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## Nawal El Saadawi on Female Genital Cutting and Women's Rights in *Woman at Point Zero* and *Searching*

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### ABSTRACT

Nawal El Saadawi's account of women's rights must be situated in Egyptian women's liberation movement. Women's position in society has been caught between modernists and traditionalists in the process of creating a new social order for the new nation. When El Saadawi wrote her novels *Woman at Point Zero* (1983) and *Searching* (1991), an urbanized fundamentalist movement that encouraged underprivileged young professionals, clerks, and college students to return to a traditional way of life was on the rise. To aid in the fight to abolish female genital cutting (FGC), El Saadawi argues that one's body is a gift from God and that the clitoris, as a part of the body, is created for a reason. A psychoanalyst by profession, El Saadawi criticizes Freud's penis envy theory and creates female solidarity in *Woman at Point Zero* and *Searching* to restore the clitoris. She compares FGC to other practices to disrupt gender boundaries and the East/West dialectic. This article investigates how El Saadawi deconstructs binary systems such as men/women, East/West and Islam/Islamism in her layered discourses on FGC and women's rights. This study argues that El Saadawi's discourse must be situated in the long history of the Western civilizing mission, the well-intentioned postmodern relativism, and the liberal progressivism in the FGC eradication campaigns.

**KEYWORDS** Nawal El Saadawi, female genital cutting, women's rights, nationalist feminism, *Woman at Point Zero*, *Searching*

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*For after all, I was only a successful prostitute. And no matter how successful a prostitute is, she cannot get to know all the men. However, all the men I did get to know, every single man of them, has filled me with one desire: to lift my hand and bring it smashing down on his face.*

--Nawal El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero*

## Introduction

Critics tend to categorize Nawal El Saadawi's feminism as "sexual feminism" due to her devotion to sexual and reproductive rights issues, such as female virginity, sexual purity, sexual exploitation, trafficking of or general aggression toward women (see, for instance, Badran 141). Yet El Saadawi's work is much more encompassing than the subject of female sexuality. The background of *Searching* (1991), for one thing, is the Islamic upsurge following the aftermath of the June War in 1967: Israel defeated Egypt and the neighboring states known as the United Arab Republic, a defeat that dealt the Egyptians a heavy blow. On the other hand, her writing career positively reflects the convolutions of the political in contemporary Egypt. Following the publication of her *Women and Sex* (1972), a book in which she presents a frank discussion of female genital cutting (FGC), El Saadawi was dismissed from her position in the Ministry of Health whereas the book itself was banned in the country in the two decades to come. Part of the backdrop of all this was Anwar Sadat's rule. During this time, rampant American-led capitalism was devastating for most Egyptians, and national problems including high-flying inflation, housing shortages, and a widening gap between the rich and poor were on the rise. In the meanwhile, Egyptian women faced gender inequality in private spaces, unemployment in the job market, and a struggle to access sexual and reproductive health rights.

From the very start, Egyptian feminism has been inseparable from the struggle between secularism and religiosity. As Qasim Amin, the founding father of Egyptian feminism, puts it, "the development of a country depends on numerous factors, the most important of which is the development of women" (72). El Saadawi battled sexual oppression in cultural, political, and economic situations during the 1950s and 1960s, right after the feudal system was eliminated. Women's rights activists in Egypt in the 1970s and 1980s were part of the United Nation's Decade for Women (Badran 129-48). This generation attributed gender inequality in the Third World to poverty and corruption in post-colonial nations (Hatem, "Toward the Development" 44). However, since their emphasis was on economic and

political difficulties, their account failed to recognize Third World women's social needs and the sexual and psychological dilemmas these women encountered in society.

The FGC ban started as the Western civilizing mission as early as the turn of the twentieth century. A discourse of torture, mutilation, physical integrity and the body as God-given was used by missionaries to impose a ban on FGC (Zabus 49). FGC helped Kenya to resist colonialism because FGC, a ritual based on women's role of reproduction, was the symbol of the ethnic groups (38). The colonial authorities, faced with local resistance, medicalized FGC at a younger age in Kenya as a compromise (55). The human rights discourse is, however, problematic in that it fails to acknowledge FGC as a gender issue as well as a site of ethnic identity. Those who are not circumcised are perceived as unclean. FGC is a common issue that immigrant women from circumcision-practicing communities still face even in industrialized countries (Nyangweso 4). Human rights activists cannot explain why people still choose to go through the surgery, even though the Egyptian government has banned it since Sadat's rule (Boyle 22). FGC is illegal in the West, but going abroad for "vacation cutting" has become increasingly common in diasporic communities.

In *Searching*, the protagonist Fouada, keeping a gap between her knees and putting her feet down on the ground with firmness, proudly describes herself as tall and slender. This is an indication that she has probably escaped FGC, and thus is looked down upon as strange and unfeminine by her circumcised girlfriends. Fouada, a university graduate with a chemistry degree, finds it difficult to survive in the job market. Her love life is also unsatisfying. She realizes that Saati, from whom she rents an apartment to start her own private laboratory, wishes her to pay with her body. She feels that she is merely a sexual object in his eyes: "She saw his eyes examine her bust as though he were appraising it" (48). The narrative revolving around the heroine of *Woman at Point Zero* (1983), Firdaus, is full of repeated rapes. Firdaus claims that she is a successful prostitute who refuses to enjoy sexual pleasure with her clients: "A prostitute always says yes, and then names her price. If she says no, she ceases to be a prostitute" (115). Firdaus remembers that she used to play with a boy named Mohammadain. They play "bride and bridegroom" in the fields. She derives pleasure from her sexual experiments with him. However, after her mother performs the surgery on her, she is no longer allowed to play with Mohammadain, nor does she ever experience sexual pleasure in the same way again. She falls in love with her secondary-school teacher, Ms. Iqbal. At the end of her life, a female psychiatrist comes to visit her in the prison after she is sentenced to death for killing her pimp. Firdaus does not succumb

to gender hierarchy. Instead, she asks Sharifa, the woman who sells her into prostitution: “Why don’t I feel anything?” (70). Sharifa replies, “We work, Firdaus, we just work. Don’t mix feeling with work” (70).

