

Patterns of Femininity in Nawal El Saadawi's *The Novel and Love in the Kingdom of Oil*

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Abstract

*This paper examines the representations of femininity in Nawal El Saadawi's **The Novel and Love in the Kingdom of Oil**. It identifies three personality models exhibited by female character portrayal patterns of femininity. The patterns, which the study terms normative, contemporary and agglomerate patterns of femininity, reoccur in the texts revealing contradictions embedded in women's struggle against obnoxious cultural elements that are detrimental to their subjective consciousness as humans. The paper argues that Nawal El Saadawi, an Arab feminist and a creative dissident, creates feminine types that contradict established feminine norms, thereby redefining and reconstructing Arab Femininity, incorporating inherent feminine traits that are aberrant to the established traditional norms. She presents Arab femininity from the point of view of the culture controlled/subjugation femininity, depicting the state of Arab traditional femininity and from the point of view of re-conceptualized and restructured Arab femininity that contradicts and challenges the normative or culture construct femininity. In doing so, she creates female protagonists who challenge the status quo, by rejecting the cultural and religious prescribed characteristics and attributes for Arab women. El Saadawi thereby offers a heroic perspective to femininity using female characters who oppose the status quo by taking up professions regarded as masculine, refusing submission, chastity, wifehood, and motherhood. These acts are regarded as a misnomer and a challenge to the traditional status quo and to the authority of men. El Saadawi therefore contemporizes Arab femininity thereby inaugurating the new Arab woman.*

Keywords: Pattern, Femininity, Normative, Contemporary, Subjugated.

Introduction

Literary and sociological discourses on femininity premise that femininity is a social, cultural and somewhat religious construction of how a woman should live and behave. The attributes and characteristics so constructed shape and control the ways women are viewed and the ways women view themselves. This also influences the depiction of femininity in works of literature as exemplify in the novels. The concept of femininity is fluid, it is both periodic and cultural, therefore, cultural variables determine and control women's self-definition, self-expression, fashion their behaviours and worldviews. Consequently, femininity

can be examined in terms of the ways cultures produce norms and values that replicate specific and unique behaviours ascribed to women. Femininity like masculinity is one's gender identity. It refers to the degree to which persons see themselves or are seen as feminine based on what it means to be feminine in the society or culture. Femininity is therefore, understood and can be defined as sets of characteristics and behaviours culture or society prescribes for women. Because it is a social/culture construct, femininity is often steep in stereotypes, therefore, the lay down characteristics and behaviours do not define exactly how women are, but rather, they define how the society and culture want women to be and behave. The societal or culture prescribed attributes though unfair to women's disposition, yet women internalize them, voluntarily accept the conceptions femininity as normal, thus validate Simeon De Beauvoir's postulation that, "One is not born but becomes woman (293)". Therefore, femininity is neither an internal reality nor essential in the process of identity formation; rather, it a construction women perform devotedly and willingly to conform to cultural and religious expectations (Lorber & Martin, 2011).

Arab femininity which is the subject of this paper is the expression of femaleness in Arab culture. One of the most essential and distinct aspect of Arab culture is religion (Islam). Islam has been identified as the dominant variable that have influenced Arab culture (Kalling & Gentry, 2007; Shahin & Wright, 2004). Islam rooted in the daily life of every Muslim, has influenced the construction of Arab femininity. The construction of Arab femininity hinges on two core attributes, wifehood and motherhood, other attributes such fecundity, submission, chastity, piety, silence, passivity and the likes are embedded in wifehood and motherhood and form the core attributes that are socially, culturally and religiously accepted. The concept and construction of Arab femininity has been the subject of both critical and sociological inquiry. However, the emerging contemporary issues have necessitated the reassessment of the status of Arab femininity, as a result, contemporary Arab writers and critics such as Assia Djebar, Fatima Mernissi, Leila Ahmed, Layla Baalbaki and Nawal El Saadawi have explored the concept and construction of Arab femininity in their various texts. These writers mostly feminists agree that the composition of Arab femininity is not how Arab women are but how the masculinised Arab society and culture wants them to be and behave (Hidden 314). They insist that treatments meted out to women are historically rooted in male-dominant culture and suggest that female objectification has been motivated by socio-political worldview that promote and project gender hierarchies (Hidden 145). Therefore, desire to reconstruct Arab femininity, improve Arab women's condition and lift off the weight of religion

and culture became the major motivation for their literary engagements. They thus reconstruct and redefine Arab femininity, specifying appropriate aesthetic parameters through which to examine it. This in a way has delineated femininity within the socio-cultural and political historicity of the Arabs.

