

The Multiple Faces of Patriarchy:
Nawal el-Saadawi's *Two Women in One*
as a Critique of Muslim Culture

Naomi Nkealah

Abstract: Nawal el-Saadawi is an internationally acclaimed feminist who has published several works, both fictional and non-fictional, which reflect the extent to which women in Egyptian society are oppressed by patriarchy. Patriarchy by its very nature permeates all levels of society—political, religious, social, and economic—and operates in various spaces, both urban and rural. Because it is essentially a power relation, it remains a major determinant of women's access to power. Traditional patriarchy has, in both subtle and overt ways, denied women the same privileges it accords men. El-Saadawi's *Two Women in One* challenges this status quo by presenting a female character who subverts the system with deliberation and precision. This article is an in-depth analysis of *Two Women in One* from a feminist perspective that frames transgression as the ultimate means of women's escape from patriarchy. The analysis looks at the ways in which the female body is exploited to maintain patriarchal power and conversely at how the same body destabilizes male dominance. Power is interpreted as an essentially fluid concept, while transgression is read as crucial to women's individual and collective emancipation.

Keywords: Nawal el-Saadawi; *Two Women in One*; Muslim culture; feminism; patriarchy; Egyptian literature

1. Introduction

Patriarchy and its detrimental effects on the lives of women are central to feminist studies. Pam Morris defines patriarchy as “self-sustaining

structures of power by means of which women's interests are always ultimately subordinated to male interests" (4), implying that in patriarchal cultures, power is vested in the hands of men and therefore women's needs are classed as secondary. The patriarchal oppression of women takes many forms and operates through various media, including the law, education, employment, religion, the family, and cultural practices (Morris 4). In many societies, African or Western, social institutions such as marriage and the family are the principal media through which patriarchy works to regulate female behaviour and to keep female sexuality under constant surveillance. Within such societies, "power is maintained by men through ideologies of gender inequality" (Kaplan 19). These ideologies are fed into the system and become internalized by both men and women. The direct corollary of this internalization is that men engineer the oppression of women and women become engineers of their own oppression.

Muslim culture, like many other cultures, is expressly patriarchal. Although Islam upholds the notion of equality for all believers, Muslim culture does not always conform to this ideal. In the context of this article, Muslim culture is defined as the practices, ideologies, and attitudes of Muslims in different Islamic societies. Muslim culture must therefore be understood as heterogeneous; the form and shape it takes in one society may be different from that which is visible in another society. In many parts of Africa and the Middle East, indigenous customs and traditions have greatly influenced Muslim culture, and because many of these customs are perceived as barbaric by non-indigenous observers, Islam has come under severe criticism from international human rights organisations, non-governmental organisations, and other civil rights organisations. In the case of Egypt, for example, practices such as clitoridectomy and infibulation, which have come to be grouped under the umbrella term "female genital mutilation" (FGM), have persisted despite legal injunctions outlawing these as forms of sexual violence against women. In a study conducted in 2010 to determine the prevalence of FGM in Cairo and Giza, researchers found that among the 244 respondents, 64.1% provided traditional beliefs as their motivation for undergoing circumcision, while 35.9% attributed their decision

to religious considerations (Zayed and Ali 197). Another study carried out in Upper Egypt between 2008 and 2010 found that religious beliefs accounted for 42.2% of the motivation for parents to make their daughters undergo FGM (Rasheed, Abd-Ellah, and Yousef 48). This practice persists despite evidence that it predates Islam and is not a religious requirement for Muslim worship (see El-Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve*; Jennings; Zayed and Ali). Situations like this in which cultural practices masquerade as Islamic law serve to complicate the task at hand for Muslim feminists. These women—whether activists, writers, or scholars—are faced with an immense challenge as they have to admit “the reality that there is dissonance between the ideals of Islam which are premised on an ontology of radical human equality and the fact that in varying social contexts Muslim women experience injustice in the name of religion” (Shaikh 156).

