

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 6. Issue.4. 2019 (Oct-Dec)

ISSN  
INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA  
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

CONTEMPORARY EGYPTIAN WOMEN'S WRITING: WRITING GENDER AND  
SEXUALITY

Chia-Ling SHE

Email: [chialingshe@hotmail.com](mailto:chialingshe@hotmail.com)

doi: [10.33329/ijelr.64.136](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.64.136)



Chia-Ling SHE

ABSTRACT

This paper proposes that cross-cultural comparisons in Egyptian women's writing are effective in revealing where the fixity and concealments reside across the differences in class backgrounds, religious beliefs, generational gaps and the differences between rural and urban inhabitants. The writers who use English to write and whose works are translated into English are nomads and gypsies, and their writing acts of deterritorialization. There is already radical transnationalism in their works written in Arabic that continue to be unheard by imperialism when they are received in the West. Egyptian woman writers either have imported Western culture into their writing in Arabic or they have used their creative language techniques to contest male nationalists and the Western patriarchal system.

**Keywords:** Egyptian woman's writing, gender, sexuality, nationalism, writing strategies

Covering the range of contemporary Egyptian women's writing, including their novels, short stories and autobiographies, from the 1920s to the 2000s, this paper addresses strategies of writing in contemporary Egyptian women's writing. The series of "womanhood" enacted in the examined writers and their textual strategies are analyzed in the following sections. As Soroya Duval suggests, Orientalism presupposes women's oppression in Arab culture as either unchanging or only starting to change in the nineteenth century under the influence of Western culture (46). As Sara Ahmed points out, separated from the specific modes in which they are encountered, strangers disappear into characteristics of strangeness (143). According to her, in today's feminism, differences invented by wild fantasy about the strangers before the encounters aid the privileged members to fluidly inhabit the globe without ever having to leave home (166).

As Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi indicate, when Gayatri Spivak translates Mahasweta Devi's works into English, they step into postcolonial discourse set up by the Western academy (Bassnett and Trivedi 10-11). According to them, there are multiple Mahasweta Devis, one as postcolonial discourse, one in her native Bengali addressing post/colonial political and cultural issues, and many others in Hindi and various Indian languages untranslated and unknown to postcolonial discourse (ibid.). As Bassnett and Trivedi note, there are equivalences between the transnational and the translational, if hybridity of the migrant workers become only accessible after they leave the Third World (12). As they suggest, translation, in this sense, is a metaphor of power inequality, coming full circle back to its origins: "The colonial subject fixed to his native site as well as the unsited migrant post-colonial are thus equally translated persons" (ibid.).

In this paper, cross-cultural comparison is an effective strategy to re-constitute the unsettled space of the post-colonial nation. In addition, as a sub-genre, the romance in Egyptian women's writing competes against imperial narratives that unify cultural differences in a self/other dialectic structure. As Emily Davis suggests, romance is an elastic genre filled with possibilities to explore body politics and engage in unsolved social problems (*Rethinking the Romance Genre* 9). Due to its potential to probe deeply into seemingly inconsequential questions, the invisible bodies of the disempowered groups across space and time have come to the foreground, urging us to re-think global politics (11).

### **Tensions, Disruptions and Ambivalence: Huda Shaarawi, Zainab al-Ghazali, Latifa al-Zayyat and Nawal El Saadawi**

The autobiographical accounts written by Shaarawi, al-Ghazali and El Saadawi share the feminist dictum that the personal is also political. *Harem Years* reveals Shaarawi's alliances and tensions in the nationalist-feminist politics in the 1920s. *Harem Years* is edited and translated into English in such a way that the alterations in the English version take care of an Orientalist taste even before the arrival of the text in the West (Kahf 149). The English edition exaggerates the Western influence on her feminist career, minimizes her father's presence and understates her class privilege.

As Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi point out, "Translations are always embedded in cultural and political systems, and in history" (Bassnett and Trivedi 6). This paper holds that the strategies employed to have Egyptian women's voices heard (unheard) are open up to unstable cultural translations that subject both to essentialism of how a Muslim woman should be like and initiations of changes in existing power dynamics. As Edwin Gentzler comments, the cultural turn of translation studies in the 1990s prove that the study of translation moves closer to the field of cultural studies (Bassnett and Lefevere ix).

Shaarawi's conformity to the wife's role aims at winning political space for her husband, Ali Shaarawi, in the Wafd party and also making space for her anti-colonialist movement organized by women, the Egyptian Feminist Union. Her strategy of feminine subservience clearly demonstrates the multilayered narratives beneath the Eastern harem in the imagination of Western audience considering her an oppressed Eastern woman escaping Islamic patriarchal system in the West. She is aware of the Orientalist portrayal of Egypt: "[An European woman] said Egyptian women could camouflage disreputable deeds behind a mask but because the actions of European women were visible their behavior was the better" (78). In Huda Shaarawi's memoir, being a wife in the harem gives her the space to go unnoticed by the surveillance of British colonizers and helps her husband, a key leader of Egyptian nationalism, in making peace with his enemies.