These feminist writers reconstruct and represent femininity rectifying the distorted image of Arab women that is depicted as mother, passive and pious and as wife, submissive and silenced among others. Analysing the state of Arab women and their femininity, Deniz Kandiyoti states that, Arab women throughout history have been anointed as “mothers of the nation, privileged bearers of corporate identity and boundary makers of their communities” (382) (Emphasis Mine). Authenticating Kandiyoti, Amrita Basu maintains that Arab women are burdened with “the repositories of religious beliefs and keepers of purity and integrity in the society” (2). Affirming the ‘agenciless’ position of Arab women, Al-Sudeary states that, “though women prove to be valuable to the society, yet, they are kept from participating in public affairs”. Their voices are only heard as medium through which the society thrives (69). Women are valuable as wives and mother, their voices are not heard in public and public affairs, hence, many women’s voices are silenced into conformity (Debora Cameron, 4). The silenced voice of women is evident in the construction of Arab femininity and is revealed in the attributes and characteristics prescribe for Arab women. Therefore, El Saadawi likens Arab femininity to a panopticon constructed for the Arab woman by the patriarchal class under the control of culture and religious surveillance (Hidden 110). Her novels reveal biases of the Arab society that dignify masculinity while reducing femininity to the archetype of the child-bearer and pleasure provider. They present three patterns of Arab femininity amidst the suppression women suffer.

Nawal El Saadawi in the Arab/Middle East Literary Landscape

Nawal El Saadawi is a prolific ultra-Feminist Egyptian writer (Emenyonu & Eke, 2010), renowned for her stand against gender-based violence and patriarchal structures that have subjugated and relegated Arab women. A self-acclaimed advocate of creative dissidence, which she claims is a tool for consciousness raising for women, lifting the veils that block their minds and enhancing their resistance against gender violence and all forms of inequality (*The Essential* 73). Speaking in Seventh International Conference of the Arab Women's Solidarity Association in Cairo in 21-25 of May 2005, El Saadawi states that creativity, Dissidence and Women are three words that are liable (especially when linked together) to evoke fear and concern amongst in men, and women, not only in the

Arab world but also in the world at large. She insists that there is a close relationship between creativity, knowledge and awareness of what goes on around us, maintaining that creativity gives birth to new knowledge and new consciousness breeds rebellion against ignorance, submission, and injustice (non-page). Furthermore, El Saadawi maintains that when women rebel against ignorance, against submission and against injustice they raise fear among those who rule over women that is to say men. Brinda Mehta opines that the true appreciation of El Saadawi's humanism is based on the understanding of her dissident disposition (*Emerging Perspectives* 7), she maintains that, dissidence is the motivating force behind El Saadawi's writings (*Emerging Perspectives* 8). Nevertheless, El Saadawi's dissident deportment gives her works prominence in contemporary Arab literary milieu. Fedwa Malta-Douglas captures El Saadawi's temperament in Arab feminist literary canon when he states that, "El Saadawi has her fingers so firmly on the pulse of Arab culture and contemporary Middle East" noting that "... little escape her gender conscious pen (1)". This statement attests to the fact of her incarceration by the government of Anwar Sadat, the attacks on herself, marriage, writing and also *fatwa* or death threats issued to her by some Islamic fundamentalist. Additionally, El Saadawi's stance on the wrong interpretation of the Koran and its effect on Arab femininity afforded her the label, of heretic. Guèye, Khadidiatou examines El Saadawi's writings and states that her writings stand at the intersection of gender and religion, literary agency and social restrictions (64). This is evident in her presentation of the intersections between religion and social restrictions in the construction of Arab femininity in her novels *The Novel* and *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*.