Recognizing that patriarchy, whether traditional or religious, is a fundamental determinant of the inegalitarian structures prevalent within Muslim societies, North African women writers have made it the object of relentless attack. Nawal el-Saadawi is an internationally acclaimed Egyptian writer who has published several works, both fiction and non-fiction, that expose the extent to which women in Islamic Egypt are oppressed by patriarchy. Fedwa Malti-Douglas argues that El-Saadawi’s “concern with an overarching patriarchy whose roots are social, religious and political combines with her treatment of gender and the body in a formula that is nothing short of feminist” (*Men, Women, and God(s)* 6–7). This assertion is quite valid, considering the ways in which El-Saadawi’s writing advocates a radical transformation of the Muslim social order such that women should be treated equally with men. This article, however, argues that El-Saadawi’s engagement with the female body is marked by a succinct duality: the female body functions both as a tool for male dominance and power and as a powerful agent for female independence and emancipation. This duality not only articulates the complexity of the body as a political weapon but also imagines power as grounded within an essential fluidity.

There is a considerable corpus of scholarship on the female body and its place within discourses of sex and power (see Driver, Cazenave, and

Etoke). This article situates itself within a conceptual framework that argues for the female body as a site of transgression, not only in terms of subverting male sexual dominance, but also in terms of bringing back to the centre the desiring female subject. Significantly, many African women writers writing from a Muslim background have represented transgression as an inevitable political strategy in combating gender injustice. For example, Algerian writer Assia Djebar not only creates female characters who rebel against patriarchy and its traditions, but she also emerges as a transgressor of tradition herself through the writing of novels that are subversive in both form and genre (see Jack and Nagy-Zekmi). Through their creative re-imagining of Muslim women and their capacity to re-order society, women writers from the north of Africa have fostered a re-definition of the African literary tradition. Odile Cazenave makes reference to these women when she states that, “by denouncing the female body as object, by exploring the body as an erotic zone, a zone of pleasure, but also as a zone of suffering and a privileged site for self-knowledge, women writers have broken the silence to create a new space” (140).

As an African woman writer writing against the backdrop of colonial and anti-colonial struggles for power in Egypt, El-Saadawi has certainly made a remarkable impact on gender struggles through a feminist politics that defies confinement to appellations of “Arabian,” “Islamic,” or “African” feminism. Her feminist politics is innately radical in conception, as it turns the tables of patriarchy and imagines woman as an agent of transformation. As a writer and a trained medical doctor, El-Saadawi has campaigned for women’s rights since the 1960s, and though she privileges individual agency, she also believes in collective resistance to patriarchy and its oppressive structures (Hiddleston 95). Thus, she has made a great contribution to the international feminist movement by speaking out against the gender injustices perpetuated against women in the Middle East. Marilyn Slutzky Zucker notes that El-Saadawi “has been a consistent, brave voice in the face of the powerful patriarchal structures of Egyptian culture” and that “her writings are responsible for exposing these very structures and their effects on the lives of women” (239). Her efforts are of immense significance because she chal-

lenges “Islamic religious discourse aimed at confining woman spatially and psychologically within a restricted frame in order to limit what is considered her dangerous insatiable sexual appetite” (Cazenave 126). Breaking the silence on the female body and sexuality, El-Saadawi positions herself among the most vocal feminist writers of the 20th century.

In Saadawian literary poetics, taboos on sex and sexuality are presented as subjects for intellectual engagement. While Bahiah Shaheen in *Two Women in One* defies social constraints on pre-marital sex, Firdaus in *Woman at Point Zero* resorts to prostitution as a means of appropriating male power. For both women, the transgression of taboos creates multiple avenues for the assertion of an identity that is divorced from masculinist constructions of femininity. Although *Woman at Point Zero* presents interesting arguments on transgression, the focus of this article is on *Two Women in One*, which explores sexual transgression not as conditioned by society, but as an expression of free will. The article discusses El-Saadawi’s critique of Muslim culture and demonstrates how patriarchy operates within it to oppress women. Two major areas through which the patriarchal manipulation of women is enforced are examined: education and marriage. What strategies, then, does the novel’s heroine employ to stage her resistance to patriarchy? The events in the narrative illustrate that for Bahiah Shaheen, defying cultural restrictions on pre-marital sex is the most effective medium of resisting the patriarchal manipulation of her body. As shall be illustrated, the female body in *Two Women in One* functions both as a means by which patriarchy sustains its ideologies and as an instrument for the re-invention of the self.

