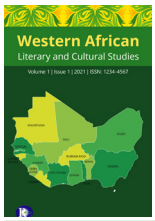

Research Article

Section: Literature and Criticism



Published in Nairobi, Kenya by Royallite Global.

Volume 1, Issue 1, 2021

**Article Information**
Submitted: 5th June 2021
Accepted: 24th August 2021
Published: 3rd October 2021

Additional information is available at the end of the article



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# The female body as a site of embodying personal and cultural memories in Nawal El-Saadawi's autobiographies

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**Abstract**

Although the concept re/making the body is often conceived as denoting re-constructions of the material body, this paper expands this notion to include issues of embodiment. It analyses how the female body might serve as a textual strategy used to represent the embodiment of female trauma in autobiography. The paper therefore deconstructs and extends the boundaries of conceptions of re-making the body from previous pre-occupation with the physical body to include social constructions of the body. The focus is on two autobiographies by Nawal El Saadawi: *A daughter of Isis* (1999) and *Walking through fire* (2002). The paper highlights the theme of female body memory because trends in representations of gendered bodies in public discourses imagine the male as the mind and the female as a body to be defined and determined.

**Keywords:** autobiography, body, embodiment, Nawal El Saadawi, trauma

**How to Cite:**
Were, M. N. (2021). The female body as a site of embodying personal and cultural memories in Nawal El-Saadawi's autobiographies. *Western African Literary and Cultural Studies*, 1(1). Retrieved from https://royalliteglobal.com/walcs/article/view/679

**Public Interest Statement**

This paper is part of a larger project that explores how female political lives in androcentric political culture are perceived and represented as well as how the women politicians represent the realities in their societies in different media of life narratives. The present paper focuses on Nalwal El Saadawi as one of these women politicians and how she uses the female body as a technique for narrating trauma revisited on Egyptian women in their patriarchal and religious fundamentalist society.

**Introduction**

This paper examineshow the woman's body might serve as a textual strategy that Nawal El Saadawi uses to embody traumatic memories which reveal how secrecy is exerted on women by individuals and institutional frameworks that silence and normalise social injustices against women. The focus is on female experiences that by virtue of their painful nature are rendered traumatic. The epistemologies of recovering these personal and collective traumatic memories act as subversive textual strategies to dominant discourses of patriarchy, religion, and colonialism, which oppress women and silence their voices as private thus apolitical this does not by any means imply that all men are responsible for women's suffering. Rather, the African woman-centred reading of these texts in this paper de-genders patriarchy to re-evaluate how women are complicit in instituting female oppression and, consequently, how some men are rendered vulnerable by patriarchy. Guided by Elizabeth Grosz's conceptual ideas on embodied subjectivity, the paper analyses how Saadawi's autobiographies re-conceptualise black women's bodies as sites of re-evaluating the embodiment of female trauma.

**Theory and Method**

Representations of gendered bodies in public discourses have tended to imagine the male as the mind and the female as the body; an object to be defined and determined by dominant subjectivities and discourses. The paper therefore examines how Saadawi uses the body as text to show how society's expectations that female body portraiture conforms to specific cultural scripts upholds patriarchal, religious, and racial dominance over women. The assumption governing the discussion in this paper is that Saadawi uses body memory to negotiate dominant and subversive cultural parameters of womanhood and to reproduce new bodily meanings in autobiographical representation because conventional narrative practices are inadequate to capture the true essence of female trauma. Autobiographies of Saadawiwere selected because they extensively narrate the processes of embodiment of African women's trauma. The aim is to explore how through her writing, Saadawi addresses the presences and absences of the disfigured female body in public discourses, i.e. discourses of nationalism, patriarchy, and religion. This calls for a refiguring of the female body and resigning its cultural symbolic value in the counter-discursive space of autobiography. Consequently, the analysis in this paper draws on the literary and women's studies critic Elizabeth Grosz's concept of "embodied subjectivity" to examine autobiographical representations of women's corporeality and how their self-embodiment re-invents African woman-centred conceptions of the female body (1994, p. 22). The following statement by Grosz is fundamental in thinking through the idea of female embodiment:

> The body must be regarded as a site of social, political, cultural, and geographical inscriptions, production, or constitution. The body is not opposed to culture, a resistant throwback to a natural past; it is itself a cultural, *the* cultural, product. (1994, p. 23, emphasis in original)

The chosen theory positions itself between alternate dichotomous body politics that polarise

bodies into binaries like "*body-mind* and *sex-gender*" (Viljoen,2014, p. 100, emphasis in original), and from this in-between position, it "refuses reductionism, resists dualism, and remains suspicious of the holism and unity implied by monism" (Grosz, 1994, p. 22).[1] The focus on embodiment is important in this debate as it traces trajectories of ideologies that embody women's corporeal experiences to their historical and cultural contexts because, as Viljoen has noted, the body is "produced in and through certain cultural concepts" (2014: 100). In relation to the cultural specificity of body politics, 'embodied subjectivity' therefore unearths how the female body is written and narrated in the private space of autobiography. To analyse how the autobiographies re-make the female body, the paper focuses on how the corporeal, female body represented in autobiography embodies gender-based trauma in life writing by women.

**The female body as a technique of representing traumatic memories**

> Memory, like wine, grows mellow with time. The impurities settle into deep forgetfulness. Body becomes mind transparent, and I can see things to which I was blind (Saadawi *Daughter* 2)

The above quote by Saadawi captures the essence of this paper; the unreliability of memory to adequately capture past traumatic experiences of women, hence the deference to body as a site of remembering traumatic events. In particular, the paper addresses three dominant discourses that exert trauma over the lives of Egyptian women represented in Saadawi's autobiographies: religion and patriarchy. Towards this end, this section analyses how Saadawi addresses issues of embodiment of trauma that pertain to Muslim womenliving in a patriarchal and fundamentalist society in her autobiographies*Walking through fire* and *A daughter of Isis*. It should be noted that Saadawi's conception of notions of female embodiment is more nuanced in cultural practices that are not necessarily tied to religion, but majorly relational to patriarchy. She, therefore,extensively addresses the themes of honour and shame in relation to female circumcision as a practice to preserve female virtue. Ultimately, the paper addresses how Saadawi's narration of the plight of different women reveals the plurality of patriarchy, but it also de-bunks the myth that patriarchy is instituted and implemented only by men and against women.

***Patriarchal expectations as a source of female trauma***

Saadawi explores different ways in which patriarchal expectations of women result in trauma. For instance, she conceptualises the aspiration to beauty as a form of bondage. In *Walking through fire*, she evinces how her mother and aunts would endure endless pain in the name of beauty, yet their men were not expected to adhere to the same standards. She recalls her mother's endless efforts to ensure that "[h]er skin was soft and smooth and no hair showed on it [and] [i]f it grew she removed it before anybody had a chance to see it" (Saadawi, 2002:153). This near-obsessive desire to maintain an outward image of perfection in order

1 Within the context of corporeality, monism bears semblance to the Bakhtinian concept of monologism, i.e., a dominant language that purports to be all-inclusive. According to Grosz, monism prevents the dialogic potential of resistant cultures and voices.

to please men is further endorsed by her description of how her mother padded her chest to shape breasts after her double mastectomy. This way, says Saadawi, her mother whose name was Zaynab, felt that "she could still show two breasts like all women, [and] walk with the pride of her full femininity as a woman" (Saadawi, 2002, p. 158). This is a very problematic ideology for Saadawi, who is a qualified medical doctor. However, she empathises with her mother because she understood the pressures of her society.