Framing Femininity in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*

El Saadawi's *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* (hereinafter *LITKO*) reveals three patterns of femininity within the Arab socio-cultural and religious milieu in doing this, she creates distinct and recurring character patterns. The first character type is associated with religion and culture prescribed attributes and qualities for women, is refers to as normative females and represents the normative pattern femininity. The normative females adhere strictly to the tradition prescribed qualities and attributes for women. They uphold the religious prescribed characteristics and behaviours for women because of the intermingling of religion and Arab culture. Religion and culture play ubiquitous role in the construction of normative pattern femininity and dictate the place of women the Arab socio-political environment. They therefore, constitute the two central sources of influence in the construction of Arab femininity as depicted in Arab literature.

Attributes ascribe to the normative females are motherhood, wifeness, submission, pious, chastity, silence, docile, etc.

El Saadawi explores religion and cultural elements in her representation of the normative pattern of femininity in *LITKO*. For example in the text, the women of the Alma Mater hold on to the religious injunctions regarding veiling, silence, wifeness and submission (49, 64). This is because Islam enjoins women to wear veil (12, 13, 17), submit to the authority of the man (59), to be silent (17). El Saadawi states that, religion claims that veiling is God's order to women geared towards protecting men from being seductiveness of feminine beauty. Contending the claim, she states, "If I were God, I would order men to cover their eyes or better, I would have created men without eyes rather than veil women...." (*The Essential* xvi). Veiling is linked to orthodox Islamic concept of *fitna*, which describes civil strife or chaos (Mernissi 31). *Fitna* is also used to denote beautiful woman, implying figuratively that, beautiful women incite chaos. Therefore, veiling especially to the orthodox Muslim just like seclusion is applied to prevent the state of *fitna* (confusion/chaos). It is believed (especially in the orthodox Muslims circle) that *fitna* arises when women move about in the streets without veil and/or un-chaperon. This is because women possess sexual power referred in Arabic as *qaid* that should be checked; hence veiling becomes a kind of restraint for *qaid* (Mernissi, 34). *Qaid* signifies moral threat to the social order, more specifically to male spiritual purity. Fatima Mernissi claims that, Arab men believe that, women exude irresistible sexual attraction that can lead to chaos or social disorder if left unchecked (35). Consequently, the veil becomes the major instrument for and means of restraining women from assaulting men's spiritual purity and invoking chaos. Therefore, El Saadawi's *LITKO* presents veiled women of the Alma Mater without any corporeality, their bodies are present but invisible to men's gaze (74). El Saadawi States that the origin of the veil is embedded in the idea that women are bodies without heads prominent beliefs in Christianity and Islamic religions (*Essential* 48).

Grace Daphne contends that the veil is a kind of double shield, protecting women against the society (male gaze) and the society against women (invoking chaos) (Daphne, 21). This authenticates various gazes portrayed in the novel. El Saadawi presents both male and female gazes, while her depiction of male gaze points to voyeurism that of female points to the state of inertness and violability. In other words, men gaze for erotic pleasure while women gaze as unmotivated victims of men's power. For example, the man with black freckles gazes voyeuristically at the Researcher hence object of pleasure, this result in sexual assaults and

violations revealed in the novel (20). On the other hand, the women of the Alma Mater gaze at the Researcher and the man with black freckles during their sexcapades is that of discontent and as resignation to fate (46). The gazes reveal women's lack of agency and helplessness in the face of masculine symbolic order and displeasure for the Researchers' immorality and lasciviousness as a woman. This is because Researcher behaviour has not conformed to the normative expectations for women; her sexual relationship with the man with black freckles invalidates feminine chastity, hence the expectations for women. Nevertheless they tried to find out if she is pregnant (75). Anne Cranny-Frances, Wendy Waring, Pam Stavropoulos and Joan Kirkby claim that, females depend on being looked at and acknowledged in order to exist (155). Therefore in the women's bid to meet the societal expectations of how their body should be (Lorber & Yancey, 228), they enslave themselves to self-consciousness.