El Saadawi is considered the Simone de Beauvoir of the Arab world (Accad 235). She is also compared to the Western feminist theologian Mary Daly due to their similar position on clitoridectomy as a form of patriarchal oppression (Malti-Douglas, *Men, Women, and God(s)* 152). According to El Saadawi, postmodern relativism and imperialism are complicit with each other in that they “make use of indigenous culture or religion as a tool to serve their own economic and intellectual interests” (*Nawal El Saadawi Reader* 166). FGC is highly relevant. Failing to put an end to FGC, the Egyptian government was confronted with repressive international policies (Ali 100). In feminist scholarship, FGC is often linked to Western plastic surgery consumers. The comparison made between FGC and Western cosmetic surgery either constructs the Third World woman as backward, docile, and mutilated, or reinforces the Eastern/Western divide (Pedwell 15). For instance, the Western woman is seen either as a seductress and a sexual object enjoying capitalism and consumerism, or as someone who asserts freedom over her body (115).

Making the comparison between Western bodily alterations and Eastern FGC, El Saadawi reveals that the cultural field is discontinuous. First of all, the comparison demonstrates that gender/sexuality alone is reductive as a category of analysis in cross-cultural comparisons. Besides, FGC is linked to the slave trade and post-colonial national struggle in the ways that cosmetic surgery is not. For El Saadawi, the phallogocentric system is also always colonial. She does not deal with gender oppression without simultaneously taking issue with colonial history. In what follows, I examine how El Saadawi applies experience of female solidarity to respond to specific forms of violence such as FGC. El Saadawi portrays Muslim women as victims who fight fiercely against oppressions of all kinds. However, her sexual politics do not seem to bestow the agency that El Saadawi seeks for her heroines in her re-appropriation of Western strands of feminisms.

For El Saadawi, the patriarchal system is an all-encompassing mechanism, and she includes linguistic, socio-cultural, and psychic systems in her writing. She agrees with Simone de Beauvoir’s idea that one is not born a woman, and she further argues that gender has no innate nature (Accad 235). El Saadawi demands women’s rights to “bodily integrity” (“Imperialism and Sex” 22). As she puts it, “To cut away any part of the human body for nonmedical reasons should be considered a crime” (22). She claims that each year a great number of immigrants in the United States suffer from FGC, and women from different cultures today cut

away their body parts, even if not always the clitoris; in both situations, women commit “psychological and educational ectomy” (22). In the interviews that Mary Nyangweso conducts, El Saadawi points out that immigrants from circumcising communities in industrial countries find it difficult to fight against the so-called tradition (2). In one case, an Ethiopian mother in Washington, D.C. who has a baby girl undertakes great pressure from her own mother who insists on performing the surgery: “She said if I don’t do these things, the girl will grow up horny. She’ll be like American girls. And how will I be able to go back to work if my mother is not here to care for my child?” (2-3). In another case, a Somali mother in Massachusetts who has an eleven-year-old daughter also testifies, “Some think I’m disrespecting my own culture. . . . Others say you act like an American now. You forgot about who you are” (3).

El Saadawi calls for women’s rights to sexual pleasure: “There is no longer any doubt that circumcision is the source of sexual and psychological shock in the life of the girl and leads to a varying degree of sexual frigidity according to the woman and her circumstances” (*Hidden Face* 39). As Firdaus describes it, when she starts to sell her body, “at first it was like pleasure, a pleasure akin to pain. It ended with pain, a pain that felt like pleasure. It belonged to a distant past, had been with me somehow right from the beginning” (70).

On the other hand, El Saadawi is keen to pinpoint the sexual politics in the Western world. Freud, for instance, stands out as a prominent figure of such convoluted politics:

Sigmund Freud promoted the psychological circumcision of women when he formulated his theory that maturity and mental health in a woman required that orgasm related to the clitoris cease and be transferred to the vagina. (“Imperialism and Sex” 22)

Thanks to de Beauvoir’s gender constructivism, El Saadawi is able to offer options for her heroines by strategizing their bodies to blur gender boundaries. Comparing Western bodily alterations with FGC, El Saadawi declares that Western society is no less patriarchal than Eastern society. Bodily alterations consist in a wide array of practices, and each cross-cultural comparison requires careful analysis. Linking FGC to Western bodily alternations, she reveals that it is a misconception to view FGC as more oppressive. As she suggests, FGC is performed on women regardless of their religious beliefs (22). As Chantal Zabus argues, the custom of FGC in Africa provided the West with an alibi (25); during the Victorian age, clitoridectomy was also performed on European women to treat masturbation and hysteria (158).

El Saadawi takes aim at the Islamic fundamentalist movement as the source of backward practices imposed on women. It is more accurate, though, to consider fundamentalism and nationalism on a continuum than simply in opposition to each other. Due to the defeat in the 1967 June war, Jamal Abdel Nasser's secular regime was under attack. Sadat, who succeeded Nasser, allowed more leeway for the Muslim Brotherhood to operate. Fundamentalism sought to expand gender divides into the public space, while modernism localized differences in the familial, spiritual and interior space (Hatem, "Secularist and Islamist Discourses" 86). Both are the products of Western modernity and both embrace its middle-class family values.

For modernists and fundamentalists alike, after the defeat in the June war, Egyptians needed to abandon Western values and recover from patriarchal ills to save their nation. Due to the social climate, El Saadawi was criticized for her writing that confirmed Western expectations of men and women in Arab society (Amireh 54). For instance, Georges Tarabishi argues that El Saadawi subscribes to masculine values, internalizes patriarchy, and turns her hostility against men (10-11). According to Sabry Hafez, "For a 'feminist' project, the wronged woman is an appropriate point of departure and the plot enhances this by making the very identity of the heroine the problematic issue in the novel" ("Women's Narrative" 166). As a woman rooted in Islam and intent on refuting neo-colonialism, El Saadawi has, to be sure, an interlocking view of oppressions; at times, however, she also paints Muslim women as sexually exploited, thereby reproducing the Orient either as the woman to be saved or as the woman ravaged and plundered. This article will examine her multiple and contradictory positions in her struggle to cope with divergent assumptions, interests, and expectations of Western and Arab audiences.