Speaking in relation to these cultural and patriarchal ideals of the perfect body, Saadawi suggests that ethnic origin was in her society considered a standard of regulating who was considered beautiful or otherwise. She explains that as an indigenous Egyptian woman of slave heritage, her darker-skin tone rendered her a marginalised subject in her mother's family who were of Turkish origin hence lighter-skinned. Similarly, women in her paternal family were of smaller stature and had feminine features that were considered beautiful. Throughout her life, Saadawi's physical stature had been a focal point of her identity and a source of ridicule by men (and women). Her "dark complexion, [was considered] the sign of poverty in [her] family, [her] tall stature, [her] big mouth, [her] protruding teeth and [her] developed muscles, undesirable in a female body" (Saadawi, 1999, p. 154). She was therefore remarkably unlike her sisters who had "white skin, soft, rounded fleshy curves and tender brown or honey colored eyes [… ], the accepted models of female beauty" (Saadawi, 2002, p. 281). Since her own physicality did not conform to social conventions on femininity Saadawi was often 'othered' in the eyes of her mother's families. However, she learned to celebrate the features disregarded as unfeminine, such as her height, to symbolize her power and to intimidate men, especially potential suitors, who would have otherwise infringed on her freedom to pursue a medical and writing career.

Saadawi narrates that in her society, young girls are socialised into patriarchal-oriented notions of womanhood such that gender performance becomes ritualised as they grow. According to Judith Butler, we become gendered through performativity when continuous performance of socially-conditioned acts become a "repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration" (1990: xiv). As a young girl, Saadawi was socialised into gendered notions of womanhood. She was encouraged to play with dolls despite her interest in aeroplanes as they were considered masculine toys. The dolls were often given to her and aeroplanes to her brother, despite his lack of interest in these planes, which he often treated with contempt. Her desire to break free from these social restrictions permeates her young life. This is perhaps why one of the recurrent dreams from her childhood features Saadawi flying, exploring "lands unknown to [her]" (Saadawi, 2002, p. 278). Interestingly, the one time she shared these aspirations with her grandmother, the latter warned her that hers "[was] not a dream for small girls" (Saadawi, 2002, p. 279). Her grandmother told her that she was supposed to "dream of a bridegroom and a beautiful wedding dress" (Saadawi, 2002, p. 279). Her grandmother's caution to young Saadawi is an indicator of women's complicity in upholding patriarchal norms. The dreams that are recalled by Saadawi then serve as a modality she uses todemonstrate how her femininity exists in a threshold space. These dreams voice the unfulfilled wishes and desires of a girl desperate to transgress social norms, who wishes to

reclaim her rightful place in society. Dreams also add to the nostalgic mood of the narrative. Saadawi uses dreaming to challenge patriarchal norms and to communicate her inner conflict about what it means to be a 'proper' woman. Even though aware of these dynamics, Saadawi shows how ideas of beauty are so ingrained in one's psyche. That perhaps explains why considering her family's dismissal of her younger self as ugly, Saadawi is stunned but pleased when the air hostess on a flight from America to Egypt calls her "my beautiful lady" (Saadawi, 2002, p. 281).

Aware of these patriarchal biases, Saadawi makes a conscious effort to distance herself with ideals of womanhood that focalise women's strength on a youthful body. Speaking in retrospect, the adult Saadawi notes that while old age gives a woman the insight to "see things to which [she] was blind" as a younger woman (1999, p. 2), aging is often associated with weakness. She however argues that while the body grows weaker, the mind becomes stronger. She therefore views body and mind as one inseparable entity, working together to sustain her selfhoods. She observes that in her advanced age, her "[b]ody becomes mind transparent" and "[b]ody memory becomes one with [her] spirit, with [her] blood" (Saadawi, 1999, p. 2). Saadawi's conception of the unity between body and mind encapsulates Viljoen's idea of "a lived body" (1999, p. 101), which Young defines as a "physical body acting and experiencing in a specific socio-cultural context" (2005, p. 16). But by merging body and mind, Saadawi is unable to seal the gap between the ideal image of herself imagined by others, and the reality of the corporeal body, what she describes as "the distance between the image and the original" (1999, p. 53).