2. Patriarchal Ideology and Women’s Education

Malti-Douglas has argued that in the Saadawian literary corpus, medicine is a recurrent subject that is instrumental in women’s attainment of gender equality with men. In her view, “it is a combination of education and the social power of medicine that allows the heroine to escape from the prison of domesticity and the powerlessness of the female state” (*Woman’s Body* 116). This suggests that it is not just the acquisition of *education* but the acquisition of a *medical education* that endows El-Saadawi’s heroines with the power to escape the entrapment of feminin-

ity. Within this framework, the study of medicine is given a privileged position, no doubt because El-Saadawi herself was a practising physician. In *Two Women in One*, El-Saadawi's heroine, Bahiah Shaheen, is a student at a medical college studying to become a cardiac surgeon. In this novel, however, we see a shift from the glorification of medicine to a more critical look at how medical education for women functions to keep women within the confines of domesticity. El-Saadawi's concern in this narrative is not so much the education of women as the ideology that informs the kind of education they are oriented to acquire.

Significantly, *Two Women in One* shows that although Muslim women are granted access to education, theirs is an education built on the solid foundations of patriarchy. This is evident in the different careers envisioned for the men and women in Bahiah's class. While the men are enrolled in medical school to prepare them for future careers in medicine, women are sent there to boost the image of their families and to prepare them to become better wives and responsible mothers in their matrimonial homes. Bahiah finds herself trapped in this web of patriarchal manipulation. As the daughter of a superintendent at the Ministry of Health, she is enrolled in medical school, not because her father is convinced that her future lies in medicine, but because her success in medical school would give him an edge over his colleagues at work. It is a battle of egos among the men folk, and Bahiah is the pawn on this masculine chessboard. Thus, her own educational preferences are shelved for family glory and social status. Given this scenario, it is easy to see how a young woman, with all her intellectual capacities, is exploited for patriarchal gains.

The resentment Bahiah holds against her father mirrors a deeper resentment she nurses against a patriarchal system that makes her a puppet in the hands of the men (and women) in her family. Her powerlessness in the face of an overarching patriarchy is captured in the following words:

None of her life was her own doing or her own choice. It was her mother who had given birth to her and her father who had enrolled her into medical college. Her aunt, who suffered from a lung disease, wanted her to specialize in this particular field of

medicine. Her uncle wanted her to be a successful, highly-paid doctor, who would marry his son, the business-school graduate. Her savings would grow thanks to his expertise in commerce, and they would raise children who would inherit their wealth and bear his name, and the names of his father and grandfather before him. (72)

Clearly, the system is one that gives Bahiah no room to exercise her independence as a free-thinking subject. She is perpetually under the control of external forces: her mother brings her into the world, her father sends her to medical school, and her aunt prescribes cardiac surgery as the branch of medicine in which she must specialise. It is interesting how her education is inextricably linked to marriage and procreation. As a doctor, she would make a 'suitable' wife for her uncle's son, and through her hard work, professionally and sexually, she would ensure the increase of the family wealth and the perpetuation of the family name. What *she* wants and desires is completely insignificant. El-Saadawi here shows that within this patriarchal culture, the female body functions as an agent in the maintenance of male power. The fact that the man chosen for Bahiah as a husband is also her cousin also points to the patriarchal manipulation of the female within Muslim culture, since paternal cousin marriage ensures that property remains in the patrilineal line. In effect, Bahiah's education is not meant to empower her to become a self-reliant woman in a competitive world but to ensure that her place in society remains one of service to men as she vacillates between wifehood and motherhood. Rather than being a means of escape from patriarchal domination, then, women's education in this society cements their oppression.

El-Saadawi, however, shows that even within a patriarchal educational system, there are possibilities for self-definition and personal emancipation. Bahiah subverts the system by combining medical education with artistic creativity. Art opens new horizons through which she perceives the world. More importantly, art enables her to locate her own identity mix within a matrix of socially constructed feminine identities. Her use of art as a method of self-exploration is evident when she stands in front

of a door at the college and peers intently at one of her paintings.. She sees in the painting a reflection of herself—a confused girl who is torn between what she wants and what society wants of her. On the one hand, she is Bahiah Shaheen the “hard-working, well-behaved medical student” (36–37). On the other hand, she is a talented artist who desires the freedom to express herself through her art. As she peers intently at the painting, she realizes that “Bahiah Shaheen was afraid of her real self, of that other self within her, that devil who moved and saw things with the sharpest powers of perception” (37–38). Thus, the painting enables Bahiah to engage in a process of self-analysis by which she is able to acknowledge that within her dwell two separate individuals whose aspirations and actions are not in harmony with each other. She perceives in herself a person who conforms to the demands of her family and society and at the same time a person who does not want to conform. Thus, Bahiah Shaheen is *two women in one*, and her dual social identity highlights her essential complexity as a gendered human being who is also the product of an oppressive patriarchal system.