Depicting feminine subjugation that is inherent in the veil, El Saadawi presents the women of the Alma mater as trapped in invisibility of the veiled "... long string of women hidden under black *Abayas* (veil that covers all their body except their eyes) walking along slowly with jars on their heads" (*LITKO*, 12). No part of these women's body is visible except their eyes (13); the black *Abaya* covers their identity as humans, giving them ghostlike apparition with no recognisable identity (*LITKO*, 74). Normative femininity hides women in the identity of men, recognised only as wives and mothers, with their identity subsumed in that of men as husbands and sons. El Saadawi in depicting this creates women who are trapped in invisibility, facelessness and loss of identity. The black abaya worn by the women of the Alma mater becomes a symbol of invisibility and facelessness (75). Representing the women of the Alma Mater as veiled, portrays them as oppressed, implying metaphorically the brutality of the Arab society under which they live. It also displays the dilemma of presenting the female body as invisible and faceless. Hence, femininity here though normative, is referred to as Faceless or imprisoned Femininity (71).

Again, the women are veiled and carrying jars of oil on their heads (62). The jars of oil signify surrendering to culturally assigned feminine subjugation, servitude and passivity. El Saadawi reveals Arab society represented by the Alma Mater, where women work and men earn wages on meant for women without working (98). The society forbids women asking for wages (41). A woman who asks for wage though having worked is regarded as a questioning and challenging the authority of men. Both religiously and culturally, it is an aberration and a misnomer for women to question men or challenge their authority. El Saadawi therefore

presents dominated, repressed and objectified Arab women represented as women of the Alma Mater battered and put to work as mere objects, performing the function of carrying jars of oil without any form of reward and will not dare to ask or question the situation. Charles Larson observes that “in many (west) African novels, the female characters play almost insignificant part. If they are present, they are mere objects performing a function (149)”. The women of Alma Mater exemplify Larson’s assertion, they are mere objects performing function of carrying oil. They represent subdued, subjugated and lapdog femininity (lapdog because they obey orders without questioning) that is evident in normative pattern of femininity. El Saadawi exposes the normative pattern of femininity that is anchored on submission, passivity, and docility. Docility and submissiveness of the women of the Alma Mater is revealed in working without asking for wages or being paid (*LITKO* 41), rather men who sit around the houses doing nothing, earn wages on their behalf. Submission and passive because they accept the situation without revolting or any form of resistance. These female are ignorant of their rights to earn wages and their responsibilities as humans; therefore, they succumb to the social and religious order that demand that women submit to their husbands without questioning (*LITKO* 112).

Another way women are controlled in the Arab society as presented by El Saadawi is by keeping them in perpetual poverty and dependent on men for sustenance. This is achieved by depriving them the opportunity to earn money, hence deprive them of financial independent, thereby, feminize poverty. This reveals another form of femininity found in the normative pattern femininity which is referred to as Controlled or Policed Femininity. The policed and controlled Arab women is further explained by Fatima Mernissi in her statement that, the women’s rights present problem for Arab men, not necessarily because of the Quran or tradition of the Prophet both of which are subject to interpretation nor the Islamic tradition, but simply because, those rights conflict with the interest of the male elites (ix). Therefore, El Saadawi presents conflict of interest in *LITKO*, conflict between the right of women to earn wages and keep the price of oil down and men’s interest and desire to keep women in perpetual control and in subservience position (*LITKO*, 78). If women earn wage, they will be lifted from subservience and men will lose control over them hence women are policed and controlled and relegated to perpetual subservience.

Rose Mezu states that, Muslim women in the Maghreb region have experienced severe religious and cultural constraints. However, there exist other kinds of constraint such as, lack of access to formal education and non-participation in

political activities (30). Like what is obtainable in the Maghreb region, the women of the Alma Mater have no access to formal education (LITKO, 46) and political participation. The culture forbids women engaging in politics (97). The restrictions intensify control, subjugation, mental and physical torture that create feminine vulnerability. The vulnerable women of the Alma Mater disdain the Researcher's education (17). Their voices become the representation of the culture that sees educated women as butch and the result of internalised religious and culture construct femininity. The women are not aware of their rights to education hence they see the Researcher as absurd, therefore her attempt to initiate change resisted and rebuffed (18). The docility and naivety exhibited by the women are the consequences of internalised fear and loss of identity coupled with strict adherence to the stringent religious behaviours prescribed for women. The prescribe behaviours flow from the basic concept of *hay'a* or modesty. *Ha'ya* in Islam is tacked to veiling (Aisha Wood 1) and submission to the authority of men which is one of the basic attribute of the normative pattern femininity. Wood claims that veiling is a symbol of feminine honour and veneration rather than that subjugation and sacrifice of personhood. Her claim runs contrary to the other patterns of femininity supported by Arab Feminists such as Fatima Mernissi, Nawal El Saadawi and the host of others who insist that veiling is a form of incarceration of the Arab femininity.