In as much as Saadawi's society expected women to uphold patriarchal ideals of beauty, there existed norms that dictated women's participation in the re-making of their bodies. Therefore, the socialisation of Egyptian women into patriarchal ideals would not have been successful without policing of gender.Saadawi does not portray the policing of female bodies as a predominantly male prerogative. She notes that women, too, endorse patriarchal rules over womanhood. The policing of women's bodies was at the familial and communal levels. In Saadawi's family, the regulator of female sexuality is mainly her mother's sister aunt Ni'mat, a female figure who sustains control over women's bodies. While at the beach, and despite being a child who felt her bosy was constricted by the spandex fabric of her swimming suit, Saadawi would not be permitted to relieve the pressure from the stretching fabric. Thus all her attempts to "pull down the straps [of her swim suit] from [her] shoulders (Saadawi, 1999, p. 58), would be checked by her aunt who would "slap" her, telling the young Saadawi "'Shame on you'" (1999, p. 58). Unable to comprehend the fault of her desire to relieve her upper body from the constriction of the tight material, Saadawi "would point to [her] brother and ask 'Why him'", she would receive the answer, "'[h]e is a boy and you are a girl'" (1999, p. 58). Beyond the familial level, the policing of female sexuality was a culturally-conditioned practice. Saadawi's community had an acknowledged female figure grown as the *daya* whose sole responsibility was to transform young females from girlhood to adulthood and to oversee all other sexual matters pertaining to women in their institutions. As the cultural custodian of customs in Saadawi's community, the*daya* performed various rituals on women including birth, ear piercing, clitoridectomy, and breaking of the new bride's virginity to make the new

bride "pure and clean" for her wedding night and to confirm that the bride's honour was still intact (*Daughter* 32). In this way, the *daya* became a symbol of sexual suppression. Thus the *daya*, a recognised custodian of culture, headed a formalised though somehow secretive social institution that made and conditioned female sexuality. Saadawi narrates how the *daya* called Um Muhammad was one women who exerted patriarchal control and untold trauma over women's bodies in her community. Saadawi cannot comprehend if Um Muhammad's persistence on exerting trauma on women's bodies was from "some kind of feud between her and the female sex" or a projection of self hatred (1999, p. 61). This complicitness of women in executing patriarchal control over female sexuality deconstructs the belief that patriarchy is instituted by men alone.

Knowledge about female sexuality, notes Saadawi, was generally secretive. She explains that Egyptian girls' training on reproduction was limited to flowers and insects and they were taught child care without its prelude. This perhaps explains why upon Zaynab's death, Saadawi becomes the defender of her mother's honour by shielding her mother's defaced naked body from the eyes of her sisters and other curious observers. She writes that: "in their eyes, I could read what they were unable to conceal, a gloating happiness, an un-wholesome curiosity to see what normally is not seen, as a burning desire to examine my mother's private parts" (Saadawi, 1999, p. 158). What Saadawi seems to suggest is that inherent in this mystery to glimpse the altered female body of one of their own was a hunger to understand the "mystery" of female sexuality, from which these women had been denied knowledge of since infancy (1999, p. 87).