It is during her reflection on her art that Bahiah meets Saleem. As she stands in front of the green door contemplating the work of her hands, Saleem walks up to her and congratulates her on the exhibition of her painting. Bahiah is immediately captivated by his voice and his distinct way of pronouncing her name. Unlike the other men in her class, Saleem has an appreciation for art. From the way he looks at the painting and looks at her, Bahiah is convinced that he shares her love for creativity. Through art, they share a common vision, and “in thirty seconds they knew each other in a way that would have taken another man and woman fifty years” (39). It is at this precise moment that the seed of love between them is sown. Thus art, unlike medicine, creates a space for human compassion, love, and understanding. It is art that brings Bahiah and Saleem together, and it is through art that they are able to relate as human beings outside the coldness of the dissecting rooms.

As noted earlier, Malti-Douglas (*Woman's Body* 116) has argued that medical education empowers El-Saadawi's heroines to overcome the condition of female powerlessness. The type of heroine El-Saadawi presents in *Two Women in One*, however, suggests a revision of that argument.

Beyond exposing the patriarchal ideology that informs women's medical training, El-Saadawi in this novel questions the privileging of medicine over art. Out of the thousands of students at the medical school, only three or four participate in the art exhibition. El-Saadawi then poses the following satirical questions: "why should medical students be interested in an art exhibition? What good was a painting, a story or a piece of music to them?" (39). She seems to suggest that the system has failed to impress upon the students the value of art, the result of which is a general lack of interest in art exhibitions. Encoded within these questions is a subtle attack on the Egyptian educational system for its elevation of the medical sciences and concurrent suppression of the arts, as though the two cannot be pursued simultaneously. As a medical doctor who is also a writer, El-Saadawi challenges this status quo through the characters she presents in *Two Women in One*.

In contrast to the other students, Bahiah and Saleem have pursued both medicine and art, and while medicine is a social requirement, art is for them an expression of their freedom of choice. As "they [stand] before the painting, shoulder to shoulder . . . side by side," (39) it becomes evident that only in an artistic world does woman exist equal to man, and it is only within this space that she escapes a gendered subjectivity. El-Saadawi's depiction of Bahiah and Saleem in front of the painting effectively neutralizes the gender line and places talent above gender considerations. Moreover, it is only in this world of art that Bahiah can escape the entrapment of patriarchy. Her production of art is the only part of her life that her father has no control over. Although he makes several attempts to stop her from doing it, she defies his efforts by continuing to paint. More importantly, she paints what she likes, not what he wants her to paint. By embarking on an alternative educational journey in which male dominance is side-stepped, Bahiah not only asserts her individuality but also frames transgression as her ultimate means of escape from patriarchy.

3. Patriarchy in Marriage

Muhammed Chaudhry notes that in Muslim culture, marriage "is not a matter of two people wanting to share their lives forever but simply

a matter of civil law” and is defined purely as “a contract which has for its object the procreation and legalising of children” (33). While this claim is controversial and may not be an accurate reflection of marriage transactions in all Muslim societies, it does highlight the point that both men and women get into marriage principally to ensure procreation and proper legal standing for their children. Within Islam, celibacy is discouraged, since marriage is the only legal basis for sexual intercourse between a man and a woman (Jansen 181). Contractual marriage, however, marginalizes the woman since the transaction is between her father and the suitor. In most cases, her opinion is hardly ever sought. Because love and romance have little value within this set-up, the conditions of a marriage contract often impose a latent silence on the woman from whom total obedience is expected at all times. This status quo renders the woman helpless in the face of male aggression and keeps her under the yoke of patriarchy. As a practice central to Muslim culture, arranged marriage comes under severe attack in *Two Women in One* as El-Saadawi lashes out against a system that turns women into articles of commercial value. The experience of Bahiah in the novel shows that marriage is one of the areas in which the patriarchal oppression of Muslim women is most visible and intense.

