

Talk Like An Egyptian:

Applying the Theory of the Subaltern to the Works of Nawal El Saadawi

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Having a voice in society is often something that women in the Western world take for granted. However, in many countries, the majority of women remain silent. Not surprisingly, these are often women with the most interesting and jarring stories to tell. The works of Nawal El Saadawi delve into the lives of these oppressed women and attempt to bring attention to the silenced others of countries such as Egypt.

This thesis analyzes the fictional works of Nawal El Saadawi using the postcolonial, feminist theory of the subaltern. Out of El Saadawi's novels and short stories, three books best display narrators who are subalterns: *Woman at Point Zero* (1975), *The Fall of the Imam* (1989), and *The Innocence of the Devil* (1994). This selection represents the three decades in which El Saadawi has been publishing fictional works. Therefore, an analysis of these novels can reveal how her writing has changed vis-à-vis contemporary events in Egypt. For consistency, Sherif Hetata is the translator for all three novels. Using the theory of the subaltern as explained by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (Leitch 2001), the primary narrators in El Saadawi's works are seen as silenced through their oppression by (Egyptian) society and by the way in which that society exerts power through religion (Islam).

Nawal El Saadawi was born in 1931 in Kafr Tahla, a village in the Egyptian delta (Malti-Douglas vii). Her father graduated from the university and held the position of General Controller of Education for the Province of Menoufia, and her mother was educated in French schools (El Saadawi, *Hidden Face of Eve*, 8). El Saadawi attended Arabic-speaking schools and

received her MD from the male-dominated Faculty of Medicine at the University of Cairo. In 1958, she took up a position in the Ministry of Health (Malti-Douglas vii-viii).

El Saadawi began writing at thirteen with the novel *Memoirs of a Female Child Named Su'ad*. Since then she has written a number of fiction and nonfiction works, including her most popular nonfiction work, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World* (Malti-Douglas x). In addition to her writing, in 1982 El Saadawi founded the Arab Woman's Solidarity Association (AWSA), which holds seminars that discuss gender relations and women's status (Malti-Douglas viii-ix). However, El Saadawi has suffered repercussions because of her outspoken behavior. She was dismissed from the Ministry of Health in 1972 after the release of her nonfiction work, *Woman and Sex*, in 1971. In 1981, the Sadat regime arrested and imprisoned her for three months because of her writings (Saiti 153). In addition, it is said that fanatical Islamist groups include her on their death lists (Malti-Douglas viii). Even so, El Saadawi does not shy away from difficult or taboo subject matter. Her works ask questions about the meaning behind relationships between males and females, gender identity, religion, and the treatment of women in Egyptian society.

El Saadawi's novels can present quite a challenge as they depart from the norm by incorporating multiple narrators, utilizing a circular plot structure, relying heavily on internal dialogue, and often slipping between memories and events in the present. Her narrators are almost exclusively Egyptian females who live in Cairo. The narrators are presented with difficulties that come from simply being female in a predominately Islamic society. In return, they fight against their fates; they are angry at themselves for being female, at their families for enforcing society's patriarchal norms upon them, and at society itself for basing this oppression in religious ideology. For young, American, undergraduate feminists, these novels may be

disturbing because the narrators exude such an intense anger against their sex, which differs greatly from the Western idea of “I am woman; hear me roar.” However, it is important to delve into these unknown territories, to discover if El Saadawi is able to give these female narrators a voice with which to roar.

Because El Saadawi is not Western, it is important to use a theory, such as the theory of the subaltern, that does not employ Western ideals. The origin of the term “subaltern” derives from the works of Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist, and refers to the “non-elite or subordinate social groups” within a society (Landry 203). One of the foremost writers on the theory of the subaltern is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Vincent Leitch summarizes the term’s definition in the introduction to excerpts from Spivak’s essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”: “The ‘subaltern’ always stands in an ambiguous relation to power – subordinate to it but never fully consenting to its rule, never adopting the dominant point of view or vocabulary as expressive of its own identity” (2194).