A key aspect of female sexuality that was considered a taboo subject, which girls were not required to know about, was human reproduction. Egyptian girls were supposed to be "virgins who knew nothing about sex or illegitimate [or even normal] pregnancies" before marriage (Saadawi, 1999, p. 220). Sadaawi finds it ironic that for a society that jealously guarded young girls' sexuality has the term 'illegitimate pregnancy' in its vocabulary. She considers the meme existence of this word a mockery of these patriarchal norms. Consequently, young girls became so paranoid about illegitimate pregnancies that they would even pray not to become the receptors of Immaculate Conception. It is for this reason that while at the boarding secondary school, girls, under constant surveillance of superintendents and with budding, albeit repressed, sexual desire, projected their desires for love onto their female teachers. The teachers too seemed to be prisoners of their society and according to Saadawi, the more attention these young female teachers received, the more beautiful they feel. For Saadawi, her love for Miss Saneya was borne of nostalgia for her mother and her first love "suppressed but still alive" (Saadawi, 1999, p. 243). Thus Saadawi saw the object of her love not as a sexual being but as an embodiment of an ideal love. For her, Miss Saneya was not "someone with a body, she was neither a man nor a woman for [her]" (Saadawi, 1999, p. 243). She clarifies: "My love had nothing to do with sex" but a search for an ideal human being and "a kind of God [she] had looked for in vain when [she] was a child' (Saadawi, 1999, p. 243). While these girls imagined the object of their desires as sexless, these "love stories between the school girls and the female teachers" bordered on the sexual. In a way, then, these young girls objectified the female teacher and if not in a sexual way, then by robbing them of their sexuality thus

obliterating their femininity. The girls' portrayal of their teachers, viewed through Saadawi's own experiences, hence diminish the power of women that lies in their sexuality. Thus, the illusory love that these girls imagined was a fantasy that was shattered when Saadawi realised that the object of her Freudian desire was actually a woman in "flesh and blood" (Saadawi, 1999, p. 245).

Another way in which Egyptian women's bodies were regulated was through patriarchal discourses portraying women's sexuality as embodying evil, a discourse that necessitates the suppression of the 'sinful' capacity of the woman's body. The dialectics of the image of the woman's body as a source of sin/pleasure, in Saadawi's autobiography, are configured in the public space of the beach. This dynamic is demonstrate through a photo that Saadawi describes and contemplates about in *A daughter of Isis*which according to her, captured the images of her mother, father, brother, sisters and aunt Ni'imat. Saadawi's engagement with this photo she described in her autobiogaphy as an object of remembrance reflects her narrative negotiation of the exertion of patriarchal control over women's bodies by both men and women. In this photo, Zaynab and her daughters are clustered together while her father and brother are seated far from them. This separation of men and women is a textual indicator of the social boundaries that separate men and women and in the process marginalise the latter. The marginalisation of women is evident in Saadawi's observation that in that photo, while most 'private' parts of her body (like that of her female relations on the beach) was constrained by a swim-suit, the chests of her father and brother were left bare. In Saadawi's autobiography and description of the photo, men are portrayed as viewers, gazing distantly at women's bodies. The subjection of these women's bodies to the male gaze despite the policing methods otherwise subscribed by religion commodifies them.

Aware of the objectification and commodification of women's bodies, Saadawi decides to reclaim her mother's body in death from this objectification by re-imagining her mother as "daughter of the sea" (Saadawi, 1999, p. 57). Here, the sea becomes a metaphor that Saadawi narratively employs to re-configure mothers and daughters as free women. The sea becomes a spatial reconfiguration of freedom from patriarchal bondage, a home where these women can be their true selves: "[their] air, [their] sun, [their] sea", an imaginary in which the sea is gendered as female (Saadawi, 1999, p. 57). It is important for Saadawi that her mother symbolises a degree of freedom from patriarchal conventions, because she creates her identity in relation to the mmaternal in the title of her autogiography, *A daughter of Isis*. The body image of her mother in the photograph she refers to previously hence functions as a means to preserve Zaynab's memory in ways Saadawi's writing has been unable to. Conversely, in the photograph as in her real life, Sadawi's father appears distanced from "[them]" the women. His distance in the photo and on the sea shore is translated into real life so that despite Saadawi's attempts to reach out to him, there appears to be a chasm between the sexes that cannot be breached even in the same space: "A world made of male bodies in which [he]r female body lived" (1999, p. 57). He becomes the embodiment of the body that "hide[s] the sun and sea from [her]" so that his body encompasses "an independent [… ] existence [that is] the outer world of [her] father, of land, country, religion, language, moral codes" such that the male body embodies the symbols of female ostracism and policing (Saadawi, 1999, p. 57).