### **Nawal El Saadawi's Nationalist Feminist Writing**

El Saadawi remains first and foremost a nationalist feminist. Her feminist career is subordinate to the enterprise of national independence. Dealing with the structural privilege in Western feminisms has been one of her greatest concerns. As Minno Moallem suggests, Islamic fundamentalism is not an autonomous movement as it claims to be (323). According to Moallem, Islamic fundamentalism and mainstream feminisms are complicit in the rise of global citizenship of domesticity: mainstream Western feminisms bring women together against patriarchy while Islamic fundamentalism deploys traditionalism to serve the communities of a transnational God; the former fails to differentiate geopolitical locations, and the

latter emphasizes cultural authenticity by once again reproducing the Eastern/Western binary (325, 328). As Moallem argues, fundamentalism not only deals with enemies within the nation but also deals with enemies beyond the national border, thereby attesting to the instability of traditionalism (324).

El Saadawi has been following the case of Kassinga, who is well-known for her attempt to seek asylum in the US in order to escape the gender-based persecution in her native land. Caught in the West's civilizing mission, multiculturalism, and cultural convention in her own country, Kassinga nevertheless had difficulty explaining the ritual that she had suffered in Togo when she first arrived in the US.

Taking her cue partly from cases like Kassinga, El Saadawi urges human rights activists to put class, national modernization, and local practices into perspective ("Imperialism and Sex" 24-25). Kassinga's situation is complicated. Born in Togo and educated in English-speaking Ghana, she is a Muslim who follows tribal law more than national law. Growing up in Islam, Kassinga disagreed with the customs of polygamy and FGC. She branded her body as part of the rite of passage and married her future husband by tribal law. Once granted asylum in the US, she could not return to Togo. As Zabus suggests, although Kassinga was electronically connected to her hometown in Togo, she could not return in person; meanwhile, she worked for the American embassy to lobby against FGC (233).

El Saadawi's sexual politics are a long-term struggle with male nationalists. Egyptian women were mobilized to fight against colonialism during the struggle for independence. However, they were urged to stay at home after its success. Firdaus's same-sex love in *Woman at Point Zero* and Fouada's aversion to penis envy in *Searching* establish El Saadawi's language of women's rights. She suggests that FGC is not uniquely Islamic. As she puts it, reducing a woman's sexual desire and imposing chastity on her is the real motivation behind FGC (*Hidden Face* 147). El Saadawi herself is a sufferer of FGC. She is acclaimed in the West for her work on the promotion of FGC ban. On the other hand, she also denounces her Western audience for only paying attention to the so-called primitive ritual (Amireh 44). She would also point out that sexual pleasure is, too, perceived as evil in Christian and Victorian Puritanism (*Hidden Face* 150).

In her fictional works, prostitution is a prominent trope of the heroines' struggle as they attempt to transgress gender boundary. As Firdaus proclaims, "Because I was intelligent I preferred to be a free prostitute, rather than an enslaved wife" (91). In El Saadawi's nationalist feminist writing, Firdaus stands in for the nation: a land full of colonial sufferings. The portrayal is a symbol rather than reality, however. The hidden world of numerous Arab women in the harem of sexual subjugation is, after all, a common Orientalist fantasy. For one thing, El Saadawi has something

to say about sexually impotent Arab men. In *Searching*, Fouada finds out that in her laboratory it is the husband, not the wife, who is sterile. The wife cries out for help: “They married me to him ten years ago and I’m still a virgin. He’s not a man!” (78). What is noteworthy is that in spite of her attempts to deconstruct binary gender, El Saadawi paints a homogenized image of her heroines as victims and fighters.

Human rights activists make the link between Muslim FGC and clitoridectomy during the Victorian age. However, they fail to make the link between FGC and intersex reconstructive surgery. For instance, as Cheryl Chase notes, “We have science, and science is linked to the meta-narratives of enlightenment, progress, and truth . . .,” but Western anti-FGC activists only consider non-Western FGC a harmful procedure (142). The First-World feminists who are devoted to eradicating FGC now fully recognize that clitoridectomy is also carried out in the West. Nevertheless, the same Western feminists who disclose that gender is constructed do not seem to care about “biological exceptions” in the cases of intersex infants (145). These conservative Western feminists focus only on the biological category of “woman.” By comparison, El Saadawi’s approach of gender ambivalence as a way for making space against FGC is much more radical and inclusive.

Intersecting sexism and racism, El Saadawi nevertheless reinforces the negative portrayal of Arab men. Arab men are portrayed negatively in her writing in such a way that it confirms the imagination of Orientalism. In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus is a woman tougher than a man, as the psychiatrist describes her:

It was as though I died the moment her eyes looked into mine. They were eyes that killed, like a knife, probing, cutting deep down. Not the slightest movement of a lid. Not the smallest twitch of a muscle in the face, inside their look steady, unwavering. (8)

Firdaus is masculine, but her father is a poor peasant, a violent man with a castration complex. His selfishness is so severe that he enjoys his food while his children go hungry. Although he often attends prayers at the mosque and prostrates before the religious staff, he beats his wife and acts as if nothing in the world matters except him. Satti, Fouada’s landlord, is also described grotesquely: “This large fleshy face, those bulging eyes looking at her hungrily as if she were a piece of meat . . .” (48). He is portrayed as a typically conservative, anti-feminist Arab man.

El Saadawi’s multiple positions illustrate the (un)translatability of femininities in Islam, across cultures, and in different historical contexts and geographical locations. In *Searching*, echoing de Beauvoir’s argument that a girl is taught to be a woman by

her teachers and society (de Beauvoir 294-95), Fouada experiences the pain when growing up to be a woman. For Fouada, women can only understand themselves in relation to men. Psychoanalytical theory is evidently present in Fouada:

She used to hear it [love] often and because heard it often, she did not know it, like the feminine parts of herself which she often saw attached to her body and washed with soap and water every day without knowing them. (25)

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While El Saadawi's heroines can make decisions about their bodies, it does not follow that they can easily surpass their bodies. In Saadawi's view, colonization reproduces sexual difference as a privileged category, as if patriarchy were a homogenous system between the East and West, with FGC as the ultimate expression of patriarchal oppression.