Spivak believes that despite the best intentions of “postcolonial intellectuals” to give a voice to the subaltern, they simply continue the silencing (Leitch 2193). Spivak applies Michel Foucault’s beliefs in “epistemic violence” to the subaltern by saying that postcolonial studies’ attempt is a “remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other” (2197). Her reasoning comes from the belief that postcolonial studies often result in placing the subaltern in an essentialist position: “leftist intellectuals who romanticize the oppressed, Spivak argues, essentialize the subaltern and thus replicate the colonialist discourses they purport to critique” (Leitch 2195). Essentialism can be described as “the belief that certain people or entities share some essential, unchanging ‘nature’ that secures their membership in a category” (Leitch 2194). While Spivak is hesitant about postcolonial

attempts to give a voice to the subaltern, she does believe that it is important to listen as much as possible to the subaltern. As Leitch explains, “In every utterance, she [Spivak] urges us to hear the faint whisper of what could not be said” (2196).

In order to understand El Saadawi’s works in their cultural context, one must take a brief look at the events that occurred in Egypt during the 1970s, ‘80s, and ‘90s. The decades of the 1960s and ‘70s saw a period of increased feminism, which could be attributed to Egypt’s postcolonial efforts to modernize as well as Westernize. However, during the 1980s a decline in the importance of feminism began (Braziel). Veiling became more popular, possibly in reaction to attempts to Westernize. Anwar Sadat served as president of Egypt from 1970 until his assassination in 1981. Sadat imprisoned nearly 1600 intellectuals in 1981 in an attempt to control political thought. El Saadawi was among those arrested. Merely a month after the arrests, members of a Muslim fundamentalist group assassinated Sadat. El Saadawi’s novels are replete with historical and political allusions and commentary on these events.

El Saadawi believes that societies manipulate the precepts of Islam in order to oppress and restrict women. In *The Hidden Face of Eve*, she states, “The reasons for the low status of women in our societies, and the lack of opportunities for progress afforded to them, are not due to Islam, but rather to certain economic and political forces . . . making a concerted attempt to misinterpret religion and utilize it as an instrument of fear, oppression and exploitation” (El Saadawi 41). Alamin Mazrui and Judith Abala speak of this issue in their article, “Sex and Patriarchy: Gender Relations” in *Mawt al-rajul al-wahid ‘ala al-ard (God Dies by the Nile)*.

They quote El Saadawi as saying,

Islam is not exceptional in having transformed women into slaves of their men. Judaism and Christianity subjected women to the same fate. As a matter of fact, the oppression of women exercised by the temple and the church has been even

more ferocious than by Islam. Changes in the situation were the result of social and economic development and the weakening grip of religion. (17-33)

This theme appears throughout each of El Saadawi's novels. It is not Islam, or any other religion for that matter, that is represented as oppressive but the ways in which the political and religious leaders interpret Islam, through the Qur'ān and Hadith, in order to exert power over others.¹

Are El Saadawi's narrators subalterns? Three of El Saadawi's novels provide the best opportunity to answer this question: *Woman at Point Zero* (1975), *The Fall of the Imam* (1989), and *The Innocence of the Devil* (1994). For clarification purposes, the characters being analyzed in this thesis will be referred to as the "primary" narrators because the majority of the plots revolve around each of these people. The other narrators will be called "secondary" narrators. This distinction is especially relevant in *The Fall of the Imam* and *The Innocence of the Devil*, in which the narration moves between multiple characters. In the case of *Woman at Point Zero*, the doctor to whom the primary narrator is speaking is a secondary narrator who only appears at the beginning and end of the novel. This approach provides a frame for the main narrative, which is the primary narrator's life story. This distinction is necessary in order to focus solely on the primary narrator, who is the possible subaltern in each work: Firdaus in *Woman at Point Zero*, Bint Allah in *The Fall of the Imam*, and Ganat in *The Innocence of the Devil*.

This thesis examines the primary narrators in relation to the theory of the subaltern in this selection of books by Nawal El Saadawi. Each book is first discussed independently with special attention given to the primary narrator of each novel and then overall conclusions are presented.

In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus is the primary narrator. She fits into the category of the subaltern because she is not only a poor woman from a small village outside of Cairo but also a

¹ Hadith literally translated means "tradition." The Hadith refers to a collection of works that record the doings and saying of the Prophet Muhammad in great detail. Together with the Qur'ān, the Hadith works as the source of law and the basis for Muslim ethics and values (Mernissi 1).

prostitute who has been sentenced to death for murdering her pimp. The novel begins from the point of view of a doctor who is doing research on the personalities of female prisoners. She hears about Firdaus and wishes to interview her. Initially, Firdaus believes this doctor is from the media and refuses to do the interview. She is very distrusting of the state-controlled media, and her mistrust of newspapers seems to stem from the fact that the papers exalt men, all of whom she believes to be corrupt:

Each time I picked up a newspaper and found the picture of a man who was one of them [kings, princes, rulers], I would spit on it . . . I did not [know them] . . . However, all the men I did get to know, every single man of them, has filled me with but one desire: to lift my hand and bring it smashing down on his face. (El Saadawi, *Woman* 11)

However, she changes her mind the day before her death and tells the doctor her life story.