In *Return of the Pharaoh*, Zainab al-Ghazali's exerts extraordinary strength during imprisonment in Jamal Abdel Nasser's prison between 1965 and 1971. Exemplifying a Muslim female political leader, al-Ghazali's autobiography demonstrates her strengths drawn on a Sufi tradition. As she states, "So weak, I was unable even to groan, I submitted myself to the One Who holds in His Hands the decrees of everything" (106). Complementing the traditional, virtuous women re-defined as an *umma* member, she demonstrates that she is capable of shouldering the responsibility to sacrifice her life for *da'wa*. The secularists do not have a total monopoly on women's right and human rights. As al-Ghazali tells her husband, "I cannot ask you today to share with me this struggle, but it is my right on you not to stop me from *jihad* [religious duty] in the way of Allah. Moreover, you should not ask me about my activities with other *mujahidin* [fighters], and let trust be full between us" (38).

As Scott Kugle points out, the bodies of Sufi saints are the "symbolic resources for generating religious meaning, communal solidarity, and the experience of the sacred" (8). Sufism defies Orientalism that regards Islam as an ascetically rigid, abstract religion separate from the corporal and lack of spiritual depth (ibid.). In al-Ghazali's case, it is by totally submitting to her feminine roles conferred on her in religion that she obtains the status as a female leader in public space excelling men in performance. As Saba Mahmood notes, the return to traditional lifestyle involves a shift of meanings for re-creating "new structures of learning" around a lifestyle organized by religious principles (56).

Latifa al-Zayyat's *The Open Door* offers us sexually-subdued heroine, intertwined with the historical events of the 1952 July Revolution and of subsequent warfare that Egypt suffered from in the independence struggle. Layla, who dares to choose a husband that she wants, defies the masculine definition of women's liberation that endorses masculine values in public and private spaces. Al-Zayyat's work introduces Western-inspired gender construction theory which investigates the social dichotomizing effect well before the appearance of the novel. In *The Open Door*, Layla and Husayn re-unite at Port Said War in 1956 when Nasser had struggles and conflicts with Western superpowers the Arab world. In *The Open Door*, the couple's patriotism constitutes an alternative narrative to horizontal comradeship that the novelist form features in an attempt to confront male-led perfunctory promise of gender equality.

Cross-cultural comparisons are effective in revealing where the fixity and concealment are across the transcultural and transnational links. Launching feminine strategies, al-Zayyat provides her heroine with space, Layla, to link sexuality to the nationalist movement, and subsequently position her femininity in a broader context of significations. Layla and her romance reveal the lack of discussions on sexuality and its relationship with war, a metaphor full of domination, conquest and confrontation. In *The Open Door*, her cousin, Gamila, tells Layla: "Do you know how a woman feels when she realizes that she's become like an old rag? She's all dried out—her body has dried out, and her heart, too, because no one looks at her with a glow in his eyes, no one says to her 'I love you.'" (279)

Aware that race is inseparable with gender issues regarding issues such as FGC, veiling, and female psychosomatic illness, El Saadawi later joins Zainab al-Ghazali in demonstrating female strength. As Al-Ali indicates, Islamism replaces El Saadawi's nationalism and secularism, leaving secular-leftists no models to learn from (197). As Edwin Gentzler suggests, translation is a primary form of literature rather than a minor or derivative form, since translation is a struggle of cultural manipulation for those who are in power (Bassnett and Trevi di x). The original work in Arabic is not homogeneous, and it has always already undergone cultural exchanges, remaining an untranslated space.

In *Memoirs from Women's Prison*, El Saadawi's self-representation exploits the autobiographical genre and serves the purpose of creating an original Egyptian identity with the use of her own image as an upwardly-mobile peasant girl fighting against the patriarchal system in Islam. In *Memoirs from Women's Prisons*, as El Saadawi states:

My nationalist reputation and my honour as a literary person are as valuable to me as my life. I did not inherit them from a father or grandfather, and they have not given me authority or a high position, but I built them up over the years through my struggles and determinations, and through them I was able to make my own name: Nawal el Sa'adawi, the Egyptian writer, known—in Egypt, the other Arab nations, and the entire world—for her free pen and her courageous, original thinking. (188-89)

In another work, *Memoirs of A Woman Doctor*, El Saadawi employs the genre of autobiographical novel to deal with an Egyptian female doctor suffering from double standards in the society. She is not happy that her body is subject to the imperatives of gender boundary. She abhors the compulsion of gender boundary imposed on her to the extent that she does not even like her menstruation: "Why had God created me a girl and not a bird flying in the air like that pigeon? [...] I was bouncing along when I felt a violent shudder running through my body" (11). *Memoirs of A Woman Doctor* creates space derived from fluid genre between fiction and autobiography in which the narrative offers possibilities for Egyptian women's unspeakable new experiences. The generic design enables El Saadawi to speak to a Western audience about female sexuality in Islam, to initiate social changes deeply entangled in nationalism, colonial history and continuing sectarian strife, but she does so not without struggles.

