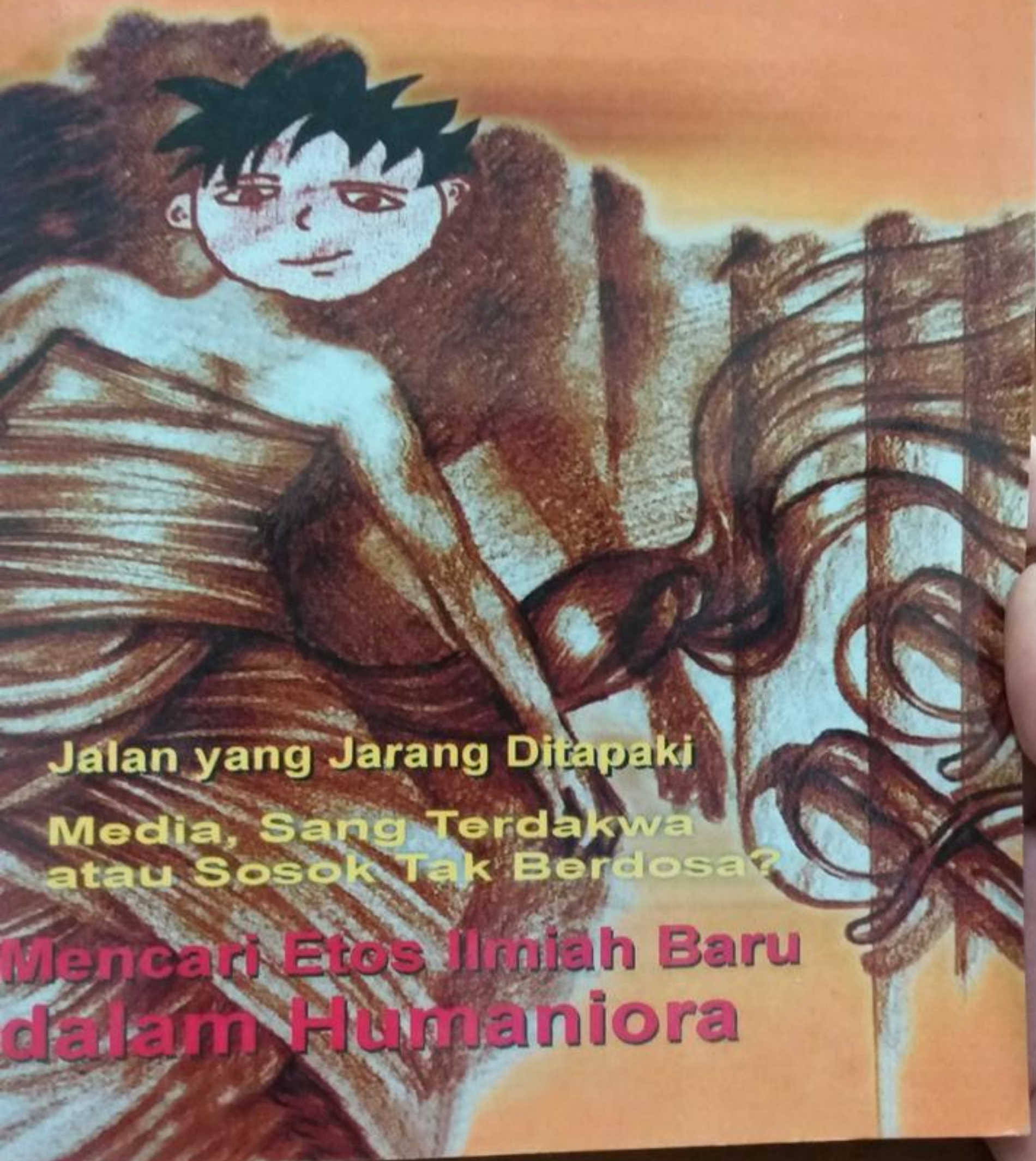


Edisi I/September - Desember/2001

retorika

Jurnal Ilmu Humaniora Baru



**Jalan yang Jarang Ditapaki
Media, Sang Terdakwa
atau Sosok Tak Berdosa?**

**Mencari Etos Ilmiah Baru
dalam Humaniora**

retorika

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Women's Issues in the Modern Arabic Literature