In Saadawi's contemplation about the memories invoked by the photo she describes of her family by the sea shore, the beach is imagined as a threshold space where patriarchal ideals of gender are negotiated by men and women. The significance of this photo in symbolising Saadawi's self-distancing from patriarchal conventions of womanhood is captured in her observations about the fading "shine" of the photo and "the colours as she [remembered, now] chang[ing] to black and white" (1999, p. 56). Against this background of a diminishing patriarchal control over women's bodies in public spaces privatised by patriarchy, her individuality and strong woman-centred stance is accentuated. She says that amidst these blurring symbols of male patronage (marked by the shine and the colours), the following caption in her mother's handwriting "stands out: Chatby Beach, Alexandria, 18 June 1935" (1999, p. 56). The inscription on the back of the photograph in her mother's handwriting, though faded, is important as it voices Zaynab's point of view (Saadawi, 1999, p. 56), a deliberate move to challenge the tendency of men to define women and their experiences. The beach, real or imagined, then features as a space where women, albeit subtly, challenge patriarchal norms.

***Religion as an instigator of female trauma***

In her autobiogaphies, Saadawi also envisions religion as key in indoctrinating women into assuming a subordinate position to men and the Quaran was the ultimate symbol of male dominance. In retrospect, she now concedes that in her father's world only her brother gained access to the Quran as her father believed that "God did not address women in his book" (Saadawi, 1999, p. 59). It was also from religious teachings that Saadawi learnt menstruation made her body "polluted" hence during this period she was not "permitted to pray or to fast or to read from the Qur'an" (1999, p. 65). Further, and Saadawi elaborates, "in the holy books mothers are described as being sacred or accursed, the embodiment of evil or the essence of purity and love" (Saadawi, 2002, p. 155). This evil-good dualism is indicative of the extremes to which motherhood is expected to conform as per patriarchal dictates. For this matter, girl children are always at risk of being killed at birth either deliberately or through neglect because it is believed they are a burden yet so resilient with "seven lives like cats" while boys are seen as fragile thus the need to be protected by charms and prayer (Saadawi, 1999, p. 32). Another reason why male children were treasured over female ones was due to the myth that girls do not take care of their parents, a discourse that promotes preference of boys over girls, and notes that Mona has always been there (Saadawi, 2002, p. 82). So, when Saadawi gives birth to her own children, she showers them with love and affection and never allows anyone to demean her daughter, Mona, because she is female.

In Saadawi's community, the main way through which religion exerted dominance and trauma over women's bodies,was through the institution of marriage. For this reason, she regards marriage as an institution that normalises women's abuse. She says that love "trap[s] women into the prison that is the marital home" (Saadawi, 2002, p. 183). In colloquial Arabic marriage means "permit" and a woman's destiny, thus her grandmother used to say, "My *Gawaza* is my *Gananza*", meaning my marriage is my funeral (Saadawi, 2002, p. 182, emphasis in original). Many anecdotes included in her autobiography attest to Saadawi's belief that

women suffer both on earth and in heaven. According to Saadawi: "paradise for women was [… ] hell since it meant either eternal loneliness or an endless cycle of pain and humiliation to ensure that men could satisfy their insatiable lust" and that the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad that describe sexual pleasure as "strictly confined to men", teachings that she says have sexualised paradise (Saadawi, 2002, p. 164). She hence asks: "Is this why men will have no role to play in paradise other than to deflower the hymens of virgin women? For each man will be allowed ninety-two virgins for his pleasure, and each time he deflowers a virgin the hymen will heal again so that his pleasure will be without end" (Saadawi, 2002, p. 144-145). These teachings then make her realise that contrary to her belief that having suffered on earth her mother would find peace in paradise, she would only get a chance to be with her husband after he was done with the queue of women craving his attentions. This explains Saadawi's choice of title for the chapter describing her mother's death as "My mother has no place in paradise" (Saadawi, 2002, p. 165).