The second pattern of femininity reveals by El Saadawi in *Love in the Kingdom of Oil*, is the trait/contemporary pattern of femininity. The trait pattern femininity is broad based and individually constructed. Characteristics associated with this pattern are independence, ability to make choices, individualism, self-assertion, garrulousness, sophistication etc. Women who manifest this pattern revolt and reject the cultural and religious construct femininity. They assert their individuality therefore enforce personal choices (16-18). The trait pattern femininity is the results of education, acculturation, and what George Ritzer refers to as cosmopolitanism (576). Cosmopolitanism is a move-away from traditional kind of thinking associated with cultural perspectives (577). Trait pattern femininity is explored in the construction of nameless characters. El Saadawi uses namelessness to disassociate her protagonists from the cultural and religious based feminine identity thereby, liberates them from the shackles of patriarchy (Gueye164). Liberation of femininity is the major message of trait pattern of femininity. Therefore, the deconstruction through namelessness becomes a prerequisite for reconstructing naming; thereby disassociate female character/protagonist from the humiliation and inferiority attached to what denotes subdued femininity that is evident in normative pattern femininity (1, 8 &

10). The nameless protagonist in the novel is an archaeologist and a researcher (8, 75) she refuses the subjugation and humiliation suffered by and inferiority attached to the women of the Alma Mater. Subdued femininity incarcerates femininity in the cell of selfless cultural performance like in the case of the women of the Alma mater who carry jars of oil without receiving wage.

The trait pattern femininity as stated above reject the cultural and religious prescribed characteristics and behaviours for women, therefore El Saadawi creates a protagonist who challenges culture and religion (9). She takes up masculine profession archaeology (8), sets out unaccompanied/un-chaperoned in search of maternal root of religion (16). It is worthy to note that in this society represented as Alma mater women do not go out unaccompanied neither do they meddle into religious matters. This is because matters of religion are exclusively reserved for male elites. Therefore, the Researcher's interest in unveiling the mechanisms that negate feminine religious components associated with the misconceptions of pre-Islamic feminine past is absurd and a misnomer. El Saadawi creates dissident character in order to challenge the unassailable and rigid religious orthodoxy that remains resistant to change. The status quos she challenges using the Researcher are: firstly, women do not go out unaccompanied and without written permission from their husband, father or father figure (6). The protagonist goes out unaccompanied and without permission. Secondly, women do not go on leave, if they will go, it is to attend to urgent family matters (9). El Saadawi's protagonist goes on leave to attend to matter of personal interest of unveiling religion, a matter unrelated to the family. More importantly, she goes to unveil that which is reserved exclusively for men. Thirdly, women are not allowed to engage in or interpret religion or handle phallic objects (9-10); the protagonist sets out to excavate religious artefacts with a phallic-like instrument chisel. This is considered a reaction towards and against men's penis. Therefore handling a chisel by the Researcher protagonist is a violation of cultural norm and feminine ideals. Again, her profession archaeology is a masculine profession that involves strenuous activity of digging up the earth. Women do not engage in digging because it figuratively portends the tossing the penis into the vagina, an act regarded as rebel against men.

Other status quos defiled and challenged by El Saadawi's protagonist are, refusing to not veiling (17), and engaging in extra-marital sexual relationship with the man with black freckles (46, 64). Her actions are grave violation of feminine submission, chastity and piety prescribed for the Arab woman. Chastity is celebrated in the Arab society hence family honour is linked to feminine chastity

(virginity). El Saadawi therefore, creates a resilient, assertive and garrulous female character who resist feminine servitude and submission to religion and culture imposed feminine ideals (LITKO, 49). Fadwa El Guindi claims that veil is not only a dress but a symbol of Muslim identity (1). The Researcher refuses to be identified with veil, she sees it as a means of muffling femininity and infringing on the right of women to see and to be seen (LITKO, 62).