#### **"Creative Dissidence": Nawal El Saadawi's writing**

As Susan Bassnett indicates, the presupposition of translation as copies in which something will forever be missed upholds the Europe as the original text (Bassnett and Lefevere 129). In Egypt, gender equality discourses tend to be imitations of the West. El Saadawi contests Western postmodernist relativism

and multi-culturalism to develop her view of Egyptian feminism, refusing to offer settled narratives with her strategy of feminine writing. As Al-Ali notes, utilizing a conservative rhetoric, cultural authenticity constantly guards against universalism by inserting “our” own culture, relegating women’s rights to the margins (209). Weaving a piecemeal networking, El Saadawi propels a process of cultural translations in an attempt to deal with Egyptian women’s daily lives, the female genital cutting in particular. In her writing, the engagement in psychoanalysis is a strategy to revise gender inequality in the modernization project of Egyptian nationalism. As Al-Ali notes, the same Egyptian feminists who speak against the FGC at home can find themselves defending FGC in an international conference where certain Western feminists denounce backward and barbarian practices (210).

As André Lefevere suggests, the term, culture, composed of different groups of people and individuals with different ideas of shaping their society, is not monolithic (Lefevere 8). In *God Dies by the Nile*, Zeinab, a subaltern in every way, re-signifies the supposedly backward *zar* rituals and Sufi practices in defining the new nation after the national independence struggle. In El Sayeda Zeinab mosque, Zeinab experiences the presence of God in sexual terms:

Zeinab’s heart was beating wildly as she cried out ‘O God’. It seemed to leap against her ribs, and shake her small breasts under the bodice of her long robe. Her eyes shone with a mysterious gleam like moonlight on a dark, silent stream. She shivered every now and then with a strange fever hidden in her depths, and the blood rose to her face in a virginal flush though this was the first time her heart had beaten for anyone. (89)

In *Two Women in One*, Bahiah, as a nationalist-feminist, has repetitive sexual encounters to re-write heterosexuality as a complex signifying system determined by class, race, religion, sexuality, historical and geopolitical contexts. Utilizing gender construction theory, El Saadawi is able to compare FGC with many other practices to deconstruct Islam/Islamism, women/men, East/West and hetero/homosexuality. El Saadawi’s short story, “In Camera,” equates women’s speech with virginity/textuality, interrogating male intellectuals’ failure to keep their promise of giving Egyptian women equal participation in the public space. As the heroine in this short story relates to the rape in prison: “Her body was no longer hers but was like that of a small calf struck by the heels of boots. A rough stick entered between her thighs to tear at her insides” (78).

*The Innocence of the Devil* sets the scene in a mental hospital governed and administered by the Director, prominently a patriarchal figure. The Head Nurse, Narguiss, in the hospital further resists the male-led gender equality by woman-identified-woman sisterhood appropriated from Western radical feminism. Narguiss’s elastic hymen does not shed blood on her wedding night. This hides a deeper and layered palimpsest of her silenced lesbianism. The hymen that does not shed blood uncovers possibilities of multiple interpretations. Her memory about lesbianism erased by electroshocks, Narguiss’ girlfriend, Ganat, becomes hysterical, shifting between the past and future shown in decentered narratives. El Saadawi integrates the notion of madness in Western poststructuralism, Freudian discourse, and Western radical feminism to wrench space for Egyptian women. Her sexual politics is entangled with race, colonial history and imperialist feminism. Psychosomatic illness in El Saadawi’s writing, as a strategy for Egyptian women’s silence-breaking, corresponds with the *zar* side by side in Soueif’s writing.

As André Lefevere suggests, translation is a rewriting of an original text, and this kind of rewriting can set forth new concepts, new genres and new devices and it also shapes power and culture (xi). The short story is apt to capture the marginal, fragmentary and painful individuals in the post-colonial society. As Al-Ali points out, new fundamentalism embraces cultural specificity in such a way that a sense of cultural and religious pride obscures differences residing within different class backgrounds, generational gaps, rural and urban residents (211). El Saadawi’s short stories forge heterogeneous enunciations, accounting for the drastic social changes in Egypt, and refusing integration by all-encompassing power, but her challenges are not without limitations. In “Eyes” and “The Death of an Ex-Minister,” utilizing a Freudian/Lacanian theory, El Saadawi implicitly compares it with unspeakable female genital cutting and male genital cutting. The Ex-Minister’s

inferiority complex both refers to castration complex and the self-identity of the circumcised people defined by tradition. He is in fear of his female subordinate:

