



SCULPTURING AND FORMULATION OF THE MOTHER'S CHARACTER IN
NAWĀL AL-SA'DĀWĪ'S IMAGINATION; A DIALECTIC OF ABSENTING OR
PROBLEMATICS OF ABSENCE – A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The first element that defines the woman's writing is her experience and its available cognitive references and intellectual thoughts. The woman's writings rely on the explosion of the suppressed hidden experiences that have accumulated over the time to be declared in her direct dialogue, in which she cries out her being a woman. She aims in her writings to blow up all the fractures of her body and its ripples. In spite of that, her writings remain far from her overwhelming desire in briefing the necessary language to formulate her desire in writing, and her attempt to react to the general existential suppression, which is exerted on her by the social, moral and psychological relationships.

Therefore, the feminist novel becomes a focus of feelings that derive their aesthetics from the wealth of emotions and momentum of feelings. The focus of the novel becomes the Self while the focus of the novel that the man writes is mostly the whole world. This probably explains the repetition of the use of the pronoun "I" in the feminist novel as a kind of emphasis of the Self and its fulfilment in writing; and probably because the woman mostly sees the world centered on her, or probably because the woman is not satisfied with anything in this universe except her "I".

The mother in the feminist novel appears to be a problematic character because the writer bears contradictory feelings towards her. The subject of the relationship between the mother and the daughter is a subject that has been frequently analyzed in the feminist art and feminist theory. The feminist writing has recently focused specifically on the mother's character, and there have been conflicting opinions among feminist theorists regarding the problematic character of the mother.

Key words: female, mother, concerns, sensitivity, radical, feminism, cultural, structure, spiritual tragedy.

1. Introduction

It is said that the woman writer is careful to be the 'narrator' and the 'focal character', and probably the 'only character' in her writing. She is not satisfied with neutrality, and her calm, guiding, and advising voice does not abate, which accounts for the intensity of the employment of the first person singular pronoun "I" by the women writers/heroines, in forming the literary discourse in general and the fictional discourse in particular,

which is due to the fact that kinship-ties do not disconnect between the women writers and their heroines. Consequently, the woman writer, basically, expresses her private concerns in her writings, which are the concerns of the female in general. This tendency lends her writing feminine or womanly sensitivity through the issues that she introduces, which are strongly connected to her female self and her existence as a social individual. These are issues that melt in the matter of the woman's social emancipation through her description of the essential obstacles that the woman faces in her quest to prove herself and assert her distinctive entity in her search for her identity that is exposed to obliteration, deformation and mutilation¹.

There are lots of writings about the problematic nature of the relationship between the Mother and her Daughter in feminist literature. In the recent years, feminist works focused specifically on the Mother's character such as *Hidden Lives* by Margaret Forster (1995)², and *A Daughter and her Mother* by Marlene French³. In all these works, the character of the Mother appears to be a problematic one, and the writer bears contradictory feelings for her regarding closeness or remoteness from her. The Mother is, first and foremost, a 'wife' and then a 'mother'. In the course of reconstructing the history of the mother, these texts themselves represent an attempt to cross over the gap that separates between the Mother and Daughter.

Through her concept of psychoanalysis, Luce Irigaray deals with the relationship between the Mother and the Daughter and argues that women are obliged to keep away from the Mother because they cannot feel but alienated from themselves. Therefore, Irigaray calls for an alternative in which "the woman involves herself in an interactive relationship with the Mother"⁴. Hélène Cixous, however, argues that the woman maintains a stronger relationship with the mother, which gives her a larger opportunity to reach the instinctive act of writing, driven by a motive that is generated by the generosity of the mother's body"⁵. Mary Daly, however, says in her work *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1978), argues that goal of radical feminist is the return to unity with the Mother and the change of relationship between Mother and Daughter, which she calls the restoration of the Mother's Right⁶.

The image of the Mother seems to be of low impact in quantity and quality in the author's novelistic world of the Egyptian woman writer, Nawāl al-Sa'dāwī. This weakness is not attributed to the omission of the Mother's importance as much as it is to the omission of the effectiveness of her traditional role since she is a symbol and a legend of sacrifice, and 'giving' is no more the only means for her self-fulfillment.

The woman no more sees her unfulfilled hopes in her children, and her old role no more represents an accepted excuse that prevents her from participation in the political, economic, and philosophical developments that surround her. She no more has to accept responsibility for the horrors of wars and the problems of everyday life. As a result of all that, the woman has to give up her previous status⁷.

The Mother plays a significant role in our lives. She is the first teacher, the first authority, and the first connection with life. Thus, she also played an important role in Nawāl al-Sa'dāwī's life, even though it was a strange role.

Nawāl a-Sa'dāwī's novels occupy a special position within the Egyptian novelistic texture. Her writing is derived from "an existence". It is in reality a text in which there are more than one bond and a meeting point between the narrating self and the writer, which are revealed through a number of attitudes and events that interconnect and intertwine with her autobiography.

¹ Fathi, Ibrahim (1995). al-Ibda' al-Riw'i li al-Mar'ah al-Misriya. *Majallat al-Hilal*. Issue, March 81.

² Forster, Margaret (1995). *Hidden Lives: A Family Memoir*, Penguin group: England.

³ French, Marilyn (1988). *Her Mother's Daughter*. Ballantine Books.

⁴ Kristeva, Julia (1991). *'Ilm al-Nass*. Tr. by Farid al-Zahi. 1st ed. al-Dar al-Baydha': Dar Tupqal, p. 91

⁵ Eliad, Marcia (1988). *Suwar wa Rumuz*. Tr. by Hasib Kasouha. Damascus: Published by the Ministry of Culture, p. 74; Cixous, Helen. (1974) "The Character of character". *New Literary History*. V. 5, Number 2. Virginia: The University of Virginia.

⁶ Huso, Issmat Mohammad (2008). *al-Gender, al-Ab'ad al-Ijtima'iyah wa al-Thaqafaiya*. Amman: Dar alo-Shuruq, p. 191.