ST. SUNARDI

*My beloved, how cruelly unjust you are
And how great is my woe
Your empire is overpowering
But you, utter not one word to explain
The greatest tyranny a man can suffer
Is the tyranny which he himself allows.
You wound me to the depths
And yet I kiss the hand that holds the cutting edge.
The worst pain that a man can bear
Is the pain in whose hurt he finds pleasure and joy**
(*Abbās Mahmūd al-Aqqād)

**Life is a snake.
If the snake realizes you are not a snake,
it will bite you.
And if life knows you have no sting,
it will devour you.**
(Nawal el-Sa'dawi)

IN RECENT decades, women's emancipation has inspired many people in their effort to recognize critically their human condition. This movement seems to be so pervasive that it is almost impossible for anyone committed in the socio-cultural transformation neglects the feminist movement. "Femi-

nism," said Terry Eagleton, "was not an isolatable issue, a particular 'campaign' alongside other political projects, but a dimension which informed and interrogated every facet of personal, social and political life." In the context of religious studies, for instance, this movement has encouraged a

number of woman writers to deal with religious matters from female perspective. They believed that religions have been dominated by male-biased point of view that in one way or another religions tend to exclude female perspective in understanding religions. By introducing feminist perspective, they urged the commencement of feminist theological tradition as it is exemplified by, for instance, Muslim feminist writers such as Riffat Hassan, Fatima Memissi, and Nawal el-Sa'dawi or Christian writers such as Mary Daly². Generally speaking, they are most concerned to create theological feminist counter-discourse vis-à-vis the male dominating ones. In doing this, they began to reinterpret scriptural texts that - according to them - has been dominated by male biased interpretation. The fact that they started with religious issues indicates that religions are potential in the process of creation of patriarchal culture. By doing feminist theology, they try to regain their authentic consciousness of the religious discourse. And indeed, women's consciousness is the principal notion of any feminist movement.

1. Literature and women's issues

In regard with the women's consciousness, we find another type of feminist writings that deal directly with this question inspiringly. This type of writing is literature such as novel, poetry, and play. In order to recognize feminist struggle in the Arab countries, in this paper we shall analyze the way feminists utilizing literature to empower women's consciousness and, at the same

time, to criticize the given patriarchal culture. "Literature", said Terry Eagleton, "is vitally engaged with the living situations of men and women: it is concrete rather than abstract, displays life in all its rich variousness, and rejects barren conceptual enquiry for the feel and taste of what is to be alive."³ By means of literature, some feminist writers try to become more critical on the given language that, according to them, is dominated by man-made language. In the context of inter-religious dialogue or inter-cultural understanding we are often overwhelmed - consciously or not - by strong prejudice that women's condition in this area is devastated by male chauvinism. As it is indicated in the two above quotations, women's "empire is overpowering". On the other hand, a feminist writer encouraged Arab women to show their sting, otherwise their overpowering empire will be devoured by men. Thus it will be very inspiring us to recognize the women's reality in Arab countries by dealing with their literature.

Among the women's movement, feminist writers who are concerned with the literature are usually called feminist literary critics. Their intellectual activities, as it is expressed by Maggie Humm in her *Contemporary Feminist Literary Criticism* (1994), are directed to: (1) examine masculine literary history by discovering the patriarchal assumptions; (2) take in to consideration on the works of neglected woman writers; (3) offer a feminist methods in reading literary works; and (4) create new feminist reading and writing collectives. By formulating these four objectives, feminist literary critics no

doubt intended to be more critical on the power of the given literature in shaping patriarchal culture and, at the same time, to encourage the emergence of feminist literary tradition, including feminist reading and the production of feminist literary writing. In doing their criticism, they started by rereading famous writings from classic works of Shakespeare, Leo Tolstoy, H.D. Lawrence, James Joys, to pop literatures.⁴ From different approaches, they examined the way women have been the object of writing of male writers. The time has come for women to produce their own text, a kind of - using Julia Kristeva's expression - *écriture féminine* or women's Writing.