El Saadawi also questions fecundity prescribed for Arab women, her protagonist rejects pregnancy and maternity (75, 82) thereby reject motherhood and fecundity that is the nucleus of femininity prized and celebrated in Arab culture and religion Islam. Therefore, the protagonist is not concerned with cultural and religious feminine ideals; rather, she is concerned with her values as an individual and the choices she makes as an individual. She validates trait pattern of femininity as broad based and individually constructed.

The New Women: Femininity in *The Novel*

The Novel reveals two patterns of Arab femininity that are somewhat alien to both Arab culture and the religious construct femininity. They are the trait and agglomerate femininity. The trait femininity as stated above is broad based and individual constructed while the agglomerate is an amalgamation of the attributes of trait and those normative patterns femininity. This is because agglomerate females exhibit a combination of attributes of normative pattern femininity and that of the trait pattern femininity.

The protagonist of *The Novel* is a nameless twenty-three year old budding female writer simply referred to as The Young Woman (4). She has no chain of reference; no father, no mother, no family, no university education, and no identity card (11). She is a neophyte female writer who establishes writing as an act of self-creation therefore a means of constructing her femininity as an individual. Writing self into being becomes a central theme of *The Novel*, while the young woman's life and reconstructed femininity form her first novel (1). In the same vein, *The Novel* is read as an explicit interpretation of the condition of women in the contemporary Arab society in their bid to assert their individuality and reconstruct their femininity.

The story centres on infidelity, betrayal, masochism, and entangled sexual relationships, prostitution and illicit sexual connections, in the lives of Roustum, who represents the Arab man with insatiable appetite for sex (149, 17). He believes that infidelity is not betrayal because God has created man so that one

woman cannot satisfy him (143). Carmen Roustum's wife represents the relationship between Arab and the west, relationship built on mistrust. Samih represents the emerging Arab masculinity that is indifferent in religious matters and in marriage law. Mariam, Gamalat and the aspiring young female novelist represent the reconstructed Arab femininity that contravenes the Arab normative femininity. For example Gamalat is single after the death of her husband. Her traumatic childhood and marriage experiences necessitate her resolve to philander. Her mother was constantly battered, humiliated and relegated by her father. In the midst of maltreatments, her mother was forbidden to leave the marriage consequently she dies in the marriage. For Gamalat, she caught her husband with another woman on their matrimonial bed (150). These two experiences influence her resolve to philander, choosing the obnoxious and illicit sexual activities. Making individual choice especially when it concerns marriage is what Arab women do not have the liberty for. Again illicit sex is both a cultural and religious taboo for Arab women but Gamalat, the young woman and the poet Miriam are entangled in one illicit sexual relationship or the other that contravenes chastity. Chastity is central to Arab femininity; hence family honour resides in woman's virginity hence chastity. In challenge of feminine chastity, El Saadawi creates contemporary Arab society where women are free to make choices, to choose sex partners and have sex at will, a society where sex is no longer a taboo for women (147, 155). Her characters construct and define their femininity as individuals, thereby, refuse the culture and religious construct feminine ideals. These characters have certain things in common, they are educated, they have interacted with other cultures like the young women who ones relocated to Catalonia in Spain and came back again (212), so they are both acculturated and cosmopolitan in their outlook. El Saadawi has consistently called for the education of the girl child and unveiling of the mind of women which is tantamount to education. She stresses that though veiling of the head is destructive but veiling of the mind is worse. Like Qasim Amin, El Saadwai advocates for the modernisation of the obnoxious Arab culture that obliterate Arab women in the man's person where she is used as an object of delight and pleasure.