⁷ Hafez, Samia Hassan (1985). *Dirasa Kashfiya li Ba'dh Jawaneb al-Bina'a al-Nafsi li al-Mar'ah al-Misriya. al-Majalla al-Ijtima'iyah al-Qawmiya*, Part 2, Cairo, p. 6.

The Mother in Nawāl al-Sa'dāwī's novels occupies quite a good space despite the absence of her presence. What these novels introduce is a traditional image that is far from idealistic Romanticism. Motherhood for al-Sa'dāwī is not idealistic as its image confirms the Father's authority, and helps it to continue through submission to various orders that are issued by it. If the Father's image in al-Sa'dāwī's novels is an image in which 'power' is reflected in its various features of cruelty, oppression and injustice, the Mother's image is completely the opposite. It is an image in which submission is revealed in its powerful moments. al-Sa'dāwī continually criticizes this submission in her novels because it is the cause of the Mother's suffering and her children's suffering, too, because they do not find anyone who is able to defy the Father's authority or at least his excessive wildness.

2. The Study

The novels of the study⁸ introduce a group of incompatible serious issues that take place among a family members. These novels, which are rich in their themes, which are dealt with in various styles, remain constantly present in the cultural structure. Besides, and consequently to that, they remain open onto new readings that deal with according to the effect that they left in the past, and which still accompanies them everywhere. Consequently, these novels have become an indicator of the literary legacy of their writer, and despite their abundance and diversity, they have become symbols of undying works, which motivated me to reread them and deal with their worlds, and try to fathom their depths that they introduce in order to explore the brilliance that has accompanied them since the moment of their birth.

Nawāl al-Sa'dāwī is considered a writer who is fascinated by the woman, and attracted by her complications because she focused her whole literary interest on understanding her natures, perceiving their differences, penetrating the depths of her soul, and drawing a complete image of all her forms of life, thoughts and feelings.

al-Sa'dāwī continually tries in her writings to put the reader in front of the woman's fragility, her weakness and her helplessness, and explore her behavior, considering her a human creature whose dreams, fears and pains are influenced by different things and forms.

al-Sa'dāwī's novels are based on the contrast between the woman's will and her fate, from which she cannot separate herself. The woman is driven by her hope and desire to be engaged in a world that she can neither understand, nor possess its meanings fully. [Renée-Marrell Albiris](#) (1921-1982) calls this type of literary genre the "Heartbreaking Novel".⁹ al-Sa'dāwī tries to introduce the 'spiritual tragedy' of the woman, in [Renée-Marrell Albiris's](#) words, and therefore, she chooses the gloomiest words to describe the condition of her women and their suffering. Consequently, the woman's character in her novels is considered constantly-possessed with her helplessness or fear, and is incapable of being guided to the meaning of her life, her suffering, or her incomplete existence.

al-Sa'dāwī often gives the Mother the trait of 'absence' because she does not talk a lot about her external or internal appearance. She either makes her appear as a 'voice' or a 'shadow' that we feel and sense through the events of the novel, or makes her appear as a mother who is not close to the meaning of 'motherhood', and consequently, is not a good model for her children.

In the novels of this study, the Mother's presence is absented and her absence is represented in her non-performance of her role, her function, and her motherhood. She constantly disappoints her children, from the beginning to the end of the novel. Her role is traditional, negative and does not help her daughter to take her mother as a good example.

⁸ al-Sa'dāwī, Nawāl (1979). *Imra'ah 'Inda Nuqṭat al-Ṣifr*. Beirut: Dar al-Adab; al-Sa'dāwī, Nawāl (1987). *Ṣuqūṭ al-Imām*. Cairo: Dar al-Mustaqbal al-'Arabi; al-Sa'dāwī, Nawāl (1992). *Jannat wa Iblīs*. Beirut: Dar al-Adab; al-Sa'dāwī, Nawāl (2009). *Zena*. Dar al-Saqi.

⁹ Albiris, [Renée-Marrell Albiris](#), (1982). *Tarikh al-Riwaya al-Haditha*. Tr. George Salem. Beirut: 'Uwaidat li al-Nashr wa al-Tiba'ah, p. 87.

al-Sa'dāwī tries in the novels of this study to bare the tragedy behind the woman's choices, her movements and statements, especially those that she cannot interpret, but she finds herself driven to say them. Thus, she directly and clearly draws to the reader the traditional image of the Mother-Wife in a tragic way. She observes her behavior in a large number of attitudes and events in the novels. We read her as she pours her anger onto that naïve marginalized woman, whose will is paralyzed as she lives her most severe moments of weakness.

However, and despite the cruelty in her drawing of the image of the Mother, there is deep love and silent support to her, which appears sometimes in a silent way, and on other times in a revolutionary way against the one who causes that cruelty, namely, the Father. Love to the Mother here turns into hatred to the Father. It is overwhelming love to the woman who sacrificed her happiness in order to make her children happy, and endured her husband's arrogance and cruelty, only to preserve the image of the obedient wife to her husband, which is an endorsed image by her society.

In her introduction of this image, al-Sa'dāwī is often extremely injurious. She introduces an averted image that makes the receiver lose his sympathy to the Mother and her submission. The novels introduce her as a weak creature, who suffers and mourns silently without tears. They also introduce her as a mother who does not do her motherhood duty and is treated like a servant without knowing that. Her husband does everything that he likes as a result of her belief that she is his own possession by law and norms. The man is actually married to her but his treatment to her and her children is a treatment of the lord to his slaves.

al-Sa'dāwī introduces a strong image of the suffering of the persecuted mother who lives with her husband, who considers her nothing more than a machine for bringing children, on the one hand, and a machine that does the home chores, on the other hand, as we read in *Imra'ah 'Inda Nuqṭat al- Şifr*. It is also the image of the neglected wife who is abandoned by her husband after she reaches the age of menopause. At that age, he remarries in discreet a fourteen-year-old girl, which makes his wife submit to her gloomy fate as we see in *Jannat wa Iblīs*. It is a stark image of the woman's suffering, who is fully helpless as we see in *Şuqūṭ al-Imām* and *Zena*.