Through her interview with this doctor, who is assumed to be El Saadawi, Firdaus is able to speak for the first time.

Throughout her life, Firdaus is continually silenced through her oppression at the hands of the Egyptian society. Growing up, she is treated as inferior to her brother. She is not allowed to attend school and is subjected to psychological and physical abuse. She is subjected to a clitoridectomy, which affects her mentally and sexually. When her parents pass away and she goes to live with her uncle, she finally has the chance to get an education. She earns her secondary school certificate; however, at this point her education ends. Because her uncle and his wife cannot afford to shelter her any longer, she is married off to her aunt's uncle, Sheikh Mahmoud. She quickly realizes the strenuous duties that a wife must perform:

The day came that I departed from my uncle's house and went to live with Sheikh Mahmoud. Now I slept on a comfortable bed instead of a wooden couch. But no sooner did I stretch out my body on it to rest from the fatigue of cooking, and washing and cleansing the large house with its rooms full of furniture, than Sheikh Mahmoud would appear by my side. He was already over sixty, whereas I had not yet turned nineteen. (43)

Everything about him disgusts her, and she must learn to turn off her mind and body when he comes to bed. The Sheikh is extremely cheap and cannot stand to waste food. On one occasion, he finds scraps of food in the trashcan. “After this incident, he got into the habit of beating me whether he had a reason for it or not” (44). When Firdaus complains, her aunt replies, “a virtuous woman [is] not supposed to complain about her husband. Her duty [is] perfect obedience” (44).

After some time, Firdaus cannot stand the marriage any longer. She escapes and finds that living on the streets and being a prostitute affords her more freedom than being married. However, while being a prostitute allows her personal freedom, she is still considered a second-class citizen. She has no voice in society. This silencing is made painfully apparent when she kills her pimp in self-defense. Because of her vulnerable position in society, she is charged and convicted to die for the murder. The trial is not discussed in this novel; therefore, it is possible that she was not given a chance to defend herself in court.

In *Woman at Point Zero*, religion is not a main focal point as it is in *The Fall of the Imam* and *The Innocence of the Devil*; however, it does play a major role in this novel in underlying ways. Firdaus begins the story of her life by speaking of her father and his Friday trips to the mosque for weekly prayer. She describes him as he discusses the day’s sermon with the other men of the village:

I could see them walking through the narrow winding lanes, nodding their heads in admiration, and in approval of everything his Holiness the *Imam* said. I would watch them as they continued to nod their heads, rub their hands one against the other, wipe their brows while all the time invoking Allah’s name, calling upon his blessings, repeating His holy words in a guttural, subdued tone, muttering and whispering without a moment’s respite. (13)

The use of words and phrases with negative connotations, such as “guttural” and “without a moment’s respite,” in this paragraph works to make the narrator’s view of her father, as well as the other men, appear pessimistic. Because it is religion that the men are discussing, that topic is presented in a negative light as well. This paragraph is juxtaposed against the following lines: “On my head I carried a heavy earthenware jar, full of water. Under its weight my neck would sometimes jerk backwards, or to the left or to the right” (13). Here, the narrator explains the tremendous weight that she must carry, both literally and figuratively. The men use religion to exert oppression upon her through her exclusion from religious ceremonies. She remains burdened by her religion and society, while her dreams of becoming something more are crushed.

Many of the incidents that shape Firdaus’s life are a direct result of society’s interpretations of religion, such as the clitoridectomy to reduce her sexual desire, the lack of education, and being married at a young age. These practices are considered to be religious-based, even if they are not directly spoken of in the Qur’ān and Hadith. The ways in which society, especially men, abuse religion in order to justify violence toward women is also apparent in this novel. At one point in her marriage to Sheikh Mahmoud, he beats her with a shoe, leaving her face and body swollen and bruised. In order to find refuge from his abuse, Firdaus returns to her uncle’s house. However, he simply tells her that “all husbands beat their wives” (44). Even her uncle’s wife admits to being beaten often. Firdaus cannot believe this and argues with her: “I said my uncle was a respected Sheikh, well versed in the teachings of religion, and he, therefore, could not possibly be in the habit of beating his wife” (44). However, her aunt replies that it was “precisely men well versed in their religion who beat their wives. The precepts of religion permitted such punishment” (44). The novel does not go into the specifics of which part

of the Qur'ān or Hadith actually sanctions violence; however, it is exactly this type of overarching belief about Islam that many of the characters cite when attempting to justify abuse.