But I was angry, Mother, because when she talked to me she raised her eyes to mine in a way I'd never seen before. Such a gaze, such a strong and steady look, is daring in itself, even impudent, when it comes from a man. So what if it comes from an employee, from a woman? I wasn't angry *because* she did it, but because I didn't know *how* she did it, how she dared do it. (15)

As Chantal Zabus points out, an upsurge of "modern primitives" or "neotribals" have pursued the threshold-crossing experiences with the use of the art work on the flesh in Western urban areas since the 1970s (270-71). As Zabus suggests, the resuscitation of ancient rites by modern primitives and neotribals is selective, but none has been characterized as "mutilation," nor is it a human rights issue, including those operated on genitals (270, 273). For the modern primitives and neotribals, the genital-reducing operations neither have anything to do with sexuality that speaks the truth nor with enhancing sensitivity and stimulation in sexual activities (273). While having no qualms in appropriating traditional practices across cultures, modern primitives and neotribals tend to be forgetful about the fact that FGC is the justification of colonial invasion and rule (ibid.).

### **Femininity as a Third Zone: Alifa Rifaat, Salwa Bakr and Ibtihal Salem**

According to Sara Ahmed, anthropology owes an ineluctable debt to the strangers who transform into knowledge available for access (63). Diminishing the divisive boundary in the dialectic structure, cultural differences are fixed by the post-modern "I" of the anthropologists, as if the strangers and the anthropologists were being together as friends (64-65). Friendship cementing the researchers and strangers predicates upon the knowledge prior to their specific encounter (65). The researchers, as the informants, who translate the knowledge of the strangers back to the academic communities actually transform themselves into the strangers (67). For Ahmed, such a translational practice in ethnographic work conceals the strangeness of the strangers by turning them into subjects who can speak (69). As she indicates, it is from the failure to know the object of their studies that the researchers have the opportunity to know (72). The desire to befriend the strangers and to know everything about them shows the violence of translational practice (73).

Octavio Paz offers a radical definition of translation; as he points out, language is already translations. He states, "[...] each sign and each phrase is a translation of another sign, another phrase" (qtd. in Bassnett and Treviñi 3). Ibtihal Salem's multi-faceted metaphors carve out a new space for the patriarchal system, and stage a re-vision of viewing Egyptian women in the national communities with descriptions of their daily lives. For Salem, women's body parts re-write history, providing another aspect of war memory by taking women's sexuality into account. She takes action with respect to the differences between Jamal Abdel Nasser and Anwar Sadat as she moves away from El Saadawi's nationalism toward internationalism in the 1970s during the United Nations Decade for Women's Development. In "Behind Closed Doors," the stasis of time, lack of sexual satisfaction and meager income, expressed by the image of the cheap, gaudy high-heeled shoes left at her house by her husband's lover, are unbearable to the heroine. Writing Egyptian women's sexuality becomes the strategy in which Salem associates their silence with the spatiotemporal multiplicities of the postcolonial national space. In Salem's representation, "woman" enacts alternative perspectives in which she creates a new time-space of generational differences by shifting the focus from El Saadawi's sexual morphology to her fragmented body parts.

Accessing hidden voices of the oppressed in the Third World via English translation is an example of Spivak's strategy of textual reconstellation (*In Other Worlds* 241). In Alifa Rifaat's writing, FGC is voiced from traditional lifestyle in Islam, thus showing the silences that the approaches of human rights and women's sexual rights cannot take care of. For Rifaat, neither is FGC simply a form of patriarchal oppression for her nor is it an act of defending cultural boundary, and therefore, her view exceeds the debate of cultural specificity. Bahiyya in "Bahiyya's Eyes" employs "mulberry" to describe clitoris rather than an atrophied penis: "... I lifted my *galabia* and didn't find anything there except for something ... like a sort of mulberry" (9). Viewing the patriarchal system simply as having one form risks treating gender as the principal category of analysis.

As Zabus notes, Christian and Muslim beliefs about women whose sexual power cannot be easily contained seem to be the reason for curbing it, but the presupposition of women's nature to have excessive sexual appetites provides a discursive site to investigate male imagination (152). In Zabus' view, discursive analysis probing into psychoanalysis is not innocent as psychoanalysis is known to cure female sexual appetites with the use of declitorizing surgery (157). According to Zabus, medical researches seeking to correct Freud by claiming that clitoridectomy and FGC deprive women of their sexual appetite need to be approached with reservation, since the proximity between the clitoris and the vagina is to promote, rather than discourage, vaginal pleasure in the surgery (ibid.). The medical discourse on female sexual pleasure addresses the issues only for the privileged group adopting a liberal language of humanism, sexual rights and individualism.