To sum up, al-Sadwi draws the mother's image, either in a state of crying, or a state of a tedious work or a state that combines them – a tedious work and bitter crying that accompanies it.

2.1 The Mother in the Novel *Imra'ah 'Inda Nuqṭat al- Şifr*

The Mother in *Imra'ah 'Inda Nuqṭat al- Şifr* is deprived of her humanity. She is merely an image, a ghost that passes quickly through the events of the novel. She does not impose her presence at all. Her role is violated and she is deprived of the traits of motherhood, which reflects the extent of refusal of the traditional role of the ignorant mother, who does not take part in her thoughts in the intellectual and psychological formation of her children. The ignorant mother is refused because her ignorance is likely to constitute a threat to the structure of her children's characters because she does not constitute a source of security, giving, or affection to them. In her weakness, the mother's ignorance and negativity play the role of the naïve and excluded character to such an extent that the sources of maternity in her dry.

The novel observes her as a negative helpless mother, who is unable to fulfil her role in front of the Father's tyranny and his cruelty. She does not play in Fardous's life and her other children a human decisive and formative role because she does not care for them or provide them with protection. Her main concern is to satisfy the husband, and therefore, we see her hide the food from her children in order to give it to her husband: "My mother was hiding his food from us in the opening of the oven; he would sit and eat alone and we would watch him"¹⁰ She stays up just to serve him: "During the winter, my mother did not warm me. She warmed my father, and in the summer, I saw her sitting at his feet; the jug is in her hand, and she was washing his legs with cold water"¹¹.

¹⁰ al- Sa'dāwī, Nawāl (1979). *Imra'ah 'Inda Nuqṭat al- Şifr*. Beirut: Dar al-Adab, p. 23.

¹¹ibid., p. 21-22.

She is absent and absented all the time, which we see in the repetition of the following statement: "The strong whiteness with the strong blackness in them [her eyes]; as soon as I look into them, their whiteness becomes stronger, and their blackness becomes stronger, as if they were filled with sunshine and moonlight"¹² She is ignorant when she seeks to circumcise her daughter, Fardous: "I asked my mother about my father and how she gave birth to me without a father, and she beat me. She brought another woman holding a pan or a blade and cut a piece of flesh from between my thighs"¹³. The mother does not protect her daughter from her father's injustice: our home was cold and my father moves my mattress and cushion to the cold sea hall and takes my place in the oven-hall. In summer, I find my mattress and cushion in the oven hall¹⁴. She lives unbearable absence when her uncle harasses her daughter, Fardous, who was only a little girl, who knows nothing about life: "My uncle was not young; he was many years older than me. He travels alone to al-Azhar Mosque and learn. I was not more than a small child who does not know how to read yet"¹⁵. Therefore, Fardous misses her absent mother, which affects her negatively and leaves on her a psychological defect that ultimately, pushes her to kill a man.

The surprising thing is that the Mother also plays the role of the savior, despite her paralysis and weakness. Therefore, the little girl knows that these eyes are her mother's eyes: "I knew she was my mother. I do not know how I knew. I crept to her to warm me on her chest"¹⁶. She recognizes her mother: "I knew she was my mother. I did not know how I knew her. I crept to her to warm me on her chest"¹⁷.

In my view, Fardous has an incomprehensible feeling towards her mother. On the level of the unconsciousness, we see Fardous cling to the image of the affectionate and saving mother; therefore, she falls down every time she tries to walk: "A power from behind pushes me to fall on my face, and a power in front of me pushes me to fall down on my back. Something like air pressure is above me, which wants to smash me, and something like the Earth's gravity below me wants to push me into the belly of the Earth, and I, among all that, resist. I pull my arm and leg and try to get up"¹⁸. Falling down means that we do not walk in the desired way of growth, far from the psychological complications and parental dependencies.

There are two contradictory powers inside Fardous but they hinder growth and emancipation: the father's authority and deprivation from motherhood, which are represented by the act of 'falling down' on one's face, and 'falling back' on one's back, besides the 'smashing air' and 'pulling down' into the belly of the Earth.

Fardous hardly remembers the image of her mother: "I was trying to remember the real appearance of my mother as I saw it for the first time in my life; two eyes, which I hardly remember; I do not know their color or their shape"¹⁹. Everything that she remembers is associated with magic; narrow or wide; have eyelashes or do not have lashes; all that I remember is two circles of strong white, and inside them there are two circles of strong blackness. When I look into them, their whiteness becomes stronger and their blackness becomes stronger..."²⁰. The mother's beauty – or eyes- is incomparable, because love doubles the beauty of one's facial features. Love is the magic, and the need for affection turns the measurements of time and place upside down so that this upheaval will create a new time and a new place, and certainly, new parents.

This magical place, which fills in the mother's eyes does not come up from the Earth (namely, the Mother, being a humiliated reality), neither from Heaven (namely, the unjust Father in his cruelty), but from buried yearnings for love, freedom, and justice, which altogether do magic on the human being. The oppressed human being cannot bear oppression for a long time.

¹² Ibid., p. 22.

¹³ Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 20.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 21

Therefore, in my opinion, al-Sa'dāwī does not deny motherhood through what Fardous's character represents, and all the feelings that it contains, but denies the mother's ignorance and her failure to perform the role of the Mother.

The Mother suddenly disappears. In addition to the hard work and hunger of the child, the beating and the curses, she is surprised by the un-justified and incomprehensible disappearance of her mother. The cause of her mother's disappearance must be either her mother's death or her divorce, which extremely affected her, and she started looking for her and her eyes in every human being that she loves. She repeats the syndrome of the 'eyes in the novel' with Abla Iqbal and with Ibrahim: saying "I did not know where my mother disappeared, but I saw another woman who beat me on my hand, and took the jug from me. And my father told me that she was my mother."²¹ We also read the following: "They were not the eyes that catch me before I fall. They were not the same circles. The strong whiteness and within it the strong blackness. The moment I look into them, their whiteness becomes stronger, and their blackness becomes stronger, as if they were filled with the sunshine and moonlight"²².