Depicting agglomerate femininity, El Saadawi creates protagonists who shock, surprise, stir pity, and open readers up to the dilemmas of Arab femininity and its construction. The characters make readers cry, laugh, and elicit sympathy or contempt. For example, Gamalat's childhood and experiences in marriage provoke sympathy, contempt and elicit shock. Hence, the reader sympathises with her in her resolve to reject wifehood, motherhood and feminine chastity. Gamalat becomes a sex freak; indulging in chains of adulterous relationships thus she

discovers a great resemblance between men and dogs with regards to sex. She becomes a nymphomaniac (54-56), a chain smoker, and an alcoholic, preferring beer to wine during summer (22). Behaviours attributed to Gamalat run contrary to submission and chastity that is culturally and religiously prescribed to the Arab women.

Contrary to Gamalat's sexual and alcohol indulgence, she is religious, her religiosity exemplifies the fact that she has a prayer mat which she rolled under her bed and often uses it to pray, she memorises a couple of verses from Omar Khayyam (21), and wears veils. Gamalat supports the traditionalists' interpretation of the subservient place of women as ordained by God. She insists that God ordered women to veil, claiming that veiling like prayer is a sacred duty a woman must perform if she aspires to go to heaven (47). Moreover, she believes in the superiority of men over women, maintaining that, the worth of a woman is determined by the man, thereby accepts the Arab cultural and religious construction of femininity as passive and docile (42).

El Saadawi in addition, creates another character that fits into the agglomerate category. She is a headmistress of an orphanage (37). She is as pious as religion demands; adheres to religious injunctions, buys ticket every year to go to Mecca for circumambulation around the Kaaba, to kiss the black stone etc., yet she resists the authority of her husband (38) thus negating the feminine submission, passivity and docility of Arab cultural and religious construct femininity. The Headmistress indulges in child trafficking and belongs to a racket that buys and sells children from orphanages (39). This contradicts motherhood that encapsulates feminine nurturant, maternal love and care of Arab traditional femininity. The two characters, present what is referred to as exuberant femininity that is the amalgamation of attributes of religious / cultural construct femininity and individual construct femininity that is broad based that characterised agglomerate femininity.

Conversely, the young woman, Carmen and Miriam the poet, exhibit trait feminine attributes. The young woman is unmarried yet she has an illegitimate child whose paternity is not known even to her. This is because she had illicit sexual relationship with both Roustum (223) and Samih, yet none of them claim the paternity of the child, (217). Therefore, the young woman challenges wifehood and chastity prescribed to Arab femininity. Carmen is a westerner, married to the sex maniac Roustum, she rejects the Arab culture of motherhood and submission to the authority of her husband Roustum, rather she asserts her

right as it is obtainable in the western culture (107). El Saadawi therefore, reveals the infiltration of western ways of life into Arab society and calls for modernization of Arab culture especially as it concerns women.

Miriam is the poet, a symbol of the emerging Arab femininity full of inner strength (164). She rejects the subservient position of women as ordained by God. She insists that the women are worth more than money because women are not commodity or products to be bought and sold in the market (42). In other words, Miriam stands against feminine fungibility, ownership and violability that evident in Arab traditional femininity. She also disagrees with feminine inertness, denial of autonomy and subjectivity stressing that, women should have a say in their dismemberment, their experiences and feelings should be taken into account because they are humans and that their worth should not be determined by the men rather a woman determines her own self-worth (42). Addition, Miriam rejects feminine submission, docility and passivity and advocates the empowerment of Arab women by allowing them the opportunity for self-monitoring, making individual choices and plans their own lives exemplifies in her choice of singlehood.

El Saadawi's characters in support the postulation that femininity is not internal reality, nor is it essential in the process of identity formation, rather femininity is constructed and subsequently acquired and performed, wilfully by some characters, and reluctantly by others. The characters acquired and perform the femininity as they desire.

Conclusion

This paper has identified three patterns of Arab femininity in the novels *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* and *The Novel*. It establishes possibility for new Arab femininity that does not consist of only the cultural and religious constructed feminine ideals; but rather that which includes the innate attributes that are embedded in women. Therefore El Saadawi in the novels reconstructs Arab femininity to include innate and individual trait that resonate as women perform their individual femininity. The paper ascertains that El Saadawi has demonstrated a possibility for a reconstructed Arab femininity because despite cultural and religious prescribed qualities and behaviours for Arab women, the women have redefined femininity as broad based and assert their individuality in quest for freedom, personhood and self-actualisation.

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