The term "female circumcision" has sexual significance. As Abdelwahab Bouhdiba notes, according to Islamic jurisprudence, circumcision is not a compulsory act, but a pious practice (175). As a consequence, "We the circumcised" defines the community boundary of Muslims (182). This term does not differentiate between pharaonic infibulation and other degrees of cutting. Using "female circumcision" instead of "female genital mutilation," El Saadawi severs the rite from the Western media full of Orientalist gaze. The term in Arabic for male circumcision, *al-khitan*, and those for females, *makhtun* and *khatin*, are not found in the Quran. Rather, these practices predate Islam (Zabus 100). Furthermore, *ulema*, the scholars who have the authority to interpret religious texts, shift the frame of reference from religion to medical procedures (Ali 110). As critics like Kecia Ali have suggested, the best place to exert change is perhaps not religion, but public opinion and social institutions (110). In contrast, the ban on male genital cutting (MGC) is still unimaginable, even when medical language of infection, health complications, pain, diminished sexual response, and possible infertility is used (105).

Like intersex reconstructive surgery, FGC and MGC are ways of enforcing gender divides. In the places where FGC is practiced, the sealed condition of the organ is considered to be natural and coherent in the same way that a foreskin awaiting circumcision is seen to be imperfect (Zabus 149). Gender traits as structural power, rather than innate nature, allow El Saadawi to touch on practices beyond FGC and link it to constituted chains of relevant practices to disrupt binary systems. El Saadawi claims that sexual rights are protected in the Quran, as evidenced by the Prophet Mohammad's advice in the Hadiths not to cut too deeply (Ali 105). *Ijtihad* (personal interpretation) that reinterprets Muslim women's position in Islam in her writing is met with opposition from orthodox

religious authorities, but it does create space for them. Religious reinterpretations crudely rendered favorably toward the ban can be effective but misleading, since the internal debate defining what counts as normative for Muslims is anything but simple and is entangled in colonial history as well as in the modern nation-states and age-old Orientalism (111).

FGC is involved in multiple female practices with a wide range of subject positions. It would be politically reductive to portray all anti-FGC supporters as progressive and all advocates as traditional. Psychoanalytic feminists who seek to disrupt the male symbolic system are criticized for their exclusion of other important categories (Pedwell 135). If sexuality is constructed in the existing power structures, it is impossible to seek subversion in the space beyond, outside, and before power structures (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 40). Poststructuralist feminists are criticized for fulfilling women's liberation only through radical re-signification of the phallogocentric representational system (15). Mary Daly, a radical lesbian feminist, for instance, is criticized for creating sexual difference and seeing transsexualism as a male problem. For her, women may be nominally and legally equal to men, but the structures of patriarchy are left untouched. As she suggests, "We [women] have not been free to use our power to name ourselves, the world or God" (*Beyond God* 8).

El Saadawi argues that Westerners misrepresent Islam and overemphasize FGC to the extent that they exclude other important issues such as veiling, which she discusses as an example to illustrate the continuing colonial domination:

[Western colonial circles] portray Muslim women in their Western media as either veiled creatures or naked belly dancers. Some progressive left-wing people in the West tend to support the veil under the name of multiculturalism, or as a symbol of the authentic identity of Muslim women. (*Nawal El Saadawi Reader* 96)

Assumptions that draw on the mutilated and veiled woman have been made about the East. As a nationalist feminist, El Saadawi is determined to tackle the ethnocentric assumptions fabricated about the East. In her writing, cross-cultural comparisons become an important tool to challenge her Western audience who secure the subject position of white middle-class men. Utilizing radical feminism, she positions FGC in its intertwined relations with many other female practices without reducing it to one-sided comparisons.

## Female Genital Cutting and Cultural Interconnectedness

Interrogating gender and sex distinction has been important for feminists in deconstructing a series of binaries building around active/passive, body/mind, heterosexuality/homosexuality, and so on (Pedwell 20). As Lila Abu-Lughod suggests, Islamic feminists have developed creative approaches of “borrowing, translating, and creating new mixtures” to deconstruct binary systems (412). Gender fluidity lends great support for El Saadawi to emphasize the constructedness of identities and lay bare the limitation of anatomy. Egyptian women’s defense of so-called traditions becomes increasingly important as a result of the collapsing value systems after colonization; they have been spoken for by their male nationalists as soulmates or complementary helpmeets (Stowasser 15). El Saadawi maintains that Third World women in severe poverty continue to suffer from the double oppressions of patriarchy and economic exploitation from the West.

East and West are not mutually exclusive in El Saadawi’s writing. They are relational and mutually constituted by the self/other dialectic structure. Additionally, portraying her heroine as a rape victim, El Saadawi portrays the West as sexually indulgent and promiscuous. In *Searching*, Fouada recalls her first sexual experience with a man and his blue eyes: “A sharp look in his eyes like that of a wild cat. He pulled her towards him with his long arms and she screamed, fearing that he would slaughter or stifle her” (70). Furthermore, in *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus uses a language of freedom for her resistance. Before she is executed, she tells the psychiatrist that “[b]ecause I was intelligent I preferred to be a free prostitute” (91). According to Zabuz, women’s equality, autonomy and orgasmic pleasure in American sexual liberation in the 1970s were passed on to circumcision-practicing communities (159-60). Any interpretation of FGC should be sensitive to the intersection between gender/sexuality and race and the contradictions at local, national, and international levels in El Saadawi’s writing.

In *Woman at Point Zero*, the desire to destabilize gender boundaries and the wish to look truly respectable torment Firdaus. As a peasant’s daughter in a small rural village, she enjoys luxurious living when she becomes a prostitute in Cairo:

I always had my hair done by stylists who only tendered their services to upper-class society women. The colour I chose for lipstick was always “natural and serious” so that it neither disguised nor accentuated the seductiveness of my lips. (11)

For El Saadawi, imported beauty culture and luxury products from the West are

no different from a mental veil. Gaining access to Western cosmetics and standards of beauty, Firdaus seems to be upwardly mobile. Meanwhile, for El Saadawi, Firdaus's choices seem to be limited. She can only imitate her colonizers because she does not live a life of her own volition. Her taste leaves no doubt that she is truly a seductive, sought-after, upper-class woman. The more successful her passing is, the more she is looked down upon as a commodity and a sexual object.