2.2 The Mother in *Şuquţ al-Imām*

The Mother in *Şuquţ al-Imām* does not exist, and her role in the novel is just 'waiting'. She is negative, paralyzed, and helpless. She stands motionless and does not take care of her daughter: "Since my mother gave birth to me, I have heard her call me with the motion of the air, the motion of leaves; her voice in my memory is engraved over stone. She is standing motionlessly in the darkness. A rock in the shape of a statute"²³. She gives up the role of the Mother: "... even if I lose my memory, I do not forget the face of my mother. She left me since she gave birth to me to fight the enemies"²⁴. Bintallah grows at an orphanage. We read about her absence at several places in the novel: "She has standing since she gave birth to me."²⁵ In another quotation, she says: "The Mother remains standing waiting for her in the darkness. In another quotation, she says: "I was running, and from afar, I saw my mother standing on the rock, waiting over the hill between the sea and the river"²⁶. Then, we suddenly read about large love and silent support to the mother: "My mother was not a traitor, and my father escaped from her before I was born"²⁷. "She offered her life for nothing"²⁸.

The Mother's absence is repeatedly introduced in the novel in order to express the violation that this absence leaves in the soul of Bintallah, who lives in total loss and confusion that lead to her death in the end: "She could nearly escape if she did not stop to fill her bosom with the air of the place"²⁹.

We observe Bintallah in the novel looking for her mother all the time but with no avail: "Twenty years have passed since I was born, and I still see this hill... and my mother is still standing and waiting for me"³⁰.

In another quotation, she says: "I have not seen my mother since she gave birth to me... In my sleep, I walk and my arms are stretched ahead of me in the darkness looking for my mother".³¹

And we read: "I was walking in the darkness looking for my mother, and behind me, I heard the voice roaring like the voice of the devil, and I run"³².

²¹ Ibid., p. 22

²² Ibid., p. 22.

²³ al-Sa'dāwī, Nawāl (1992). *Şuquţ al-Imām*. Beirut: Dar al-Adab, p. 20.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 12.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 18.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 65,76,109.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 12.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 20.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 15.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 65.

³¹ Ibid., p. 145.

³² Ibid., p. 108.

And we read: "I was running, and from afar, I see my mother standing on the rock waiting for me on the hill... her arms are stretched towards me. I nearly reach her and survive..."³³.

The woman in *Şuqūṭ al-Imām* is introduced as a traditional woman, who is satisfied with the compulsions of life, and devotes her life to the service of her husband. The Imam's mother is satisfied with the oppression of her husband: "My mother prays the morning prayers before she goes to the field and returns to her home in the afternoon to pray the evening prayers. I did not see my father kneel one kneeling. In Ramadan, he drinks and eats... and spends his nights among his four wives unjustly. He gives the last wife three nights and my mother one night"³⁴. The mother of the "Great Writer" does not do anything against her husband's betrayal, which makes her son go crazy: "I see you wash his clothes and rub the yellow spot on his pants with no avail. The spot remains under your eyes. In your nose, you smell the smell of the other woman and you make the laundry and cook for him, and wait for him to come back at the end of the night. When I look into your eyes, I realize that you know... I wish you spoke once about that. I wish you refused to wash his trousers that were polluted with the sweat of another woman"³⁵.

In *Şuqūṭ al-Imām*, the Mother does not fulfill her role of motherhood. The only role that she performs is the role of a 'waiting' mother. Thus, Nawāl al-Sa'dāwī does not deny the role of the woman but denies and refuses her negativity, ignorance and submission.

2.3 The Mother in the Novel *Jannat wa Iblīs*

The Mother in the novel *Jannat wa Iblīs* is also absent and absented, and does not help her daughter: "She calls for her mother's help but her mother does not come to help"³⁶. The Mother in the novel does not utter even one word and she is satisfied with her appearance as an image, a voice, a spectrum or a shadow that appears through the window. Thus, the syndrome of voice and image is repeated in the novel: "Her mother's voice is in her ears since she was born, like an old melody that runs in her veins with blood"³⁷.

We also read: "Her mother's image invades her from every side. A cataract of images and cold water drown her head"³⁸ and: "Her mother is standing behind the window"³⁹, and: "she sees her mother's face through the window from afar like a star"⁴⁰, and "she sees her mother standing behind the window; her eyes looking up at the sky..."⁴¹ and her mother's face "sparkles like a star"⁴². "Her appearance through the window can be an indication of fear, weakness, and search for a protection, or hiding from something that threatens her entity, or can be an indication of the great yearning of the mother, whose appearance occurs partially or totally absented.

The Mother's absence leaves the worst impact on Jannat's life. Therefore, we observe her looking for her mother whenever her conditions become critical. After the 'electricity session' at the asylum, Jannat sees her mother's face, in which we see an indication that confirms the mother's loss and her yearning for her presence: "The beats below her ribs are strong. They have regular rhythm... the melody runs in her ears, soft like her mother's voice... she opens her eyes and sees her mother's face surrounded with a white veil. The eyes are black and float over the water. She was pats on her shoulder and whispers in a familiar voice: Jannat"⁴³. Jannat waits for her salvation by her mother till the last moment in her life; therefore, we observe her continue her search for her on her death to attend the moment helpless and satisfied with her tears: "The cats and stray dogs, the yellow grass over the barren land, all of them sing with her mother... hoooh, sleep Nina ... hoooh! She opens her

³³ Ibid., p. 109.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 38-39.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 81.

³⁶ al-Sa'dāwī, Nawāl (1992). *Jannat wa Iblīs*. Beirut: Dar al-Adab, p. 84

³⁷ Ibid., p. 148.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 16.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 16

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 107.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 82.