Rifaat's writing re-constitutes the myth of the private space either as culturally repressive, heteronormative and singular in Islam or as the fantastic realm of white men's projection. Rifaat's heroines tell their stories from an isolated space of a traditionally Islamic home to re-formulate the still home as a place of a new national space beyond national monuments and wars. The bodies of Rifaat's heroines re-constitute a splitting un-homely discourse regarding FGC, Muslim men and women's lives, and polygamy. Rifaat's writing provides new enunciations for Islam with her critique, subverting the patriarchal system without ever labeling herself a feminist, presenting her experiential accounts grounded in daily lives, and entering the debate as a religiously pious woman. This narrative space in Rifaat's writing is home to the wounds of the unexpected traumatic experiences understood later through the haunting memories later in the heroines' lives.

In Salem's writing, sectarian strife that influences Egyptian women's lives is of particular importance. For Egyptian woman writers, their writing is not separable from the economic and political milieu. The use of the short story form which does not always give nicely close-ended answers was suitable to express the fragmented identities in the society in the human rights-friendly 1970s. For instance, the heroine in "Making Bets" suggests that the man, now successful, middle-aged and driving a Mercedes-Benz, stand outside for an hour at the bus stop exactly as they did in childhood. Salem agilely manages the hybrid space in the short story genre, mixing it with vignettes, film and prose poetry, catching bits and pieces of the migrating lower-class population in the urban areas, the young nouveaux riche class and pop culture.

The private lives, re-constituted by these Egyptian woman writers of the post-1970s generation, take both class and gender into consideration, and in so doing, they construct polyvocal narratives of the nation. The national communities are involved in a process of social transformation where each entrance of new culture is neither an origin nor a copy (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 325). As Al-Ali notes, Bhabha's notion of "subaltern secularism" define the groups of people who base their notions of choice and freedom not on Western liberalism, but on building creative links, to oppose fundamentalism of all forms, all religions, and all ideologies that subordinate women in the family and communities accorded with the ideas of tradition all over the world (133).

In Bakr's *The Golden Chariot*, the heroine, Aziza, falls in love with her step-father, who takes her virginity away at a young age, but marries another woman, and eventually murders him. She ends up in prison re-living the memory of love with her step-father. In Bakr's writing, including her novel and short stories, madness, as rebellious behaviors, forges a feminine time by living in the traumatic past, revealing the confinement that women, as wives and mothers, suffers from. In Bakr's writing, women's madness shows the ways in which Egyptian women are defined by the public/private, active/passive binaries, and religiosity/secularism divide. Madness, as indication of women falling out of normalization, demonstrates to us a privileged space of the middle-class family excluding disempowered group of women.

On the one hand, the local *zar* ritual defies Oedipal complex, and further, it divulges the silence accumulated around male hysteria during the wartime in Egypt. On the other hand, psychiatric institutions in the former colonies point a new direction for psychology of colonialism shedding a new light in the researches on post-colonial histories and social histories of medicine (Keller 325). As Mitchell notes, the unwanted feelings of grudge and jealousy triggers the possessed spirits in a polygynous society (236). Mitchell demonstrates that "hysteria and its performances enable the presentation of absence rather than the

representation of loss" (242). In *The Golden Chariot*, Aziza remembers vividly the day when her stepfather-lover takes her virginal innocence away from her young body. Afterwards, both the mother and daughter together wait for the same man to return home after work. The mother is happy about the good relationship between the stepfather and her daughter. Aziza inflicts pain on herself in such a way that she even finds pleasure in doing it. Her body turns into a hysterogenic zone to complete the fusion and identification that she is deprived of in her society.

#### Ahdaf Soueif: the Transnational and Femininity

According to Bhabha, the national time is split, located at disjunctive sites, and disrupting inside/outside boundary (*The Location of Culture* 247). The problem with cultural relativism is that it recycles the universalism/cultural specificity divide. In Soueif's novels, *In the Eye of the Sun* and *The Map of Love*, Egyptian women's experiences render the novel genre more fluid by mixing it with the genre of autobiographical fiction as the space for cultural negotiations. Her *In the Eye of Sun* disrupts nationalism by bringing into contact with readers an impotent man, Saif, who works for an intelligence agency. His impotence signifies the June War in 1967 and its aftermath with ensuing social concussions and psychological disasters. In *The Map of Love*, Amal is concerned with anti-imperialist and anti-governmental protests in the Egyptian society. The universalism/cultural specificity debate does not only erroneously portray feminism as cultural betrayals, but also exerts an adversary effect on the understanding of human rights. As Al-Ali notes, Islamists may feel ill at ease about foreign funding, but that does not necessarily mean that they are hostile toward universal values and human rights (213).

While translation is a re-writing of the original text, it is possible that a text, treated as a translational work, is, in fact, an original work. For example, Cervantes' *Don Quixote* is allegedly a recuperated translation of the lost original text to add to the work's authority (Lefevere 2). *The Map of Love* calls into question the notion of translation as a genuine reflection of the original text, since the Denshway Incident in 1906 resulted from a fabricated letter in English pretending to be a genuine translation of an original Arabic document. Egyptians are tried and executed for murdering the British soldiers in a court composed mostly by the British in the incident. As a matter of fact, the cause of the incident is that the British soldiers shoot Egyptian villagers' pigeons and seriously injure an Egyptian woman. It is when Anna and Saif translate the English letter into Arabic that they find out that this might be a fake letter. It is by Amal's further pursuit of this question that she feels sure that it is indeed a fake letter that involves people's lives.