The desire to create feminist literary tradition can be found also in the Arab countries such as Egypt and Lebanon, where literature (*adab*) has deep roots in their cultural heritage. As their western counterpart, woman Arab writers also tried to recognize critically the way Arab women being represented in the Arabic literature and, at the same time, to produce their own literary works. Utilizing literary critical approach, they investigated the famous works of leading writers such as 'Abbās Mahmūd al-Aqqād, tawfīq al-Hakīm, Zakī Najīb Mahfūz, Zakī Mubarak, and so fort. Included to the Arab feminist literary critics are Nawal el-Sa'dawi (Egypt), Andrée Chedid (Lebanon), Assia Djebar (Algeria). Generally speaking, so far feminist movement has encouraged the emergence of feminist literary criticism and feminist literature.

2. From al-Jamaliya to Qanatir

In this paper we will focus on two famous Egyptian novels that have been debated both in and outside Egypt. These two novels are *Midaq Alley* (1947) written by an Egyptian Nobel laureate Najib Mahfuz and *Woman at Point Zero* (1975) by a leading Egyptian feminist, psychiatrist, Nawal el-Sa'dawi. The fact that these two novels have been translated into several foreign languages shows the degree of their inspiring power.⁵ In Indonesia, for instance, el-Sa'dawi's *Women at Point Zero* (and her other writings) has been inspiring young Indonesian Muslim feminists in their effort to recognize the principal problem faced by modern Muslim women. The *Midaq Alley*, that has been filmed in Egypt, was filmed again in 1994 (entitled *Miracle Alley*) by a Mexican film director, Jorge Fons, who adapted the story of the novel into the Mexican condition. Indeed, for different reasons these two novels have inspired the readers not only to recognize the Egyptian modern society but also to awaken many Muslim thinkers from different countries to examine more critically their own society.

At the first sight, *Midaq Alley* is not very much different from the rest of Egyptian novels in 1930s. Viewed from its topic, the story of the *Midaq Alley* deals with the question of women - a banal topic as it can be seen in other novels such as Mason's *Ibrahim al-Katib* (1931), al-Aqqād's *Sarah* (1938), and the first Egyptian novel *Zainab* (1914) of Muhammad Husain Haikal. Mahfuz, however, represented the topic of woman in dif-

ferent way that made his novel occupy a particular place in the history of modern Arab novel. Unlike his contemporaneous writers, in dealing with the topic of woman, Mahfuz did not stuck on the romantic subject; but, instead he represented the women' issues in the context of socio-economic condition. This novel depicted the life of an old alley *Midaq*, in the *al-Jamaliya* area, during the second world war, when Egypt was under the British colonization. In the past, this alley was recorded as one of the flashing stars in the history of Cairo as it is said in the opening paragraph: ("Many things combine to show that *Midaq Alley* is one of the gems of times gone by and that it once shone forth like a flashing star in the history of Cairo. Which Cairo do I mean? That of the Fatimids, the Mamlukes or the Sultans? Only God and the archaeologists know the answer to that, but in any case, the alley is certainly an ancient relic and a precious one.") This alley - as many others places in Cairo - has lost its glorious face. What remains is an impoverished alley crowded with the poor people. For ambitious woman like Hamida, the heroine of the novel, this alley is an unwanted place to realize her ambition to live a decent life. Unsurprisingly, once she cursed the alley and swore not to live in the alley, where she was born as a daughter of a very poor mother. In particular way, Mahfuz depicted how the politico-economic condition of colonialized Egypt touched dramatically the human condition of women. That is why *Midaq Alley* is often considered, for instance by Louis A'wad, as the precursor of the socialist realist novel, i.e. a literary stream that

is concerned with the reality of the ordinary people (*sha'b*). The *Midaq Alley* characterized the transition of Egyptian novel from romanticism to naturalism. In regard with the women's issues, this type of novel must be very useful in recognizing the presence of women in the Egyptian literature, particularly the way women's issue is presented by an Egyptian male author.