⁴² Ibid., p. 84, 89, 107.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 23.

eyes within the box and sees her mother's face shining in the darkness; her eyes are covered with a layer of water like tears that do not dry nor fall"⁴⁴.

This constant presence of the Mother's voice and her shadow is nothing but buried yearnings for love, freedom and justice, which all together affect the human being strongly.

In spite of the Mother's absence, she plays the role of the savior through her present absence, which seems to be coming from afar. Therefore, Jannat looks for her on her death. She opens her eyes... and sees her mother's eyes covered with a layer of water like tears that do not dry or fall"⁴⁵.

We see that Jannat's clinging to her mother's image on the level of unconsciousness made her continue looking for her image whenever she needed her. In her constant search for the mother's voice and her panting after her spectrum have an indication which means that we do not move ahead in the stage of the correct healthy growth. This is also a clue and a signal of psychological complications that were caused by the absence of the Mother's role, which indicates al-Sa'dāwī's feelings of loss, alienation, loneliness and yearning for the absent mother.

The Mother's absence in *Jannat wa Iblīs* causes a complicated psychological problem. She does not stand her husband's betrayal, and the collapse becomes an inevitable result. Then the character of the Grandmother appears. She is a first-class traditional woman, who replaces the mother and takes her role. We also observe her as a woman who is robbed of her will, and lives in fear with her husband: "Since he married her, he has taught her to perform ablutions and read the Koran, but she hears her at night repeating the name of Jesus Christ. She hid the Gospels under her cushion" ⁴⁶.

The remarkable thing in *Jannat wa Iblīs* is that the Mother's absence created a common destiny that combined between the daughter's destiny, the mother's destiny and Grandmother's destiny. The three are exposed to betrayal by the man: "A voice that resembles her mother's voice screams in the silence. It is extended like her Grandmother's voice as long as the darkness extends"⁴⁷.

Jannat remembers her mother's suffering; "Her father stresses the word "enemy" and gives her mother a red look... and she sees her mother standing behind the window. Her eyes are looking up at the sky. Above her eyes there is a tear that does not dry nor fall"⁴⁸. We read about the mother's suffering in another quotation: "It resembles her mother's voice when she was sobbing during the night"⁴⁹. Then the narrator tells us about her mother's exposure to beating: "Her forehead is broad. Her nose is high and extremely straight. The bones of her cheeks are prominent and pointed. The blackness of her eyes is dark; a thread of blood was flowing from the corner of her mouth" ⁵⁰.

In the three novels, *Jannat wa Iblīs*, *Imra'ah 'Inda Nuqṭat al- Şifr*, and *Şuqūṭ al-Imām*, the mother is observed as a traditional woman who is satisfied with the compulsions of life. She is absent but devotes her life to the man's service; "Every day, day after day, year after year, thirty years, she stood during the night waiting for him; her head bends over her chest as she is standing. She prepares dinner for him while she is standing. She waits for him, an hour after an hour, but he does not come. If he comes, he takes his meal in a hurry, and after dinner, he goes quickly to bed, without a hug or with a quick hug"⁵¹.

As the case with Fardous is in *Imra'ah 'Inda Nuqṭat al- Şifr*, the case is with Jannat in *Jannat wa Iblīs*. We observe two contradictory powers that hinder her emancipation and her growth in a natural way: the absence

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 155

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 155.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 64.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 71.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 82.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 16.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 16

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 111.

of the role of the Mother and the Father, and the central presence of Grandfather's authority, which is symbolized by the syndrome of the Mother's voice and her spectrum throughout the events of the novel.

The more remarkable thing in *Jannat wa Iblīs* is that "we observe another image of the mother, which is the image of the struggling mother, which contradicts what we have observed before. This image is parallel with the image of the traditional woman, whom we are accustomed to in al-Sa'dāwī's novels. However, this image of the mother does not occupy a large space in al-Sa'dāwī's writing. She is the struggling mother who ferociously defends her children and is represented in Um Iblīs's character, whom we see zealously defending her son, Iblīs: "Why do you beat him, Sheikh Mas'ud? A disrespectful child who was not well-brought up by anyone? He is brought up in the best way! A women's upbringing!"⁵².

In another quotation from the novel, Um Iblīs asks her son to be a man who defends his honor: "Beware of kissing anyone's hand! We earn our living by our sweat! We are not indebted to anyone. Never kiss the hand of anyone"⁵³. We also observe her defy the 'Umda /Chief, symbol of authority: "the 'Umda appears on the bridge surrounded by his guards; Sheikh Mas'ud notices him, and the proud cock shrinks and becomes like a sesame grain! He advances to him with a bended head... His mother is standing with a raised head, and he, Iblīs, was standing beside her, catching her hand. Sheikh Mahmoud pokes him on his shoulder by his rod: Your child, say "hello" to the 'Umda and kiss his hand. She pulls her son's hand and walks, with her face towards the sun and her back towards the 'Umda. Her head is raised high, and does not bend, and her eyes are open"⁵⁴. In my opinion, there is a positive development in the woman's role, but it is incomplete and could not rescue the woman from the captivity of traditions and customs that handcuff her and limit her movement.

In this novel, Nawāl al-Sa'dāwī does not deny the Mother her role, which is represented by Jannat's character, but she refuses her ignorance of her role that is observed as limited, marginalized and affected by the environmental climate of a male patriarchal society that compels her to be negative, marginalized next to an active man.

2.4 The Mother in the Novel *Zena*

In the novel *Zena*, the mother is helpless and negative. She disappoints her children's expectations, which affects their life negatively. She is Um Bdour/ Bdoour's Mother, the absented character, who ignores her motherhood versus her husband's tyranny who exerts on her the cruelest types of injustice. She accepts his betrayal to her with other women (as the case is with Jannat's grandmother in *Jannat wa Iblīs*). She is satisfied with the compulsions of life; "He does not take a shower after he has a sexual intercourse; he moves from her mother to other women without taking a bath"⁵⁵. Her daughter Bdoour grows weak, who fears everything, and ultimately, she becomes helpless, and abandons her daughter *Zena*.