In *Walking through fire*, Saadawi recalls how her second marriage gave her untold trauma that drove her to the brink of insanity. Married to a man she did not love or want but because her family manipulated her into the union, Saadawi felt lost and unable to identify with her reflection in the mirror. The mirror reflected someone else, "this woman inside the woman [she] was, who had married a man she did not love, had become pregnant with child without love, and jumped off the balcony to take away its life" (Saadawi, 2002, p. 221). Unable to convince her rich husband to let her go, and upon discovering she had fallen pregnant, chooses to jump off the balcony and abort, risking death, rather than bring a baby into such an oppressive marriage. The prospect of motherhood for her and the future bondage is signified becomes a source of foreboding. She says:

> Nothing linked me to this woman and her son other than the embryo inside me. It was a foreign body these strangers had implanted in me. I wanted to rid myself of my body, often thought of committing suicide. But then my eyes would wander to the pile of papers on my desk. My novel kept drawing me away from all this, telling me to finish it before I died. So I decided to postpone dying until I had finished it. (Saadawi, 2002, p. 222)

Saadawi's emotional trauma is a manifestation of an inner turmoil manifested as a "'dissociative personality has been fragmented through a series of traumatic experiences'" (Katrak, 2006, p. 150). She says "I wanted to rid myself of my body, often thought of committing suicide" (Saadawi, 2002, p. 222). Trauma forces her to name the sources of her struggle, her marriage and unwanted unborn baby, thereby enacting what Katrak calls "the power of naming forms of women's oppression" (2006, p. xii). After undergoing an abortion, Saadawi feels "free, rid of the chains" binding her to her second husband. She says, "[t]he evacuation had freed me from the foreign occupation of my body. I had torn from my womb the foreign body that had become a part of myself" (Saadawi, 2002, p. 227). However, Saadawi is still unable to obtain a divorce because it is considered "the prerogative of men only [… ] an absolute right which he alone possesses" (Saadawi, 2002, p. 228). Returning back home after receiving treatment

at the hospital and realising she was back in her prison, Saadawi violently lashes out against herself, noting that she "lifted [her] arm, struck the face of the woman in the mirror with the plaster cast. The mirror cracked. Now the woman's face was no longer one face but two faces with a single eye each" (Saadawi, 2002, p. 221). Here, Saadawi's revulsion at her body is the consequence of her inability to reconcile the image in the mirror with the woman that her mind represents – the doctor, writer, and activist.

It is perhaps this reminder of her true essence, the strength that lies within her that motivates Saadawi to find alternative ways of seeking freedom from her marriage. When she threatens to stab her husband with a knife, he finally grants her the divorce. This anecdote that Saadawi narrates is a reminder of the incident which she narrates in the novel Woman at Point Zero that details similar events in another woman's life. The allusion is to the story of "Fatheya the killer [who] had cut her husband to pieces when she found him raping her eight-year-old daughter" (Saadawi, 2002, p. 231). Saadawi, who had met Fatheya in prison later in her career, had written about her in the fictionalised biography *Woman at Point Zero*. This decision to turn to fiction to exemplify the enormity of despair at the prospect of impending motherhood is reminiscent in Viljoen's supposition that some women resort to fiction in representing the "(m)other" as fictionalisation "[takes] some of the pressure off the written 'other'" (2014, p. 153). Although Viljoen is speaking in reference to a daughter representing the mother, her views are of value in reading Saadawi's narratives where the fear of motherhood incites such angst that the psyche splinters and the subject views herself as separate from the mother-to-be, hence one of her selfhoods envisions its fictional double as an 'other'.