Almost thirty years after the publication of *Midaq Alley*, Nawal el-Sa'dawi published her *Women at Point Zero* (1975), a biographical novel dealing with a miserable but brave woman who was waiting for the execution of her penal sentence in Qanatir Prison. Looked from its plot, the story of the *Women at The Point Zero* is very close to the *Midaq Alley*. Both novels started from the deteriorating human condition that forced the central female protagonists to accept freely an irrespectable profession: prostitution. Again, here we see the obsession of an Egypt writer in dealing with the question of woman, particularly woman prostitute. Why are they so obsessive with this subject? El-Sa'dawi herself acknowledged that so far women prostitute attracted many Arab writers for their heroine, as she said in her other writing ("The 'Heroine' in Arab literature"):

"It is ironic, then, that the women prostitute plays a much more important role in Arabic literature than that which is accorded to the pure and virtuous women. It is as though purity and virtue are not attractive enough to evoke interest, whether in real life or in the stories of men and women conjured up by an artist's imagination. The prostitute seems to symbolize real woman, woman without a veil or a mask. She is

real woman for she has lifted the mask of deceit from her face and no longer feels a need to pretend that she is in love, or to stimulate virtue and devotion.⁷

In the *Women at Point Zero*, this kind of consciousness is expressed strongly. This accent no doubt made this novel have particular value in both the history of Arabic literature and the history of women's emancipation. Moreover, in this novel we find other particularities that are absent in others. The heroine of this novel, named Firdaus, is not completely fictive but fictionalized from an historical woman. Additionally, this novel was written by a feminist who tirelessly struggle for the liberation of women from different types of repression.

Considering these particularities, understandably this banal topic is still attracting the reading public. It is true that according to contemporary literary criticism - as it is pioneered by Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes - the author is dead, in the sense that in reading a text what we count is the text itself; it is irrelevant to relate the text to its author. Nevertheless in the context of women's emancipation, the emergence of a feminist writer must be taken into consideration by those who are searching for the way a feminist writer represents women consciousness in a novel. Sociologically, feminist writer would attract many attention. It does not necessarily means, however, that the text of the *Women at Point Zero* is secondary. The enthusiastic acceptance of the *Women at Point Zero* must not be separated from the attempt, as it is mentioned above, "to create reading and writing collective".

Referring to particularities and similarities of both novels, it will be very interesting for us to recognize the women's issues in the Arab worlds through these novels. In these novels we can sense immediately how love and hatred, passion and pain, rebel and despair - all can be found merely in one word: woman. Moreover, in these two novels, we can also find continuity and discontinuity in examining the complex questions of modern Egypt. In order to examine more systematically the women's issues in the *Midaq Alley* and *Women at Point Zero*, we will divide these issues in three subjects: (1) marital discontent, (2) woman and comodification, and (3) women and state.

(1) Marital discontent

In the Islamic tradition there is a famous *hadith* about marriage saying: "O young people! Whoever among you can marry, should marry, because it helps him lower his gaze and guard his modesty, and whoever is not able to marry, should fast, as fasting diminishing his sexual power."⁸ From this saying, we can recognize immediately the way Muslims giving value on marriage. Marriage is closely related to the way people controlling their sexual drive. In another *hadith*, however, we read that "Marriage is one half of religion" (*al-zawāj nūsf al-dīn*). Marriage is recommended not only on the base of biological necessity but also on the religious reason. In order to follow Islam's religion, a Muslim cannot ignore the importance of marriage in its relation to be a good Muslim. It is true that, unlike Christian teach-

ing, marriage is not considered as a sacrament, i.e. the sign of the union between God and human being. Yet, Islam's marriage is considered as one of the most important contract (*'aqd*) among human beings that should be concluded in the name of God. Nor like Christian marriage, Islamic marriage is not undissolved. In certain conditions, it can be lawfully dissolved. Nevertheless, it is recommended not to dissolve the marital contract. In a *hadith* it is said: "With Allah, the most detestable of all things permitted is divorce" (*al-talāq abghâdul-mubâhat illa-llâhi ta'âla*). In short, among the Muslim there is a strong tendency to cherish marriage, by which men and women are supposed to improve their humanity.