The novel does not observe any movement, action or saying by Um Bdour/ Bdour's Mother. She is not present in the text at all, and the reader does not know a lot about her. He does not see her or hear anything from her, or knows anything about her appearance. She is completely marginalized, and is often silent and muffled. The novel does not observe her as supporting to her daughter when her life circumstances get worse. She does not show her the right way when she rediscovers her father's rape a lame child from the street children. Besides, she does not defend her daughter Bdour strongly when her husband Zakariya al-Khartiti abuses her.

The other mother in the novel is Bdour, who appears as a confused lost and negative woman, with a paralyzed will, marginalized, and hesitant, who is unable to take any attitude, and her main concern is the 'family reputation': "Since her childhood, Bdoour was careful about her renown. She had to carry on her shoulders the honor of the broad family, the honor of her father lieutenant-general Ahmad al-Damhiri..."⁵⁶. Therefore, she abandoned her newly-born daughter and threw her on the road for fear of a scandal and shame, and in order

⁵² Ibid., p. 98.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 99.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 99.

⁵⁵ al-Sa'dāwī, Nawāl (2009). *Zena*. Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, p. 131-132.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 16

protect the name of the broad family. Consequently, the baby grows with the street children: "You left your newly-born baby on the pavement for what? For Zakariya al-Khartiti? Your husband, who is sick of his amputated penis, with which he rapes little girls and orphan boys?"⁵⁷

We also read: "Bdour suddenly stops; she looks behind, and sees emptiness and darkness behind her back... she cleans the pavement from chalk and bricks; she lays a cover under her; she wraps her with a blue woolen blanket; she covers her and protects her from the winter cold, and leaves her and continues walking in the darkness; she pulls her fat finger from between the baby's small fingers..."⁵⁸ Thus, Zena does not need her real mother on the level of unconsciousness and does not think about looking for her; she is satisfied with Dada Zenat and Abla (Nanny) Mariam. The first brought her up and took care of her, and the second believed in her talent. Therefore, we do not observe Zena looking for her; 'Zena, daughter of Zenat, created by her will the circumstances of her life; she says about herself: I am the street daughter; I take pride in my mother Zenat, the maid-servant, who lifted me up from the pavement; fed me pride and self-confidence; Abla Mariam is my second mother; she surrounded me with music, poetry, singing, and filled my heart with joy, rhythm and balance"⁵⁹. We also, "Abla Mariam is my second mother; she is the one who made me love music and singing; she is the one who trained us and embraced us from the street into the world of art"⁶⁰.

To sum up, the mother's character in Nawāl al-Sa'dāwī's novels represent 'absence' and the 'margin'. The Mother is a pale character, who appears in images of weakness and submission. The woman gives in to pain, humiliation and breakdown. She appears in one appearance – a weak woman with a paralyzed will, battered and exhausted in her body and rights. In *Imra'ah 'Inda Nuqṭat al- Şifr* she suffers twice: once by her sadistic husband who "beats his wife every night till she bites the ground"⁶¹, and "when their girl dies, my father eats his dinner... and when a boy dies, my father beats my mother and then he goes to bed after he eats his dinner"⁶².

In *Şuqūṭ al-Imām*, the mother is weak and exhausted physically and spiritually. The man rapes her body and life. For example, the Imam rapes women, including the mother of Bintallah. The Imam's mother is abused by her husband and she accepts that. The mother of the major writer betrays her with other women and she does not utter a word.

In *Jannat wa Iblīs*, the Mother is transparently weak and we hardly see her till she disappears again in the novel. In *Zena*, she is very weak and throws her daughter on the roadside. Thus, the Mother's absence from the narrative is compensated by Abla Iqbal for Fardous in *Imra'ah 'Inda Nuqṭat al- Şifr*; she is substituted by Narjis, Jannat's friend for Jannat in *Jannat wa Iblīs*. She is substituted by Nematalla, Bintalla's friend for Bintallah in *Şuqūṭ al-Imām*, though Abla Iqbal and Nimatallah and Narjis represent a different line from the mother. As a result, a lesbian relationship grows among these female characters in the four novels.

After this observation of the Mother's image in the novels of the study, we can conclude that the women relationships take different social forms such as, friendship, jealousy, competition, and solidarity. Such relationships are significant in the woman's psychological life. They can also play either a negative or positive role in the sexual development of the woman because the "the dividing line between the early stage and the later stage of adolescence is that the early stage is of homosexual tendencies, but the second stage is of relative sexual tendencies towards the other sex"⁶³. It might happen that some feelings of anxiety and psychological stress generate in the girl's soul after her separation from her girlfriend, without being able to get any compensation from her mother. When this disconnection takes place as a result of betrayal of either side, the

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 264.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 176.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 270-271.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 146.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 16.

⁶² Ibid., p.22-23.

⁶³ Ibrahim, Zakariya (n.d.). *Sykolojiyat al-Mar'ah*. Cairo: Dar Gharib li al-Tiba'ah wa al-Nashr., p. 73.

other side is likely to fall a prey to serious neurosis. In such cases, the girl is likely to retreat to the stage of childhood, and behave like small children, and then, she would feel she is in need for her mother's emotions.