The novel ends with Firdaus explaining why she is no longer afraid to die. She describes herself as free “because I no longer desire to live, nor do I any longer fear to die” (101). She states that she is not being put to death for killing someone but instead for exposing the truth about how prostitutes are treated: “That is why they are afraid and in a hurry to execute me. They do not fear my knife. It is my truth which frightens them . . . I spit with ease on their lying faces and words, on their lying newspapers” (102-103).

Woman at Point Zero portrays the life of one particular woman who falls into the category of the subaltern, in that she was forced to face oppression at the hands of men and society as a whole, often in the name of religion. Through this oppression, she finds herself silenced in multiple ways. Just as her aunt and uncle would not listen to her complaints about her abusive husband, neither would the court system and newspapers. It is only the doctor/author who even attempts to give her a voice.

Similar to *Woman at Point Zero*, *The Fall of the Imam* is about a young woman named Bint Allah, who has been silenced in many ways. This complexly constructed novel revolves around the repeated scene of Bint Allah's death. “It was the night of the Big Feast. They hunted me down after chasing me all night. Something hit me in the back” (El Saadawi, *The Fall*, 1). When the police catch up with her, they proclaim that her mother was stoned to death and that Bint Allah is a child of sin: “Your mother never knew what loyalty meant, neither to our land, nor to the Imam Allah. She died an infidel and is burning in hell” (1). Bint Allah defends her mother to the end: “. . . my mother was never a traitor. Before I was born my father abandoned her and ran away” (1). They then ask her who her father is. When she replies that he is the

Imam, they scream and cut out her tongue. This scene varies in the details each time that it appears within the book. Sometimes she is stoned to death; other times she is stabbed or shot.

Another scene, which is central to the novel and is repeated several times, is the possible assassination of the Imam. Whether or not he is actually dead remains questionable because he has a bodyguard who wears a mask and stands in the place of the Imam on many occasions: “No one in the whole land could possibly distinguish between the two, tell which was the false Imam from the true, except the God in heaven and the Chief of Security” (39). A connection between these two scenes seems to be missing in some way. The reader then wonders if Bint Allah attempted to assassinate the Imam or, if not, then what her involvement was exactly.

Throughout the novel, the reader learns that Bint Allah has grown up in an orphanage after her mother’s death and was given the name Bint Allah, which means “Daughter of God.” Within the orphanage, her caretakers subject her to mental and physical abuse. One in particular is a man named Baba. “His right hand always held a stick while his left was closed most of the time around the arm of some small girl he was dragging off to the punishment cell” (19). Bint Allah is unaware of what the punishment entails until Baba decides that it is her turn.

My turn had come to be punished . . . I felt his thick fingers close tightly over my arm. I closed my eyes and abandoned myself. He was God, and he could take me wherever he wished. I woke from my sleep to find myself lying in bed. There was a feeling of wetness under my body, and over my thigh was something warm and sticky like sweat . . . [I] touched my thigh . . . My finger tips were covered in blood. (22)

This abuse continues throughout Bint Allah’s life until she is at last killed for saying that she is the Imam’s daughter.

It happens that one day, the Imam decides that he wants a particular type of slave girl to be his lover. He sends the Chief of Security in search of the perfect woman. The Chief finds

Bint Allah and brings her to the Imam. The Imam has sex with her, unaware of any possibility that he could be her father.

It was the night of the Big Feast when the moon becomes a full moon once again. She lay on the ground, her naked body bathed in light just as it had been when she was born. . . . and as she lay there on the ground she whispered to herself, I must either save my life or I must die for my sisters. I must deliver them from the tyrant for all time. (118)

The next day the assassination attempt on the Imam occurs. It is possible that the reader could interpret those last lines as Bint Allah's decision to kill the Imam. However, because of the ambiguity that surrounds every event in this story, it is hard to find concrete details to support that interpretation. From Bint Allah's mother's death, to her abuse in the orphanage, to her subjection at the hands of the Imam, and finally to her death, Bint Allah is continually silenced by society through her class status, the history of her mother's death, and her own outspoken beliefs about the Imam.