That patriarchy operates through the institution of marriage is clearly seen in the way Bahiah is carted off into marriage with her cousin. The marriage between them had been arranged by both sets of parents long before the children reached adolescence. As her eighteenth birthday approaches, Bahiah is tormented by “the almost daily visits of her uncle, his wife and their son—the business school graduate who since childhood had been picked as a potential suitor” (59). Because Bahiah’s marriage is arranged, her consent is not sought, nor are her feelings taken into consideration. Admittedly, both Bahiah and Muhammad are victims of a patriarchal system that prescribes paternal cousin marriage as a means of keeping property within the family. The degree of victimization is, however, less for Muhammad who is content with the arrangement and embraces the visits to Bahiah’s house “with his silly smile and his murderous idiotic happiness” (59). Bahiah is doubly victimized, not only because she is forced into marriage with a man she does not desire,

but also because in marrying him she is forced to sacrifice her love for the one whom she desires, Saleem.

The decision to formalise the marriage arrangement is precipitated by Bahiah's participation in a student strike that results in her arrest by the police. She is bailed out of jail by her father and uncle and "it was as if she had been arrested again, but this time by another kind of police," for her father sitting on one side of her in the taxi and her uncle on the other side "seemed like policemen" (94). They are policemen in the figurative sense of guarding her body, which is now seen as a threat to the social order. To prevent her body from destabilizing the social order, the men have to take drastic action. In a meeting that evening in which "all the men of the family" are present (94), they deliberate on the best course of action. One of the men suggests that Bahiah be taken out of school, stating that "universities corrupt girls' morals" (95). Because Bahiah takes part in the strike, it is immediately assumed that her education is responsible for her rebelliousness. This is a patriarchal ideology that equates women's education with moral corruption. Not surprisingly, then, another relative suggests that Bahiah be married off as soon as possible, his reason being that "marriage is the strongest protection for girls' morals" (95). The implication of this statement is that girls need protection and only marriage can provide it—through the domination of the male partner. The "perfect" solution is given by a third speaker who simply states that they "should do both: take her out of school and marry her off," and to make things even better they "already have a groom" (95).

The different propositions of the men show how deeply rooted patriarchal ideology is within their society. The patriarchs believe that education exerts a corrupting influence on women and that it is incompatible with their maintaining moral uprightness. Therefore, taking Bahiah out of school and sending her off into marriage is presumably the best way to protect her from moral decadence. Marriage is thus elevated as a redemptive institution through which rebellious women can be rehabilitated and redirected to their assigned place in society—that of caregivers and child-bearers. Moreover, marriage serves to excise the "surplus" in woman, the surplus "which is at odds with the Symbolic Order" (Driver

7), for by marrying Bahiah off, the men in her family are enforcing their traditional rights and simultaneously curtailing Bahiah's rebellious spirit. Thirdly, marriage functions to keep women away from nationalist struggles, which are deemed to be male enterprises. In all these scenarios, the female body is constructed essentially as a reproductive body whose capacity is limited to the private sphere, leaving the public sphere for male domination.

What is also significant in this novel is the way Muslim culture constructs the female body as a silent body—a body devoid of the capacity to represent itself through speech. Bahiah's exclusion from the marriage discussion silences any objections she may have to the proposal. Because language is primarily a power relation, the exclusion of Bahiah ensures that she remains marginal to power. As Cameron observes, women in patriarchal cultures suffer from an imposed silence as they are often “explicitly *prevented* from speaking, either by social taboos and restrictions or by the more genteel tyrannies of custom and practice” (4). The practice of arranged marriage is thus depicted in this novel as an institutionalised means of silencing women. Since speech is associated with power and silence with passivity, rendering Bahiah's body voiceless ensures that power remains within the ranks of the men in her family.