No wonder then that Fardous makes a lesbian relationship with Abla Iqbal in *Imra'ah 'Inda Nuqṭat al- Şifr*: "Her eyes caught mine, and I stretched my hand and caught hers; in the surprising contact, my body shivered in a deep ancient pleasure, older than my age that I am aware of"⁶⁴. No wonder also that a lesbian relationship should develop between Jannat and Narjis in *Jannat wa Iblīs*:

"She nearly jumps to her and embraces her; she hugs her so strongly that her body melt into her body, and she and her girlfriend become one thing, and the name Narjis disappears from existence"⁶⁵. The same thing happens between Bintallah and her girlfriend Nematallah at the Orphanage in *Şuqṭ al-Imām*: "Beside me, there is a bed of a child of my age, named Nematalla... her hair is soft and black, which appeared from beneath the cover. Her eyes are open; her breaths are intermittent like sobbing; she whispers in a silent voice: Bintallah, come. I get up and sleep beside her. She holds me in her arms, and her body was shuddering. She surrounds me with her arms, and below my ears, her heart was beating; he chest was soft like the chest of a mother. We sleep embracing till dawn. Before sunrise, Bintallah wakes me up: Go back to your bed!"⁶⁶.

To sum up, the Mother in Nawāl al-Sa'dāwī occupies a considerable space despite her absent presence. al-Sa'dāwī does not draw her as an ideal woman in performing her role. What the novels introduce is an image of the traditional mother.

We observe the idea of pluralism in al-Sa'dāwī's perception and depiction of the character of the Mother. In the novels of the study, we have an image of the traditional mother and the image of the struggling mother. The image of the *traditional mother* in al-Sa'dāwī's novels is far from the ideal romanticism in an aim to confirm the Father's authority and to help her to continue through her submission to various orders that are issued by her. While the Father's image in al-Sa'dāwī's novels is an image that reflects injustice and cruelty, the Mother's image is the opposite: it is the image of submission and subservience.

This subservience, which al-Sa'dāwī criticizes repeatedly, is, in her opinion, the cause of her suffering and her children's suffering, who do not find anyone, who can defy the authority of the father, or at least, reduce it. al-Sa'dāwī introduces the traditional image of the Mother-Wife in a direct clear way to the reader. She draws her as she is preparing her daughter to perform her role and replace her in *Imra'ah 'Inda Nuqṭat al- Şifr*: "In the morning, my mother did not send me to the fields as she does every day. She was loading the spinach on my head and I go to the field."⁶⁷. The Father shares in completing this role: "After my hand grew larger a little, my father put the jug in my hands and taught me how to wash his legs, and thus, I started doing my mother's role"⁶⁸. al-Sa'dāwī draws her forgetting her motherhood, accepting the compulsions of life, and living with a sadistic man: "I belong to the middle class by birth from a poor father, who beats his wife every night till she bites the ground... my mother used to hide his food from us in the opening of the oven. He would sit to eat alone and we would watch him eating."⁶⁹

She is also the Imam's mother in *Şuqṭ al-Imām*, the traditional woman who is satisfied with the compulsions of life and accepts her husband with all his shortcomings. Actually, her life is based on his service: "My father distributes his time among his four wives without justice. He gives the last wife three nights and my mother one night only..."⁷⁰ She does not object to his betrayal. The son grows to be the marginalized 'Great Writer', who does not know to distinguish between 'right and wrong'. We read him suffering for her weakness and submission: "I see you washing his clothes, rubbing the yellow spot in his trousers, with no avail. The spot

⁶⁴ al-Sa'dāwī, Nawāl, *Imra'ah 'Inda Nuqṭat al- Şifr*, p. 35.

⁶⁵ al-Sa'dāwī, Nawāl, *Jannat wa Iblīs*, p. 87.

⁶⁶ al-Sa'dāwī, Nawāl, *Şuqṭ al-Imām*, p. 24.

⁶⁷ al-Sa'dāwī, Nawāl, *Imra'ah 'Inda Nuqṭat al- Şifr*, p. 17.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 22.

⁶⁹ al-Sa'dāwī, Nawāl, *Imra'ah 'Inda Nuqṭat al- Şifr*, p. 16-23.

⁷⁰ al-Sa'dāwī, Nawāl, *Şuqṭ al-Imām*, p. 39.

remains under your eyes, and in your nose you smell the smell of the other woman, and wash and cook, and wait till he returns at the end of the night. When I look into your eyes, I realize that you know...if only you uttered once. If only you refused to wash his polluted trousers with another women's sweat⁷¹.

She is also the absent and absented Mother-Wife in *Jannat wa Iblīs*, who does not appear at all except like a voice or a shade or a shadow through the window: "She sees her mother's face through the window, shining from afar like a star"⁷². In another quotation, she says: "She opens her eyes inside the box and sees her mother's face shining in the darkness"⁷³. The novel observes her doing nothing except that she is waiting the return of the man to prepare dinner for him and prepare herself for him: "Every day, day by day, year by year, for thirty years, she stands during the night bending her head on her chest while she is standing. She prepares dinner while she is standing. She waits hours after hours and he does not come. If he comes, she brings the meal quickly and after dinner, he goes quickly to bed, without a hug or with a quick hug"⁷⁴.

She is also the confused lost woman in *Zena*, who throws her daughter onto the street for fear of a scandal; the baby grows up with and among the street children: "You left your baby daughter on the pavement for what? For Zakariya al-Khartiti? Your husband? The sick one of his amputated penis, who rapes with it the little girls and orphan boys...?"⁷⁵

To sum up, through her exposition of the image of the traditional mother, and despite the cruelty in her depiction, the narrator introduces within that cruelty what can be called 'deep love' to the mother, and implies her support to her, once and in silence, and once in a revolutionary way against the father, who is considered by his children to be the cause of all their mother's suffering. Thus, the children's love to their mother changes into hatred to their father. Their love to the Woman/Mother becomes great because she sacrificed her life for her children. However, the image of the Mother does not always take the form of the 'passionately loved-creature' in al-Sa'dāwī's novels, and it often causes hatred and disgust.