El Saadawi claims at times that in many ways Egypt achieves better gender equality than the West (Amireh 45). Contesting the view that the veil is a sign of Muslim women's backwardness, El Saadawi responds to a Western audience who wear heavy makeup as a postmodern veil:

The veil is forced on Egyptian women by religio-political groups. It is no different culturally from the postmodern veil made of cosmetics and hair dyes that is forced on Western women by the media and beauty commercials. (*Nawal El Saadawi Reader* 170)

However, comparing veiling/cosmetics to a mental veil, or self-deception, one fails to perceive the potential of passing to re-signify problematic binary systems. Such a comparison erases historical particularities and the multiple and incoherent meanings of the veil under undifferentiated victimization of women. The undifferentiated comparison simplifies veiling in reinforcing, re-constituting, and even exceeding binary systems. It also elides the role that race and class divisions play in the acts of gender passing.

The Egyptian woman is caught in a project of modernization led and advocated by Eastern and Western men whose goal is to liberate her. El Saadawi's position is not very different from that of the new wave of Islamic feminists who demand that religious texts and communities make space for female religious authorities. However, in *Searching*, Fouada criticizes Muslim women who prefer leading a traditional life, such as her mother:

She imagined her mother's form in such a position and pictured her the way she knew her, with a white scarf wrapped around her head, a long *galabiyya* over her body, long black socks on her feet and woolen slippers too. (62)

As Carolyn Pedwell argues, cross-cultural comparisons are important in disclosing inequality, but these comparisons often repeat the existing categories of East and West rather than reflect how one practice is constitutively related to one another (32). El Saadawi neither approves of the traditional dress as a sign of protest

against the West nor agrees with wearing mini-skirts, perfume, and cosmetics as a demonstration of sexual liberation.

Edward W. Said claims that El Saadawi is over-exposed and over-cited in the West (qtd. in Amireh 62). Amal Amireh also suggests that El Saadawi's portrayal of fundamentalists as inflexible and bigoted is inaccurate (50). The difference between the modernists and the Islamists, however, is that the Islamists do not regard men as their enemies; they just lose hope in the modernists and tend to differentiate themselves from the Westernized political and economic elites (Stowasser 23). The new wave of fundamentalism started as early as the 1970s. The movement encouraged lower and lower middle-class Muslims to return to the traditional way of life. Weekly lessons on the Quran were offered at home and mosques. This movement asked Muslims to share religious duties and restore the traditional principles of piety and virtue. Drawing on Judith Butler's argument that the norm is unstable and can be subverted, Saba Mahmood argues that docility, as a skill to be taught, is a power struggle rather than simply passivity (29). Mahmood suggests that the mosque attendees who comply with the Islamic code as a lifestyle call the nationalist assumptions from both secularist and fundamentalist camps into question (34).

Camille Nurka makes a clear distinction between reconstructive surgery that affects health and female genital cosmetic surgery (FGCS) performed for the purpose of aesthetics, and not gynecological disease (6). Nurka calls attention to FGCS, increasingly prevalent in the West, for its "problematic medicalisation of the female body" and "a constrained choice shaped by broader culture on women to sexually self-objectify" (7). Linking FGC to labiaplasty, which has become increasingly popular in the West, Pedwell also compares FGC with clitoridectomy, breast augmentation, and liposuction, which equally damage health (15). Pedwell argues that FGC and labiaplasty should be considered by the same measurement and not singled out for scrutiny to disguise the transparency of the West (15).

In the "Author's Preface" in *Woman at Point Zero*, El Saadawi claims that Firdaus is part of her research on women's neurosis in the women's prison near Cairo (ii). In our attempt to understand an author like El Saadawi, as Hafez argues, we should consider Arabic narrative works not merely in terms of the literary mimetic techniques, but more in light of the dialectic of text and context (Hafez, *Genesis* 154). The realist style of El Saadawi's writing cannot be taken at its face value, but must be viewed as re-signifying attempts to reconstitute Eastern and Western feminisms using multiple cross-cultural comparisons. As Pedwell suggests, the problem resides less in comparing along the similarity/difference line than in comparisons that repeat existing power relations and conceal seemingly innocent ahistorical premises (61).

## Eyes, Trauma, and Female Genital Cutting

Conventionally, eyes are equivalent to penises that can deliver sexual pleasure (Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body* 27). Firdaus's eyes create a shared mystery with the female psychoanalyst: "It was as though I died the moment her eyes looked into mine" (6). In *Searching*, Fouada is exposed to Mr. Saati's gaze: "With the eyes of the men examining her exposed name, she felt, in a confused way, that they were examining her naked body displayed in a window" (53). As a cultural convention, woman's body, presence, and even voices are *awra* in Arabic: "private body parts," literally "shame." As Saati suggests to her, "a female must cover her body because it was private and she must not speak in the presence of strange men because even her voice was private" (53).

Firdaus's life narrative comes into existence in the night-long conversation she has with the female psychiatrist: "Firdaus' voice was now silent, but its echo remained in my ears, like a faint distant sound. Like the voices one hears in a dream" (107). Cathy Caruth argues that repetitive seeing is a neurological reaction incurred by a gap of immediacy and belatedness (94). According to Caruth, the father dreams about his child calling out to him: "Father, can't you see that I am burning?" (98). He wakes up to see that a candle has fallen and set his son's body on fire. For Caruth, the burning is a missed encounter that happens again and again between the dead and the survivor (97). Dreams are the protector of not waking up to unacceptable reality, embodied by the cyclical, nightmarish narrative in *Woman at Point Zero*. From the dream, El Saadawi speaks about her own unspeakable and incomprehensible experience through Firdaus.

According to Nyangweso, up to 2010, of the twenty-eight countries in Africa that practice FGC, eighteen have a prevalence rate of 50% or above (3). At first, the Egyptian government was reluctant to publicly deal with the ban because it stood in sharp contrast to the attitude of the majority (Boyle 2). As a result of the pressure from international human rights campaigns, Hosni Mubarak had to take a firm stand on the ban. In Egypt, bans passed by the government do not always mirror local values and conflicts (5). In the diasporic communities, even though the severe form of FGC is not performed, the need to separate Muslim women from the sexually open West persists (Hernlund and Bettina 32). FGC is thus performed on unsuspecting toddlers and babies to avoid legal consequences; children can also be taken abroad to have it performed in the name of "cultural right" (4).