In this novel, religion is tightly wound together with the plotline. The Imam, along with being a political figure, is a spiritual figure as well. He is described as a "religious leader and ruler, representative of God on earth" in a footnote within the novel (1). Bint Allah believes herself to be the daughter of the Imam: "We were called the children of God, and I was called Bint Allah, the Daughter of God. I had never seen God face to face, yet I thought He was my father, and that my mother was his wife" (13). Bint Allah uses the word, "god" in these lines; however, the Imam and God are often referred to interchangeably. Her belief that she is the Imam's daughter is seen as sacrilegious and blasphemous and is likely the main cause for her death.

Bint Allah often dreams about God. Sometimes she dreams that God is a man who impregnates her with his son. Other times, he takes the form of Baba, the abusive man who

worked at the orphanage. God is always dual in form: one part loving, the other evil. “I saw God in my sleep and He had two faces. One smooth and gentle as a mother’s face, and the other like the face of Satan” (49). Each of these representations of God and religion show the tremendous confusion that Bint Allah feels about Islam. In her education at the orphanage, she is presented with the truth about Islam, which at its core is not oppressive. However, this attitude is countered by the ways in which the men in this society, such as the Imam, use religion to abuse the power that it gives them.

The Fall of the Imam provides a portrayal of the abuse and violence that Egyptian society inflicts upon many women. In the article, “Nawal El Saadawi’s *The Fall of the Imam* and the Possibility of a Feminine Writing” Earl G. Ingersoll discusses the cruelty within the reoccurring scene of Bint Allah’s death. He questions if the woman in the scene is actually Bint Allah or her mother. He then wonders if “. . . the object of this brutality [is] any woman whose body is the site of persecution” (Ingersoll 23-31). This statement generalizes Bint Allah’s oppression to all of the other women who find themselves subjugated by those in power. In the Author’s Preface to *The Fall of the Imam*, El Saadawi discusses many of the events that lead up to her writing this book.

[The characters] were there when I met the Iranian Shahbani Shiraz who told me the story of her ‘little girl’ raped by her jailers. There with Fatima Ta El Sirr, the Sudanese woman, when she took me to visit the ‘Association for people with amputated hands’ so that I could see her boy and his companions with their hands cut off at the wrist in accordance with Shariat (Muslim jurisprudence, which allows amputation of hands and legs for theft). There during the three months I spent with Iitidal Mahmoud and other young Egyptian girls in a prison cell.

The last of these experiences, El Saadawi’s imprisonment by Anwar Sadat, is spoken of in the introduction to *The Innocence of the Devil* by Fedwa Malti-Douglas. “El Saadawi’s imprisonment under Sadat inspired several works, which permitted the writer to enter fully into

domains that she had previously only skirted” (xi). In speaking of *The Fall of the Imam*, Malti-Douglas states that the novel, “with its patriarchal ruler (who is, among others, a stand-in for Sadat), weaves a tale that is an ambitious rewriting of patriarchy” (xi). Even the simple fact that this novel is about a political figure’s assassination shows strong parallels to Anwar Sadat’s assassination in 1981. Therefore, one must consider the apparent implications that the Sadat regime had upon the events that El Saadawi places in this novel.

Ganat, the primary narrator of *The Innocence of the Devil*, finds herself being oppressed by society to the extent that she is placed in a mental institution. The exact reasons behind her involuntary admission into the hospital are not clear; however, it seems to have something to do with her reaction to finding her husband in bed with another woman. Upon finding her husband, she jumps into his car and speeds away. “She lifted her hands from the wheel and clapped them together with the glee of a child set free. The beat of her heart danced under her ribs, and the car danced along the road to the same beat. She hugged the steering wheel as though she were hugging her mother close to her heart” (El Saadawi, *Innocence*, 101). The description of this incident seems to allude to her instability. She says that she has endured “thirty years of sadness” (101); however, this statement is quickly followed with the line, “Under the surface was a gleam like a ray of light, like the eyes of another woman being born, happy to be saved” (101). Whether she is joyous or deeply hurt by this occurrence is unclear.