***Modalities of coping with trauma***

Saadawi's autobiographies give testimony to different coping mechanisms employed by some Egyptian women in dealing with the pain levied on their bodies within the domestic arena. While she narrates happy memories, these are often juxtaposed with the horrors of the past, as if to catalogue the symbiotic relationship between Egyptian womanhood and pain. Most of the female characters in her autobiographies appear to be deliberately enforcing forgetfulness as a survival strategy amid pain. For instance, she tells her readers an anecdote about one of her patients, Masouda who embraced madness to avoid facing recurrent memories of her constant marital rape. Although her family and community assume that Masouda was sick and perhaps possessed by a demon, Saadawi understood that her patient had to forget, because remembering meant confronting her corporeality as an object of unwanted sexual attention. Smith and Watson note that "narrators struggle to find ways of telling about suffering that defies language and understanding; they struggle to reassemble memories so dreadful they must be repressed for human beings to survive and function in life" (2001, p. 22). For Masouda, "the fear suppressed within her manifested itself in the form of a devil which mounted her" (Saadawi, 2002, p. 136). Saadawi's treatment of Masouda's predicamentas relational to other Egyptian women's experiences of psychological trauma suggests that the root of their suffering partly arises from some men's disparaging attitude towards women's bodies. Therefore, Saadawi appropriates madness as a metaphorical device to voice Masouda's (and other women's) pain.

Even as an observer facilitating the voicing of Masouda's story, Saadawi is constrained in terms of the best way to narrate this story. Seemingly, therefore, the only way that Saadawi can find the means of retelling Masouda's ordeal is by first recalling a teenage dream featuring "[a faceless] man whom the girls in school addressed as [sir]" (Saadawi, 2002, p. 130). This dream re-enacts how rape is silenced and brings terror and fear to girls such as Masouda and Zeinat, Masouda's nurse at the hospital where she was admitted as a patient under Saadawi's care. These two women, observes Saadawi, symbolise abused women who are unable to voice their trauma and therefore are labelled insane. According to Susheila Nasta, "[t]he use of alternative forms of consciousness – through dreams, 'madness', or [… ] 'zombification' in order to define new spaces and realities for women is a common technique" used by women in contexts where social injustices against women have been experiences on a wide scale (1992:xxvi).

To counter violation of their female bodies, the violated women in Saadawi's community collectively perform exorcism on women like Masouda in a ritual culturally referred to as *zar*through which they vent their anguish as a collective group (Saadawi, 2002, p. 132). The exorcism ritual of *zar*then seems to function as a counter-discursive metaphor that narrates collective forgetting. Saadawi acknowledges that she took part in one *zar* out of curiosity and found the ritual effective in reducing her pent-up anxiety. As a medical doctor, however, she questions its ability to cure madness. She explains that at the height of the ceremony, women experiences border on pain and pleasure, a threshold space in which women freely expose their bodies and condemn their suffering (Saadawi, 2002, p. 133).Saadawi therefore uses madness to represent manifestations of neurosis by women in their societies.

**Conclusion**

Nawal El Saadawi portrays Egyptian womenas subjects who experience myriad forms of trauma, mainly caused by patriarchy and religion. Her autobiographies employ personal and collective memories silenced by hegemonic discourses, to contest the marginalisation of women and to show how trauma victims participate in reconstructing their identities. The paper presented the argument that female trauma is not only historical but alsoexerted on them by cultural and religious practices that uphold the dominance of men over women. These discourses, located in incontestable religious and communal repertoire, make many demands on women that are sometimesimpossible to achieve. Saadawi, therefore, shows different ways through which culture is embodied in women's bodies and demonstrates that male tyranny aside, patriarchy manifests in various ways such as: ethnic superiority, sexual control, religion, cultural rites of passage, and marriage. Saadawi's narrations also reflect on how women propagate patriarchal practises that oppress them and that the continued assumption that patriarchy is synonymous with male superiority overshadows how different role-players exercise and execute power in myriad ways.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** This author declares no conflict of interest.

**Disclaimer Statement**

This work is part of a thesis submitted for the award of PhD, titled Negotiating public and private identities: A study of the autobiographies of African women politicians, English Department, Stellenbosch University. Supervisors: Dr. Mathilda Slabbert and Dr. Daniel Roux

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