In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus manipulates her masquerades to play around with the notion of femininities: "To protect my deeper inner self from men, I

offered them only an outer shell. I kept my heart and soul, and let my body play its role, its passive, inert, unfeeling role" (110). According to Freud, the little girl, seeing that she has no penis, realizes that she does not have one and wants one for herself. For Mary Ann Doane, on the other hand, femininity is a play of masquerades behind the masks that conceal nothing (184). To assume a position to look from which she is prohibited, a woman needs to use her body as a disguise (191). Fouada has the symptom of penis envy: "Yes, I am nothing" (*Searching* 13). As she admits, "she was unsure of the meaning of the word 'envy' but had inherited it as she'd inherited her nose and arms and eyes" (12).

Some critics have found El Saadawi's position controversial. Georges Tarabishi, for instance, interrogates El Saadawi's passive-aggressive strategy in her presentation of her heroines' transformations (23). According to Tarabishi, it is bizarre that Firdaus would become a prostitute to be free of the patriarchal system (30-31). As Fouada claims, she feels love, as if "she had fallen into an eternal trap whose chains and ropes bound her legs and hands" (60). Tarabishi also finds it questionable that Muslim men in El Saadawi's writing are often relegated to the "category of the enemy with whom no truce can be made and no deal struck" (26). For Tarabishi, Firdaus's frigidity shows nothing other than a desire to collectively castrate men: "The pleasure, felt both consciously and subconsciously, is that of stripping men of pride in their masculinity" (24). It is uncertain if Firdaus's masquerade of femininities is subversive or not in disrupting the interlocking system of oppressions. It is nevertheless important to point out that El Saadawi is subject to a divided readership. As Amireh argues, El Saadawi is received differently in the Arab and Western worlds, respectively (62). Criticism leveled at her is generally labeled as a response of Arab men who are conservative and anti-feminist (63). On the other hand, she also enjoys an image as one of the world's most renowned persecuted feminists (63).

In *Searching*, Fouada feels that "her body felt heavy, as if shackled with chains," when she is in love (60). As El Saadawi claims, unequal relation in marriage is unhealthy (77). She criticizes the Arab man who prefers a "blind pussy cat" to a woman who knows about her rights, sexual desires and ambitions (*Hidden Face* 77). Fouada complains about obscurantism and insufficient sex education:

She did not understand why she always linked birth to urinating and felt that the two must be related. She continued searching for the site of the opening through which she had merged into the world and thought she might find out in the history or geography or hygiene class, but they taught her everything but that. (25)

Fouada, as an uncircumcized woman and a professional, should be positioned differently from Firdaus. However, El Saadawi emphasizes the importance of anatomical and psychological integrity, and thus portrays her heroines as trapped in a pursuit that only takes them to self-delusion. Fouada's masculinity is once again assimilated into the program of resistance against colonizers and conservative Arab men, and thus runs the risk of relegating FGC to a marginal space.

In *Searching*, Fouada utters her protests when Saati looks at her "as if she were a piece of meat" (48). As El Saadawi claims, it is a religious duty for Arab men to marry; however, "masturbation is an evil, and adultery an even greater sin" (*Hidden Face* 145). Saying that Fouada is enslaved in her body is equivalent to suggesting that it is a reality that she cannot escape. Yet we can also look at her in a different light. According to Luce Irigaray, woman's auto-eroticism, grounded in biology, engages in woman's body in the symbolic order and is thus not merely anatomical destiny (Stone 31). Fouada remembers that as a child, when she is prevented from knowing her sexual organs:

When she was very young, she learned that she had been born from an opening beneath her mother's stomach, perhaps the same opening through which she urinated or another one nearby. But when she told her mother of her discovery, she scolded her and said that she'd been born from her ear. (25)

Sexuality is a gendered issue equally shaped by racial, cultural, and class differences. In regions where sexual drives are considered a minor question and an issue attached to bearing children, judging women based on low sexual drives as a problem retains the East/West divide (Boyle x). Research on sexual deprivation in relation to FGC is inconclusive at best (160-61). Sexual deprivation, however, empowers a privileged group of white middle-class women by indiscriminately taking women's equality and autonomy as the guiding principle (159). Additionally, FGC is further intertwined with class in terms of financial power: upper-middle-class women, for instance, can afford reinfibulating after the delivery of children, and widows may reinfibulate to attract men and increase their chances for future marriage opportunities (Zabus 150).

In *Searching*, in a conversation with her mother echoing Freud's primal scene and incest taboo, Fouada admits that she disapproves of the neglected sexual pleasure that her traditional mother also suffers from:

Yes, she saw her in all these things lying on the bed in her father's arms, her lips sternly closed, a grave frown on her wide forehead, performing her marital

duty—slowly and with the same dignified movements with which she performed her prayers. (62)

El Saadawi presents a picture of the new woman who comes to the realization that her autonomy is sacrificed when she becomes a woman. It would be a delusion for Fouada to find her liberation from the masculine epistemology that makes her the hopeless object. Saba Mahmood, however, argues that heterosexuality exceeds the gender norm as a site of subversions (34). Mahmood is suspicious of corporeal materiality separate from language, making silence unrecoverable (159). She is equally suspicious of re-signification as an approach because of its inability to provide an adequate framework within which to understand the new upsurge of fundamentalism (159).

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Germaine Greer makes a link between FGC and intersex reconstructive surgery for their similarity in tidying up the ambiguous genitalia (qtd. in Zabus 219). This comparison reveals that woman, as an identity category, is constructed, too. Woman can be said to be in ever-lasing transgender passing to achieve a fictive identity that takes repetitions to ascertain (Garber 49). In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus's mother and another woman relentlessly cut off a piece of flesh from between her thighs:

So one day I asked my mother about him. How was it that she had given birth to me without a father? First she beat me. Then she brought a woman who was carrying a small knife or maybe a razor blade. They cut off a piece of flesh from between my thighs. (13)

In El Saadawi's writing, motherhood is not an instinct, but a compulsory heterosexual institution. The institution of motherhood is disguised as universal maternal feelings. However, as Pedwell indicates, Western feminists who make these cross-cultural comparisons to show cultural similarities also erase the racial and national discourses (73). Firdaus's mother, easily deemed a conspirator, is caught in a predicament that cuts her off from the community and leaves her economically vulnerable. El Saadawi clings to sexual difference, but only to reverse it. However, the question as to how Firdaus and Fouada can evolve from enslaved bodies into self-determined transcendence, not defined by masculine epistemology, is left unanswered in El Saadawi's writing.