Patriarchy also constructs the female body as property that is “owned” by men. El-Saadawi condemns this ideology through the strong language she employs to describe Bahiah's predicament in the face of an unwanted marriage. Bahiah is seen as the property of her father “who owned her just as he owned his underwear” (96). Ownership conjures images of dominance and control, and it commodifies the subject. However, Bahiah is hardly considered a valuable piece of property: like underwear, she can be easily discarded. Moreover, her father has the authority to “marry her off or not marry her off, for he was the broker, even though she had never authorized him” (96). Clearly, he does not need her authorization: tradition empowers him to give her in marriage to whomever he thinks appropriate. As a broker, he therefore looks for the highest bidder. Hence, “at a big family party they sold her to a man for three hundred Egyptian pounds” (99). Her marriage to Muhammad Yaseen becomes a monetary transaction between a property owner and

a viable buyer. This bizarre exchange of a human being for cold currency denotes the extent to which commercialism is finely woven into Muslim marriage, and it highlights the dehumanization of women on whose lives little premium is placed. The economic value of Bahiah's marriage to Muhammad resonates profoundly with Gayle Rubin's interpretation of Marxist theory that women sustain the labour system of a capitalist society since "the labor of women in the home contributes to the ultimate quantity of surplus value realized by the capitalist" (37). In this sense, Muhammad has used his family wealth to "purchase" a wife through whose unpaid labour the family wealth (the capital) will be doubled.

Within the context of transactional marriage, therefore, the woman's body functions principally as a tool for male power and dominance. In effect, the woman's subjectivity is obliterated while her body is turned into an object for male possession. The objectification of Bahiah's body is clearly seen during her handing-over ritual: "at the door to the new flat, her father handed over his property to the bridegroom: Bahiah Shaheen passed from the hands of Muhammad Shaheen into the hands of Muhammad Yaseen" (100). "Property" has changed hands and Bahiah's new "owner" is now her husband. This dramatic depiction of the handing-over ritual illustrates the degree to which patriarchy operates through marriage to force women into a shadowy existence. The subject (Bahiah) is deliberately *silenced*, but her body becomes the grounds on which male power is negotiated and consolidated.

Against this background of the commodification of the female body, transgression becomes women's ultimate mode of escape from patriarchal domination. Bahiah transgresses sexual norms when she rejects Muhammad's sexual advances on their nuptial night. Her rejection, ironically, does not surprise him, for he perceives it as behaviour "typical of a virgin who has no knowledge of men" (101). His assumption that Bahiah has never experienced sexual intimacy with any man stems from social restrictions placed on women's sexual lives. Thus, when Bahiah kicks him off, his immediate response is to mentally measure her action against conventional female behaviour. Bahiah, however, does not conform to his perception of femininity: "this strong foot could not pos-

sibly belong to a female. For a female's foot, from his experience with prostitutes, was so soft and small that he could bend it with one hand. But this foot was as firm and strong as a bullet" (101). At this point in the narrative, the spotlight of El-Saadawi's criticism of Muslim culture falls directly on the young male population whose sexual proclivities highlight a serious case of sexual discrimination within Egyptian society. In her study of the Nubians of West Aswan, Anne Jennings found that while women's sexuality in this part of Egypt was restricted through clitoridectomy and infibulation, male sexual behaviour was "allowed wide latitude" since it was presumed that it did not reflect "negatively upon family honor" (50). These inequalities within the Egyptian sexual space are vividly exposed in *Two Women in One*, where it is evident that Muhammad has had the freedom to enjoy sexual intimacy with prostitutes but that he expects Bahiah to be a virgin. Bahiah's unambiguous rejection of Muhammad's sexual advances points to a power shift in which she now takes control of her sexuality and protects it from male exploitation and domination. In this case, her body, along with her capacity to rebel against tradition, becomes a powerful tool for female agency and individual emancipation.

It seems that in the Saadawian world, rebellion against male dominance is a prerequisite for women's self-definition. Bahiah rebels against tradition not only by withholding sex from her husband on her nuptial night, but also by running away from her marriage. She considers the marriage oppressive because it is "an assault on her reality, the usurpation of her will and of her very existence" (103). Thus, to reinstate her will and fashion her own reality, she decides to walk out on the marriage and to re-unite with Saleem. Her relationship with Saleem is more meaningful because it is born out of love and personal choice. It is a relationship that is based on an intellectual and a physical bond. Through her association with Saleem, Bahiah is able to define who she really is and what she wants out of life.