In both *Midaq Alley* and *Women at Point Zero*, however, marriage is dramatically fictionalized as the most terrifying social institution, where different types of human transgression can take place excessively -intentionally or not. This transgression is mostly directed to women that they can be the most suffering victims. In these novels, in fact, we hardly find any marital relationship that reflects the spirit of the saying of the mentioned *hadith*. Instead, what we find is the fact that any marital relationship is going to ruin and for the female protagonists the dreamt marriage turned to be a nightmare. In the *Midaq Alley*, in different ways and degree, the turmoil of marital relationship can be found in the family of Kirsha, Alwan, Shaikh Ridwân Husaini, and Mrs. Affifi. The family of Mr. Kirsha, for instance, is breaking tragically, since he got addicted on hashish and had a love affair with a young handsome boy. Since

then Mrs. Kirsha turned to be the target of endless violence of her husband - physically and psychologically. The similar crisis happened on the Salim's family, the wealthiest family in that area, after he decided to take Hamida as his second wife, neglecting the disapproval of his first wife. In the *Women at Point Zero*, the crisis of marriage is represented through the central protagonist, Firdaus (literally means "paradise"), who gradually became realized that "marriage was the system built on the most cruel suffering for women".⁹ In order to escape from the familial life, she ran out of her husband's house into the street, since she found herself that "the street had become the only safe place in which I could seek refuge, and into which I could escape with my whole being."¹⁰ For both authors, indeed, marital relationship is fictionalized as a male-created institution to repress the female power. Understandably, in both novels we find here and there a strong desire of women to run and to run as far as possible from the familial life.

Is marital institution so corrupted that it cannot longer stand up? Is marriage something out of mode? Are all husbands so cruel that no wife can help to live in the marital institution? Both authors seem not to want to disbelieve the marital relationship itself. They did not want prove nor disprove anything about the necessity of marriage. What they are most concerned is above all to speak about the irony of marriage. On the one hand, marriage is the most desirable institution among women. On the other, it can produce terrible suffering. In many cases, this suffer-

ing is unsaid, silent or silenced; it is accepted as such, because most of us believe that this suffering is one of the inevitable consequences of marriage. As soon as a girl entered marital institution, her life is under control of her husband. Anything she wants to do should be consulted first to her husband. On the contrary, a husband can do what he wants. Only because he is a husband, a man, he can be the master of himself and over her family. While she was a child, Firdaus saw how powerful her father is upon his family, as if he were the only human being in his home. This unforgettable bitter experience happened on herself successively, when, after her father's death, she lived with her uncle, a student of al-Azhar university, and then became the wife of Shaikh Mahmūd, a wealthy sixty-years widower. Her uncle used to do sexual harassment - something that horrified her, but she could not refuse this shameful transgression, because she felt powerless. She had no right to name that what he did was not his right. Her suffering was augmented, when she was forced by her uncle to marry to Shaikh Mahmūd, from whom her uncle got no less than one hundred pound for the dowry. She would like to escape, but she failed, because she did not know how to escape, and where she should go. But she could not stay long with her husband, because he used to beat her with his shoes. When she asked her uncle's family why a shaikh acted so harshly, her uncle's wife said:

"It was precisely men well versed in their religion who beat their wives. The precepts of religion permitted such punish-

ment. A virtuous woman was not supposed to complain about her husband. Her duty was perfect obedience."¹¹

Indeed the suffering of a husband is derived from the weak position of a woman in the family. This position is sometimes justified with religious law. This consciousness is also expressed by Mr. Kirsha who did not want to listen to his wife advice in regard to his addiction and love affair.