Firdaus in *Woman at Point Zero* describes how she used to experience sexual pleasure with her playmate before what her mother did to her:

The moment I touched it, I would realize that I had felt the sensation before. Then we would start to play again until the sun went down, and we could hear his father's voice calling to him from the neighbouring field. I would try to hold him back, but he would run off, promising to come the next day. (14)

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Feminists who intend to break away from binary structures compare FGC with bodily alterations in the West to argue that legal frameworks concerning various cosmetic surgeries and FGC should at least be made consistent (Sheldon and Wilkinson 263-85). However, according to Pedwell, emphasizing similarities runs the risk of reinforcing the quest for self-identities in the Western style, thereby further neglecting that this is an ancient wound in which historical particularities and national struggles intertwine (82).

With plastic surgery, body art, and female genital cosmetic surgery becoming ever-commonplace, the ideological or moral panic on FGC should be called into question (Hernlund and Bettina 16-17). Like piercing and tattooing that symbolizes individuality, rites of passage shape social identities and separate the recipients from the rest of humankind (Zabus 26). Just as body art can represent a form of transcendence, FGC should be considered as a religious identity practiced for self-governance; however, such spiritual and transcendental side of FGC is not always recognized by the West as such (270). According to Zabus, FGC is a rite of sacrifice not unlike the crucifixion of Jesus Christ (49). Linking FGC to piercing and tattooing, especially the ones carried out on sexual organs, Zabus notices that these so-called modern primitives who are spiritually lost in the industrial society view their practices as universal issues and certainly not human rights issues (272-73).

From that moment on, Firdaus could no longer feel a "sensation of sharp pleasure" (14). In *Searching*, Fouada is envious of men: "[A man] was not more able, but he was male, and masculinity in itself was one of the preconditions for discovery" (22). In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus pronounces that it is impossible for women to have feminine libido:

All women are victims of deception. Men impose deception on women and punish them for being deceived, force them down to the lowest level and punish them for falling so low, bind them in marriage and then chastise them with menial service for life, or insults, or blows. (111)

Firdaus cannot escape the destiny of men looking at her as a sexual object. All she wants is a return to her mother, when she is an infant: "I tried to recall what my

mother had looked like the first time I saw her. . . . Two eyes to which I clung with all my might” (18). Mary Daly argues that women are castrated in language that deprives them of their power (*Beyond God* 9). Portraying Firdaus as mentally and physically castrated, El Saadawi joins Mary Daly in reclaiming something stolen from women.

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## Female Genital Cutting and Unsettled Narratives

El Saadawi's notion of sisterhood echoes that of Mary Daly's as Daly, too, treats FGC as a murder of women's divinity committed by the patriarchal system (*Gyn/ecology* 463). Daly uses the word "Freudians" to describe the circumcisers, designating the transfer of women's erotogenic zone from the clitoris to the vagina at puberty (468). For her, Freud and FGC are equally oppressive (164). According to her, women are condemned to be the inferior sex due to an overemphasis on cosmetics, marriage, feminine propriety, and religious beliefs in both Eastern and Western cultures (164).

Both Daly and El Saadawi emphasize the roles of Virgin Mary and Eve in the monotheistic religions, the former the clean vessel to bear Christ, the latter a seductress who leads Adam to sin against God. They turn penis envy into vagina envy. Daly, who challenges phallogentrism in Western religion, has been criticized for establishing a "female counter culture," and evading rather than disrupting the patriarchal system (Echols 5). Radical feminism such as hers has been accused of falling into cultural feminism in the sense that women antagonize men to compete for superiority of innate qualities (Echols 5). In the eyes of their critics, radical feminists see male dominance as a form of class oppression but can never pinpoint the causes of the patriarchal system (Thompson 60). If woman is a primary category of analysis, it not only assumes identities to be pre-existing but also endorses a category already defined by the patriarchal system (Thompson 69).

In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus is portrayed as falling into the trap of compulsory heterosexuality that men alone fabricate:

In other words, I was telling the man he could have my body, he could have a dead body, but he would never be able to make me react, or tremble, or feel either pleasure or pain. I made no effort, expended no energy, gave no affection, provided no thought. (110)

Firdaus is depicted as sexually manipulative accorded with the patriarchal representational system: "My eyes were penciled in perfect lines drawn to suggest a

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seductive appeal, or a provocative withdrawal” (124). She cannot pass for a wealthy woman without being simultaneously fetishized and erotized in the eyes of men. To assert that Firdaus’s femininity is constructed is not to suggest that her passing is illusory, but to claim that she is deceptive is to understand her passing in these terms.

In *Searching*, Fouada’s mother confirms that Fouada does not rely on men for her self-identity: “Fouada is different from the other girls in the class” (19). Her boyfriend, Farid, also confirms that she is essentially as good as a man: “You have something in you that other women don’t have” (ibid.). Fouada reveals how Egyptian women hide their true skin color underneath their cosmetics:

That white powder with which women cover their faces, to hide those blood vessels that run through living skin? What is left of living skin after its blood colour is blotted out? Only dull, dead skin, chalky white, etiolated. (86)

Just as genders are seen to be unnatural in the view of gender constructivism, race is not natural and is, too, subject to constructions (Ginsberg 13). Judith Butler’s theory of performativity and anti-binarism is intended to apply not only to gender but also to race (*Bodies that Matter* 17). Since cosmetic surgery can enhance femininity and change racial features for the purpose of social mobility, gender and sexuality studies scholars have come to claim that cosmetic surgery can be considered a type of “surgical passing” (Davis 78). When all identities are potentially acts of passing, feminist theory is rendered powerless in that differentiating acts of passing has become impossible, let alone adequately dealing with disempowered groups.

