different light... As I write, I experience moments of thrill, of deep pleasure never experienced since I was a child. I lean back, stretch my body, open my arms to the whole world, walk through the trees in Duke Forest, and the sunlight touches my face, like the gentle fingers of my mother when I was a child of five. (293-294)

These eloquent last words bring the child in an Egyptian village and the young woman practicing medicine in a rural town back to life in the body of the sixty-two-year old woman walking joyously through a sun-kissed forest in North Carolina where she feels the touch of her mother's hand

not as a distant memory but a visceral reality. In a frenzy of joy, she examines and reconnects with her entire life, bringing past and present together and juxtaposing in a single page the lush green of Duke forest with Kafr Tahla and Cairo (15). Written in an almost mystical state, she traverses the intervening years to touch the child she thought she had lost. The autobiography ends as it began with the intensity and passion of the dreaming child with her life ahead of her, relishing the challenge of writing her dreams into stories.

For Nawal, creativity brings body, mind, and spirit together. The writer must always make connections despite disparate experiences that separate moments from each other: "I cannot live the same moment twice, cannot transform past into present, let alone express reality in words written on a piece of paper. Truth changes, is never the same, like the sea, like the movement of water, of air, and soil... This is the difficulty whether in autobiography or in fiction" (2). Creativity, she concludes connecting her initial thought to the end of the book "is linked to memory. Through it I discover the shining moments in my life. They started to scintillate when I found myself in exile far away from home, like stars that died out many years ago, but their light still reaches us" (292-293). Linking is a key concept not only in this autobiography but also in all of her thought. During a September 2014 meeting with Chinese women writers that we both attended at Beijing Normal University she insisted that we "live in one world under patriarchal capitalism. I am opposed to anything that divides us. The differences between people and cultures that literature erases, theory generalizes and abstracts." Her personal philosophy, life choices and life writing refuse division and abstract theorization. Theory distances the object of study, but the imaginary rooted in reality brings the object close where the struggles, joys and challenges of a particular individual can be examined: "When with a sincere intent," she resumed in Beijing, "a

writer dives deep into their reality the story will become universal.” Theory obscures the particularity at the heart of the universal.

The particular for Nawal is the rebelling child whose passion had inexplicably remained alive in the body of a 62-year old woman. As though this child was her Doppelgänger, she distances it and reflects on it in the third-person: “Somehow it has escaped death. Maybe it taught itself to face death from the moment it was born and right from the start learnt not to fear it. Maybe it has built up what in our medical studies we call immunity” (206). This miraculously surviving child promises a kind of immortality. It has stirred her creativity, shaped the shapeless into compelling narrative and inspired her to challenge her readers to dream and, like Nawal, to reach for the stars.

* * * *

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