In *Two Women in One*, El-Saadawi brings to the centre of feminist discourse the desiring female subject. Marilyn Booth argues in her analysis of selected Egyptian narratives of the 1920s that the female narrators in these texts "propose a set of differently voiced perspec-

tives, repentant but also defiant and desiring” (266). Like these pioneers of women’s right to desire, El-Saadawi’s heroine in *Two Women in One* takes steps to reclaim her desiring self. Although Muslim culture severely restricts romantic ties between two people who are not married, Bahiah forms a romantic relationship with Saleem. She casts aside social taboos, for what matters is that “she loved him” (69). Love thus becomes the motivation for her actions. When Saleem takes her to Jebel al-Muqattam where they stand looking down at Cairo lying at the foot of the mountain, she experiences a “rapid throb like the pulse of the universe in the night of silence,” and desire surges through her as he gazes intently into her black eyes with his black ones, which are tinged with “a deep blue that spoke of unknown depths like the blue of the sky” (45). The romantic language emphasizes the physical and emotional bond the two young people share. El-Saadawi dispenses with religious conservatism by sanctioning a relationship that exists outside the confines of marriage. In effect, she privileges the erotic over the material and purely contractual.

Eroticism, however, is not without its complexity. Far from idealizing the notion of romance, El-Saadawi highlights the challenges of pursuing romance within a culture that exorcises it from the marriage arrangement. Bahiah realizes that the love between her and Saleem is inevitable and yet forbidden. She is rocked by internal conflicts in which her one self wants to give in to her desires but her other self, the Bahiah Shaheen that society has moulded, panics at the prospect of intimacy with Saleem. Through a process of self-reflection provoked by Saleem’s presence and utterances, however, she chooses to break the monotony that threatens to consume her life and to embrace “a strong and persistent desire to feel alive” (48). In effect, she decides to consummate her relationship with Saleem by engaging in sexual intimacy. In this transgressive act, she not only rejects sexual constraints placed on women by Muslim culture but also reclaims the female body as an instrument principally for *female enjoyment* of sexual pleasure. Sexual activity in this context has no relation to irrationality or impulsiveness; it is rather a deliberate subversion and a step towards the transformation of a system that represses women’s erotic desire.

The romantic relationship between Bahiah and Saleem is El-Saadawi's creative transformation of the Muslim social order to accommodate male-female relationships that are the product of love, equality, and mutual respect rather than the result of coercion, domination, and family interference. By creating a heroine who deliberately flouts normative sexual practices, El-Saadawi not only rejects the suppression of female sexuality but also brings female erotic desire to the centre of Muslim feminist politics.

4. Conclusion

Bahiah's sexual transgression marks a milestone in her process of self-definition, as it is the means by which she re-invents herself according to her own desires and expectations. In contrast to earlier constructions of the female body, El-Saadawi now constructs the body as an instrument of female agency, where sex becomes an avenue for destabilizing male dominance over the female body within the bounds of contractual marriage. Saleem does not extort sex from Bahiah; she gives it to him out of her own volition and takes pleasure in doing so. By doing this, she subverts the authority Muhammad has over her body on the grounds of marriage. Sex therefore becomes an act of transgression through which Bahiah not only asserts her individuality but also undermines the patriarchal exploitation of the female body for male ends. Woman is re-instituted as a desiring subject within the sexual politics of the novel, while the objectification of her body is condemned in no uncertain terms.

Contractual marriage, as the narrative illustrates, deprives women of their right to freedom of choice and limits their potential to attain equality with their spouse. The collapse of Bahiah's marriage on the same day it is established exposes the flaws inherent in arranged marriages. By portraying arranged marriage as one of the institutions through which ideologies of gender inequality are maintained, El-Saadawi emerges as a revolutionary feminist whose primary concern is the destabilization of patriarchal power and the restructuring of society on the twin pillars of equality and liberty.

This article has demonstrated the centrality of the female body in both the sustenance of patriarchy and the destabilization of patriarchal

power. El-Saadawi's construction of the body is grounded within an essential duality that posits the body on the one hand as a tool used to assert male power and dominance and on the other hand as an instrument of female agency and transgression. The above analysis has illustrated that the manipulation of women's education and the practice of arranged marriage are two major avenues through which patriarchy is sustained within Muslim culture. Through *Two Women in One*, El-Saadawi critiques Muslim cultural practices relating to women, their education, and their marriage prospects. More importantly, she demonstrates through this riveting narrative that by drawing on their individual resources—intelligence, willpower, and physical strength—women *can* triumph over the tyrannies of patriarchy.

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