However, the parallel image of the previous image is the image of the struggling mother who fiercely defends her children, but this mother does not get her deserved large space and place in al-Sa'dāwī's novels. We happen to come across her in *Jannat wa Iblīs* represented by the character of Um Iblīs/ Iblīs's Mother, who fiercely defends her son, Iblīs: "Why do you beat him, Sheikh Mas'ud? Is he an ill-brought up child? He is brought up in the best way! A woman's upbringing!"⁷⁶

In another quotation from the novel, Um Iblīs asks her son to protect his honor: "Never kiss another person's hand. We earn our living by our sweat! We are not indebted to anyone. Never kiss another person's hand"⁷⁷. She takes a defying attitude to the 'Umda, the village chief, the representative of the official authority: "the 'Umda appears on the bridge, surrounded by a group of guards. Sheikh Ma'ud notices him. He shrinks in humiliation. He approaches him with a bended-head... his mother is standing with a raised head. He, Iblīs, is standing next to her holding her hand. Sheikh Mas'ud pokes his shoulder with his rod: Say 'hello' to the 'Umda, you boy, and kiss his hand. She pulls her son's hand and walks away. Her face is towards the sun and her back is to the 'Umda. Her head is raised un-bended and her eyes are open"⁷⁸. In my opinion, this is a positive development in the woman's role but it is incomplete, and was not sufficient to save the woman from the captivity of traditions and customs that shackle her and limit her development.

From the above, we see that Nawāl a-Sa'dāwī introduces the image of the Mother in a tragic way that makes the receiver lose his sympathy to her as a result of her failure to perform her motherly duty. al-Sa'dāwī

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 81.

⁷² al-Sa'dāwī, Nawāl, *Jannat wa Iblīs*, p. 107.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 155.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 111.

⁷⁵ al-Sa'dāwī, Nawāl, *Zena*, p. 264.

⁷⁶ al-Sa'dāwī, Nawāl, *Jannat wa Iblīs*, p. 98.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 99.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 99.

depicts her as a weak creature who suffers in silence. It is a hurtful and powerful image of the suffering that the oppressed mother lives, as we see in Fardous's Mother *Imra'ah 'Inda Nuqṭat al-Ṣifr*, who is not respected by her husband, who considers her a machine for bringing birth to children. She is the neglected wife by insincere disloyal husband, who deserts his wife after she reaches the menopause period to become a poor depressed woman as we see in *Jannat wa Iblīs* "Her husband abandoned her in bed, when she reached the menopause age, and secretly married a fourteen year old girl"⁷⁹. It is a painful image for the paralyzed powerless woman in *Ṣuqūṭ al-Imām* and *Zena*.

In my opinion, what Nawāl al-Sa'dāwī does in her novels is merely introducing concepts about the meanings of Motherhood in its comprehensive cover, and its irresistible power. She just wants her to do her duty, and nothing more. al-Sa'dāwī does not deny the mother's role and all its overflowing feelings. Besides, she does not deny the woman's ability and greatness in lending her generous giving to her children, but she denies her ignorance and limited education, and her limited and marginalized role that is influenced by the environmental climate of the patriarchal male society that forces her to be negative in her common life with a positive and active father, which leads to a clear defect in the family structure, which, consequently, leads to a defect in the psychological structure in the children⁸⁰.

al-Sa'dāwī does not give a name to the character of the woman in the novels of this study in order to confirm the absence of her role, and to point out her refusal and aversion from the character, not only in the fictional world, but in the lived reality, as well, which implies al-Sa'dāwī's strong anger. For example, the Mother in *Imra'ah Inda Nuqṭat al-Ṣifr* is nameless while Fardous's teacher has the name Abla Iqbal, who replaces the absent mother in the novel. Therefore, Fardous started looking for her absent mother in her Abla Iqbal's eyes: "The night was silent and quiet; there was neither a voice nor a movement... my face was towards her face, and my eyes were in hers. I saw in front of me two circles of strong whiteness, and within them, there were two strong circles of blackness, looking at me; whenever I look into them, the whiteness becomes whiter and the blackness becomes blacker..."⁸¹

In the novel *Ṣuqūṭ al-Imām*, the Mother has no name. The case is the same in *Jannat wa Iblīs*. Only in the novel *Zena*, does Nawāl al-Sa'dāwī give a name 'Bdour' to the character of the Mother. In my opinion, what al-Sa'dāwī says in these novels is: The Mother, first and foremost, is a wife, and motherhood comes after that.

3. Summary

The image of the mother does not always take the image of the passionately loved creature, as it sometimes raises hatred, aversion and disgust. The character of the Mother mostly represents absence and marginalization. Her image is introduced through her absence and we rarely read her external features. The Mother is a pale character, who appears in the most terrible and submissive images, an exhausted creature, physically and spiritually.

She surrenders to pain, humiliation, and psychological breakdown without any resistance. Her role is mutilated and deprived of the traits of Motherhood. She is not a good model for her children, which reflects the extent of refusal of the traditional role of the ignorant mother, who does not participate in her thought in the intellectual and psychological formation of her children. The absence of the Mother leaves deep scars in al-Sa'dāwī's women, which makes them live in a feeling of loss of security, safety, confidence and protection. She is present through her voice, shade or shadow.

To sum up, it is worthwhile mentioning that the image of Nawāl al-Sa'dāwī's mother in her memoirs and autobiography is also pale. She is the traditional introvert woman, who is not tainted in her relationship with men. Her relationship with her husband is straight. In spite of that, its effect on Nawāl al-Sa'dāwī appears to be the opposite as al-Sa'dāwī appears to be more influenced by her grandmother of her father and her father, the

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 21.

⁸⁰ Najj, Sawsan (2003). *al-Mar'ah al-Misriya wa al-Thawra*. Cairo: The Higher Council for Culture, p. 202

⁸¹ al-Sa'dāwī, Nawāl, *Imra'ah 'Inda Nuqṭat al-Ṣifr*, p. 34.

central source of authority at home, and the more able to act. Therefore, we find Nawāl al-Sa'dāwī in her book, *A Doctor's Memoirs*, introduce her mother as a more absorbed woman in her concerns with the formal details that preserve for the woman her femininity in the traditional form, and in return, Nawāl al-Sa'dāwī appears to be more daring to resist these attempts and concerns.

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