The white Shahrazad figure in Soueif's work, such as Milou, Anna and the white heroine in "Sandpiper," shows that they are fluent in transcending the East/West divide. In "Chez Milou," Milou's life revolves around the love affair when she is young. Her single-woman lifestyle provides a look probing into the women's proper roles in the family. The myth of the nation is founded not only on making women sexual objects, but also on excluding homosexuality in the national communities. In "Sandpiper," the British woman's desire to be a mother reverses Western women's travelogue writing, such as Lady Duff Gordon's in the nineteenth century looking for an exotic taste, mentioned in *The Map of Love* (58). As the heroine states in "Sandpiper," "For seventeen years my body had waited to conceive, and now my heart and mind had caught up with it" (26). As she also proclaims, "My body could not get enough of him [then her boyfriend]" (ibid.). It is easier for these white women to transcend the public/private divide which ties women to a form of liberation made available by Western progressive liberalism.

As Gearhart suggests, "...just as the transindividual is neither the individual nor the collective, so the transnational is neither the national nor the international" (36). In "The Nativity," Aisha's encounters with her British husband and the Egyptian butcher are a trajectory that involves her expression of sexuality as a pursuit of selfhood by shuffling in and out of unstable discursive boundaries in the *zars* ritual. It starts as a melodramatic escape of the middle-class wife and ends up in rape and pregnancy by her fellow countryman, the butcher. In "The Nativity," the *zar* ritual provides Aisha with an intimate encounter between herself and the ritual goers:

He [the butcher] grabs the girl by the waist and holds her up. As the musicians bang their tambourines above her head and shout in her ears, he dances and shakes her. He leaps in the air and carries her with him. He rattles her so her head shakes giddily from side to side. Her head shakes from side to side, then steadies. Still wobbly, still uncertain, but better. (146)

While Islamic fundamentalism suffers from the criticism of Western liberalism for actively submitting to the heterosexual norm in the local patriarchal society, one must understand that the Islamic revival takes the form of super-nationalism at risk of becoming conservative at times. In "The Nativity," Aisha's symptom of hysteria is a mode of encounter for the unspeakable trauma to speak inside her body, when she is so close to her baby born out of the rape.

Pheng Cheah argues that it is important to be aware of the unpredictability of a changing globality in influencing the postcolonial nation-state (324). This is shown in the arbitrary meanings of the veil in the works of Egyptian women's writing. The veil has been a symbol of the independence of the nation and Egyptian women, when Huda Shaarawi unveiled herself from a trip abroad returning to Cairo (Grace, *The Woman in the Muslin Mask* 72). For Soueif, the new veiling is particularly dispiriting for her mother and grandmother's generation, but is a symbol of Islamic fundamentalism nowadays (qtd. in Grace, *The Woman in the Muslin Mask* 75). In El Saadawi's writing, veiling represents an illusion to be overcome, or a mental veiling, both for the nation and Egyptian women (84). The veil signifies woman's lack and absence both in the Arab world and Freud and Lacan's psychoanalysis in Western gender/sexuality theory (ibid.). In "The Veil" written by El Saadawi, the heroine gives a motherly kiss on the man's forehead and puts on the veil again, as if she submitted to her traditional gender role (85).

As Reina Lewis notes, since there is quite a lot of writing published about the Orient by woman writers of the Ottoman origin, Western women are not the only owners of Orientalism (qtd. in Pedwell 100-01). In the movement of new fundamentalism, it is through the comparison with the over-eating Muslim women that the binary opposition of delicate Western woman and the strong Muslim woman is established (94). As Pedwell shows, it is through the anorexic white women who are slim in English nationalism that Egyptian male intellectuals can establish the image of unhealthy, over-eating, backward Muslim women (84). In the Victorian age, however, it is the emergence of the anorexic women portrayed as idle, morally weak, sexually frigid, and mentally feeble that establishes the sexually innocent and physically and mentally healthy ladies who can distinguish themselves from the lower-class women and women of color (92). The women of color or working-class women were portrayed as sexually excessive and hysteric, and thus morally unsuitable for English men to choose as spouses (85-106).

Carolyn Pedwell compares veiling with anorexia, criticizing the restriction of submission and rebellion of the gender norm as the framework of analysis, to illustrate the criss-cross boundaries of the East/Western cultures (58). She argues that such a comparison would unfold that many well-intentioned humanistic cross-cultural comparisons turn out to be unwittingly deepening Eastern/Western divide. Utilizing the comparison between veiling and anorexia, Pedwell illustrates the trap of the either/or choice in treating practices, such as veiling and anorexia, as one-sided and discrete comparisons (107). As Juliet Mitchell argues, hysteria also sharing the symptoms of anorexia has been regarded as associated with female sexuality, normalization of femininity and the relation that the infant has with the mother at the early stage in life, and thus erasing many other aspects in understanding hysteria (159). As Pedwell suggests, the comparison between veiling and anorexia clearly shows how "Western" Christians and "Eastern" Muslims constitute each other relationally in interconnected chains of significations (42).