Once in the hospital, Ganat is subjected to shock treatment and kept under heavy sedatives throughout her entire stay. This novel comprises scenes that move fluidly between the conscious and the unconscious. Her memories and the present events warp themselves together so that reality becomes extremely unclear. Ganat is only allowed to leave the institution after she claims that she has forgotten her past. “A woman who cannot remember being oppressed and

who cannot fight, [the hospital Director] thinks, is no longer a menace to society” (Saiti 170). However, in the next chapter, Ganat is carried out of the hospital in a coffin. In addition, she finds herself in court, charged with continuing to remember her past. Whether this court session actually occurs or if it is inside her mind is not clear. It is ambiguous as to whether Ganat is literally set free or if she is freed by death.

Religion plays a key role in this novel. Most of the secondary characters are representations of religious figures. A male mental patient at the hospital is named Eblis, which is Arabic for “Satan.” Another mental patient is Sheikh Bassiouni. It is not clear whether he was actually a Sheikh before coming to the hospital; however, he now believes that he is not only a Sheikh but God as well. He is often called “The Deity.” Sheikh Bassiouni comes to Eblis during the night and tells him to whisper evil things into the other patients’ ears. At the conclusion of the book, however, Sheikh Bassiouni realizes that using Eblis in this way is a mistake, and he cries out that Eblis is innocent. Thus, El Saadawi is commenting on the religious view that all the evil that Satan does is only because God tells him to do it.

Ganat is placed in the interesting position of having a Christian grandmother who is married to a Muslim man. Her grandmother hides the fact that she has not actually converted to Islam and keeps the Bible under her pillow. Therefore, Ganat is exposed to both religions simultaneously. Thus, her views on God and religion are a mixture of both Muslim and Christian approaches. Even though she is constantly berated by her schoolteacher and grandfather for asking too many questions about religion and Allah, she has a very high respect for God, referring to him as pure love. At one point during her childhood, Ganat writes a letter to God, which states, “You are love. You are the morning star. The light of my heart” (152). Later, her husband, Zakaria asks her to write him a love letter. She writes,

I love you as I love the forbidden fruit
 On the tree of knowledge.
 I stretch out my hand and pluck it off.
 I am not afraid
 For God is love. (96)

This view of God as love is interesting because it brings up the topic of Sufism.

By bringing up the fact that Ganat might adhere to the tradition of Sufism, El Saadawi is showing that Ganat is straying from traditional Islam to the more mystical aspects of the religion. This approach would place her in direct opposition to a large majority of Muslim Sunnis and even some strains of the Muslim Brotherhood. As Ramzi Saiti says of the issue of religion in *The Innocence of the Devil*: “the characters that feature as part of the past memories of characters in the asylum also offer a powerful commentary on religious intolerance, misinterpretations of holy books (the Bible and the Qur’ān), the oppression of women, and the prejudice against anyone who is perceived as being different” (169).

Religion is depicted as a justification for the abuse and oppression of women and others within society in this novel, just as it was in the other novels. A particular passage that speaks of using religion as a rationalization for abuse occurs in the section about Eblis as a young boy.

He heard his father saying that women were lacking in mind and in their faith in God. At school he had heard his teacher say that men were custodians. The teacher made him open the book and read out the phrase: *Men are the custodians of women*, and every day he was made to read it out and repeat it three times after the teacher. . . . He put up his hand and asked:
 --Sir, what does the word *custodian* mean?
 --. . . To be a custodian means to be sovereign over someone.
 --And what does *to be sovereign* mean, sir?
 --Sovereign means that the male rules over the female, boy, and that the female submits to the male. (El Saadawi, *The Innocence of the Devil*, 134)

These teachings, from the male elders to the young men, simply perpetuate the continuing belief that women are supposed to be subordinate to men. This belief is then later carried to the extreme, making it acceptable for men to beat, abuse, and oppress women for the simple fact that

the women are inferior. Therefore, Ganat, Firdaus, Bint Allah, and other women like them, are silenced over years as this belief has been passed down through generations of men.

An analysis of these novels leads to the conclusion that each of the three primary narrators is silenced in a different ways, with society and interpretations of Islam playing a significant role in their oppression. Comparing the three novels with one another makes it apparent that the three primary narrators qualify as subalterns because they find themselves having to submit to the power of authority, without ever entirely accepting it. Firdaus, Bint Allah, and Ganat all fought against the powers that kept them silent. Therefore, they belong in the category of the subaltern. To return to Spivak's question, "Can the subaltern speak?" it seems that at least in this case, the answer is yes. Each narrator is given a chance to tell her story through El Saadawi's writing.

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