Passing means that there are discrete and bounded categories of identity for the passers to transgress prior to the act of passing and the passer may not be successful in re-signifying essentialist binaries (Pedwell 48). El Saadawi does not manage her multiple positions easily. In *Searching*, defying gender boundary is ultimately too idealized for Fouada. She defines herself against Western standard of beauty:

Buy expensive dresses? But of what use were expensive dresses? She didn’t remember one of her dresses, didn’t remember Farid looking even once at them. She had never felt that her clothes had a value except to cover parts of her body. (86)

A village girl of color passing as an upper-class, lighter-skinned woman is certainly

different from a darker-skinned, middle-class, nationalist woman passing as someone who is better suited to being a man. For Fouada, a face without makeup is authentic. It is the political, cultural, and geographical location where Fouada's passing occurs that gives meaning to the subversiveness of her passing. As the critic Amireh notes, El Saadawi has transformed from a gender equality advocate to a rising star and a representative of Arab writers in the West (66). As Amireh points out, El Saadawi fosters the image as a lonely fighter battling against patriarchal figures who subdue her voices: El Saadawi differentiates herself from other allegedly Westernized Arab feminists, thereby retaining a single story of an original Arab feminist (50-51).

Fouada's passing as a man seems to be more successful than Firdaus's. In *Searching*, refusing to take the patriarchal system for granted, Fouada contemplates how it shapes the way she relates to her body and the bodies of her girlfriends:

She felt ashamed to look at those curves and protrusions that flaunted themselves disgracefully and with every breath. But there was something besides shame, something deep, and buried, something that wrapped itself in a thick mist, something like hidden pleasure, or wicked pride. (69)

The more Fouada finds pleasure inside her body, the more she privileges the clitoris to be biologically significant: "What did a woman want from the world? Visiting women friends? Gossip and jealousy and the pursuit of marriage?" (86). Wearing cosmetics and undergoing FGC are both acts for women to construct their identities. But this view elides the complexity of passing. One time, on the bus, Fouada is annoyed at a young woman beside her: "A waft of perfume came from the woman, on her face that familiar layer of powder, on her lips that blood-red coating" (30). Racial boundary seems so fragile for Fouada that she has to justify it constantly. Besides, while cosmetic surgery is not performed only on Western women, people of color may be discriminated against for certain cosmetic surgery, such as skin lightening. For Fouada, gender passing has always been race passing and a class marker.

In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus's transgression seems to be conservative inasmuch as she keeps the gender norm intact. She is a woman who cannot find her true self. She becomes fixed as a fetishized image in the eyes of men:

[Men] watched me as I passed by, and I kept my head high like a challenge to their lascivious eyes. I moved along as calm as ice, my steps beating down with a steady unfaltering sound. For I knew that they stood there waiting for a

woman like me to stumble, so that they could throw themselves on her like birds of prey. (125)

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Firdaus passes for an upper-class woman who says no as a demonstration of her freedom: “I have triumphed over both life and death because I no longer desire to live, nor do I any longer fear to die.” (130). Firdaus’s passing may have involved surveillance mechanism that polices her ambivalence and characterizes her as a woman lured away by Western culture. Her body could have been open to ever-evolving masquerades, but she is cut off from the social and material relations that determine her. The circumcisers are barely visible in the eradication campaign, except as Freudians, who castrate women.

Same-sex love in *Woman at Point Zero* creates the pre-Eden, pre-symbolic world, as if it were in the womb. This has more to do with radical feminism than *musahaqat al-nisa’*, tribadism, or the missionary sexual position between two female sexual partners (Ali 75). It is against the female psychoanalyst that Firdaus’s masculinity is measured: “Compared to her, I was nothing but a small insect crawling upon the land amidst millions of other insects” (5). Paradoxically, however, it is the psychiatrist who makes Firdaus’s story possible. The comparison eclipses the power relation between an urban psychoanalyst and a village criminal/prisoner. Firdaus’s masquerade, as a wealthy, Westernized woman, is under scrutiny. Her masquerade does not seem as subversive as it is a product of sexual exploitation brought about by Western capitalism. Her passing, as a highly visual performance, fetishizes an eroticized and masochistic image, but excludes wider possible interpretations.

Chandra Mohanty criticizes Fran Hosken’s treatment of Third World women as victims of men, when Hosken claims that the goal of FGC is “to mutilate the sexual pleasure and satisfaction of woman” (339). El Saadawi’s attempts at inserting FGC into global feminisms lead her to make a comparison between gender ambivalence and FGC. This strategy enables her to transcend the deadlocked resistance/colonization divide. Firdaus’s lesbianism and Fouada’s penis envy rearticulate their own unutterable and fractured life history. Their stories disclose the regimes of power distinguishing who has the authority to determine which gender is real. The acts of passing from Fouada and Firdaus are implicated in the intertwined power structure in which their selfhood is also shaped. Releasing sex from gender, El Saadawi nevertheless retains the biological significance, and thus identifies with the masculine transcendence which is based on overcoming the body in the symbolic system. The presupposed power of passing as a man also leads El Saadawi to blur between castration complex and FGC. In so doing,

she overemphasizes the power of re-signification to implement change for a deep-seated religious tradition that has multiple clashing meanings. However, El Saadawi does remind us of the difference between a dark-skinned girl who passes for a white woman and a white woman who presents herself as feminine, autonomous, and technologically progressive, and who can afford plastic surgery.

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## **Conclusion**

Human rights and its relationship to the FGC ban are contested fields. Human rights are involved in the re-inscriptions and re-interpretations of power structure. As Mary Nyangweso points out, in the US FGC is performed in the disguise of corrective surgery, thus blurring the boundary between medical surgery and a harmful practice. Ascertaining whether a woman is circumcised thus makes prosecution difficult. Though nicking is considered an illegal procedure, physicians in the West consider it effective in preventing women from suffering greater harm (5-7). To transcend the universal values of human rights and the traditional values of cultural relativism, Nyangweso suggests incisively that an ethnographic approach to FGC be adopted in the considerations of circumcised women, and that interventions must heed the needs of these women and come from an understanding within their communities (11).

It is important to situate FGC in its multi-faceted matrix that perpetuates it by having transcultural feminist dialogues and exposing the transparent concealment and negligent repetition that may have reinforced the silences surrounding FGC. When FGC is restricted to merely a humanitarian issue, what has been ignored is the fact that femininities in modern-day Arabo-Islamic cultures are in effect reproduced variedly and even contradictorily. El Saadawi never loses sight of the layered workings of all these issues in the conversations over FGC. Just as her position as a nationalist feminist should be taken into account, El Saadawi's sexual politics must be placed in transnational dialogue in which her voice is easily assimilated into continuing power structure and privileges.

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