Soueif benefits from her Western education and her works do not need to be translated. Her works in English show the author's significance mainly as a translator who has the privilege to fluidly cross cultural borders. As Wail S. Hassan suggests, "translational texts are performances of inter-linguistic, cross-cultural communication, operating on several levels of mediation and contestation, alternating between autoethnography and the rewriting of metropolitan narratives from the perspective of imperialized societies" ("Agency and Translational Literature" 755). Similar to Asya in *In the Eye of the Sun*, Amal, in *The Map of Love*,

translates Anna's life from her forgotten trunk, resembling Shahrazad in *The Thousand and One Nights* excelling in her story-telling ability. While it is easier for her to cross the boundaries dressing as an Englishman and wearing the Eastern veil, Anna becomes suspicious due to her skin color, and eventually resulting in her husband's assassination. In *In the Eye of the Sun*, there is no way Asya can translate an Arabic song into English except by coupling her translation with the cultural context in the song criticizing neo-colonialism in the Arab world. The Nixon administration managed diplomatically between the oil embargo and the peace negotiation in the Middle East. Her translation manages to keep the track of the foreignness in Arabic in order not to be domesticated by English, when she explains the song to her British friends.

Translation plays a significant role in consolidating a national identity (Bassnett and Lefevere xiv). As André Lefevere shows, the English translation of the *Kalevala*, a collection Finnish oral poetry, draws on sources from the classical Nordic epic (76-89). Because Finnish was a lesser-known language at the turn of the nineteenth century, the Finnish historians had to use sources from Swedish, the predominant language at the time to create national literature for the nation to win recognition by the world (76-89). As Asya and Anna in Soueif's novels show, only when their English breaks down the linguistic and conceptual boundaries can the Arabs pierce through the myth that the West is the original text that the East copies from. As Ganesh Devy indicates, the discovery of the East in the West depends heavily on Orientalism corresponding with the development of modern Western linguistics (Bassnett and Trivedi 186). No translations are born into the world without struggles and no translations in the world leave no traces of oppression brought by the dominant cultures.

## Conclusion

Maria Tymoczko suggests that there are two kinds of translation: literal translation and postcolonial re-writing (Bassnett and Trivedi 19). As she further indicates, there are similarities between the two kinds of translation (ibid.). For the Egyptian woman writers, they have imported Western culture into their writing in Arabic or they have employed their creative language techniques to contest nationalist men and the patriarchal system in colonialism. There is already radical transnationalism in their works in Arabic continuing to be neglected and untranslated, when they are received in the West. As Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi argue, Salman Rushdie's writing in English has the privilege of inhabiting translational and transnational third space that Bhabha argues for in his theory of a third zone (Bassnett and Trivedi 12). Subversion in the texts originally written in Arabic seems to be marginalized, in comparison with Soueif's strategy of employing English as a translational space. It is sometimes very difficult for El Saadawi to manage her sexual politics in the circuit of epistemic violence, let alone other less-known works translated into English.

As Deleuze and Guattari suggest, Franz Kafka, a Jew in Prague, writes in German, a language defined by its irreducible distance for a Jew in Prague (16). As they characterize Kafka, "A minor literature doesn't come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language" (ibid.). The definition of a minor literature applies both to Egyptian writers who write in English and Arabic that I examine in my paper. As Deleuze and Guattari indicate, Kafka's writing is not merely about an Oedipal fantasy, but about systemic oppression. Gregor and his father are not independent of the "commercial, economic, bureaucratic, juridical" triangle that dictates the value of the family triangle (17). The major language that a minor literature is written in displaces the writers. The writers who use the major language to write are nomads and gypsies, and their writing acts of deterritorialization.

## Works Cited

### Primary

Al-Ghazali, Zainab. *Return of the Pharaoh*. Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 2006.

Bakr, Salwa. *The Golden Chariot*. Trans. Dinah Manisty. Reading: Garnet Publishing Ltd, 1991.

El Saadawi, Nawal. "The Death of His Excellency the Ex-Minister." *Death of an Ex-Minister*. London: Minerva, 1992. 9-27.

- . "Eyes." *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing*. Eds. Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990. 203-14.
- . *God Dies by the Nile*. Trans. Sherif Hetata. London: Zed Books, 1985.
- . "In Camera." *Death of an Ex-Minister*. Trans. Shirley Eber. London: Methuen London Ltd., 1987. 75-96.
- . *The Innocence of the Devil*. Trans. Sherif Hetata. Intro. Fedwa Malti-Douglas. Berkeley: U of California P, 1994.
- . *Memoirs Of A Woman Doctor: A Novel*. Trans. Catherine Cobham. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988.
- . *Memoirs From The Women's Prison*. Trans. Marilyn Booth. London: The Women's P, 1986.
- . *Two Women in One*. Trans. Osman Nusairi and Jana Gough. London: Al Saqi Books, 1985.
- . "The Veil." *Death of an Ex-Minister*. Trans. Shirley Eber. London: Methuen, 1987. 29-36.
- Rifaat, Alifa. *Distant View of a Minaret*. Trans. Denys Johnson-Davies. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1987.
- Salem, Ibtihal. *Children of the Waters*. Trans. Marilyn Booth. Austin, Texas: The Center for Middle Eastern Studies at U of Texas at Austin, 2002.
- Soueif, Ahdaf. *Aisha*. London: Black Swan, 1983.
- . "Chez Milou." *I Think of You: Stories*. New York: Anchor Books, 2007. 101-24.
- . *In the Eye of the Sun*. London: Bloomsbury, 1999.
- . *Map of Love*. New York: Anchor Books, 2000.
- . *Sandpiper*. London: Bloomsbury, 1997.
- Shaarawi, Huda. *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist*. Trans. Margot Badran. London: Virago, 1986.
- Al-Zayyat, Latifa. *The Open Door*. Trans. Marilyn Booth. Cairo: American U in Cairo P, 2003.
- Secondary**
- Ahmed, Sara. *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*. London: Routledge, 2000.
- Al-Ali, Nadje. *Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East: The Egyptian Women's Movement*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000.
- Bassnett, Susan and Harish Trivedi, ed. *Post-Colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*. London: Routledge, 1999.
- Bassnett, Susan and André Lefevere, ed. *Constructing Cultures: Essays on Literary Translations*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1998.
- Cheah, Pheng. "Given Culture: Rethinking Cosmopolitical Freedom in Transnationalism." Eds. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins. *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling the Nation*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998. 290-328.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Davis, Emily Suzanne. *Rethinking the Romance Genre: Global Intimacies in Contemporary Literary and Visual Culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Devy, Ganesh. "Translation and Literary History—an Indian View." *Post-Colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*. Eds. Susan Bassett and Harish Trivedi. London: Routledge, 1999. 182-88.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Trans. Dana Polen. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986.

- 
- Dural, Soroya. "New Veils and New Voices: Islamist Women's Groups in Egypt." *Women and Islamization: Contemporary Dimensions of Discourse on Gender Relations*. Eds. Karin Ask and Marit Tjomsland. Oxford: Berg, 1998. 45-72.
- Gentzler, Edwin. "Foreword." *Constructing Cultures: Essays on Literary Translations*. Eds. Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi. ix-xxii.
- Grace, Daphne. *The Woman in the Muslin Mask: Veiling and Identity in Post-colonial Literature*. London: Pluto P, 2004.
- Hassan, Wail. "Agency and Translational Literature: Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love*." *PMLA* 121:3, 2006. 753-68.
- Kahf, Mohja. "Packaging "Huda": Sha'rawi's Memoirs in the United States Reception Environment." Eds. Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair Majaj. *Going Global: The Transnational Reception of Third World Women Writers*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000. 148-72.
- Keller, Richard. "Madness and Colonization: Psychiatry in the British and French Empires, 1800-1962." *Journal of Social History* Vol. 35: 2 (Winter, 2001): 295-326.
- Kugle, Scott. *Sufis and Saints' Bodies: Mysticism, Corporeality, and Sacred Power in Islam*. Chapel Hill: The U of North Carolina P, 2007.
- Lefevere, André, ed. *Translation/History/Culture: A Sourcebook*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Lewis, Reina. *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation*. London: Routledge, 1996.
- Mahmood, Saba. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005.
- Mitchell, Juliet. *Mad Men and Medusas: Reclaiming Hysteria*. New York: Basic, 2000.
- Pedwell, Carolyn. *Feminism, Culture and Embodied Practice: The Rhetorics of Comparison*. London: Routledge, 2010.
- Tymoczko, Maria. "Post-colonial Writing and Literary Translation." *Post-Colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*. Eds. Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi. London: Routledge, 1999. 19-40.
- Zabus, Chantal. *Between Rites and Rights: Excision in Women's Experimental Texts and Human Context*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2007.
- 

**Bio: Chia-Ling She** got her PhD in English from the University of Leicester, UK. She previously taught EFL courses in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at National Chung Hsing University and in the Language Center at Chung Yuan Christian University in Taiwan as Adjunct Assistant Professor. Her research interests include postcolonial study, transnationalism, literary criticism and gender/sexuality study. Her articles regarding postcolonial feminism in Egypt are published in peer-reviewed academic journals in Taiwan. She currently works as an independent scholar and freelance translator. She could be contacted at [chialingshe@hotmail.com](mailto:chialingshe@hotmail.com)

---