"No, no! I refuse to submit to the will of a woman. I am a man. I am free. I can do what I like! Let her leave the house if she wants to. Let her roam with the street beggars!"¹²

Mr. Kirsha's response must remind us of a proverb saying, "The obedience to women is nothing more than a regret" (*al-ta'a al-nisa' nadāma*). For women there is no choice in confronting the violence from their husbands. They should accept, otherwise they will be expelled. But why did not they choose the otherwise? It is almost impossible for them, because their society and religion will not tolerate women who be without *the* male protection. It is this very notion of protection that is exposed critically in both novels.

The rebellious women in the novels increasingly realized that they were treated as weak human beings who needed the protection of men. In this case, family was the only place where women seek protection; and family should include man/men. From this perspective, the success of family should be measured from its capacity to protect its women. Women, in other words, are considered as the symbol of the supreme honor

of the family. It is a pride of a family to be able to maintain this kind of honor. On the contrary, the failure to exercise this task will produce an unforgiven shame (*aib*) and the sanction is very severe. That is why the system of protection of women is so, tight that they might not make their family shameful. While she is not yet married, her family has responsibility to protect her. After her marriage, this responsibility is taken over by her husband. In the case she was divorced, she should seek protection from her family. In short, she cannot live alone, because she cannot protect herself. Thus it is understandable that the feminist protest is fundamentally directed to shake the assumption that women cannot protect themselves. Till's assumption is not only strongly rooted in the family life but also in the world of prostitution, where Firdaus was looking for freedom from male domination. This can be seen in the dialogue between Firdaus and a powerful man who wanted to be the pimp of her.

"Every prostitute has a pimp to protect her from other pimps, and from the police. That's what I'm going to do."

"But I can protect myself!"

"There isn't a woman on earth who can protect herself!"

"I don't want your protection."

"You cannot do without protection, otherwise the profession exercised by husbands and pimps would die out."¹³

Here we see how critical el-Sa'dawi's position on the status of husband in regard to his domination upon woman. She put a husband and a pimp in the same role. What does she precisely mean? Is a husband's role similar to a pimp or vice versa? In el-

Sa'dawi's opinion, all husbands are pimps, even worse than professional pimps, for they make his wives prostitutes. A wife can be a prostitute as long as she cannot say "No" to her husband. All wives, according to Firdaus, are afraid to be assertive with themselves and to say "No" to their husbands. But, tragically, this kind of relationship is masked with heroic expression such as "protection" or "for the sake of woman's honor".

Furthermore, throughout his novel, el-Sa'dawi represented how the central figure, Firdaus, increasingly became aware that the dominating marital institution has its roots on 's fear of being dominated by women. From this point of view the novel is directed to unmask this fear, of which men themselves are not conscious. In order to unmask men's fear, el-Sa'dawi created a protagonist who stay outside of the marital institution, so that she can fictionalize this unconscious and unsaid aspect of men life. As a wife, a woman is completely dominated by her husband, because she can no longer give any value on herself. Thus she does not stand upon her own value. Even she cannot honor herself. The honor in the marital relationship does not belong at all to herself but to her husband. A man, on the contrary, would feel to be threatened as soon as a woman can honor herself. Firdaus realized this through her experience of be' professional prostitute. "A human being", concluded Firdaus, "cannot stand up to a double defeat. That is the secret of their (men) continues attempt to rise to power."¹⁴ Thus it becomes clear that an independent woman will be very difficult to be a wife, because her

capacity to honor herself threatens directly the essence of the patriarchal marital relationship. In his other writing, el-Sa'dawi's said that man's fear from woman is transformed into hatred and, in its turns, into repression. As a comparison, just remember al-Aqqâd's experience as it is quoted above: woman can be experienced as the greatest woe and tyranny, to which man can kneel down unconditionally.

In the *Midaq Alley*, the process of unmasking also happened. Like el-Sa'dawi's female protagonists, Mahfûz' also unmasked men's fear of woman's power. But, unlike the female protagonists in the *Woman at Point Zero*, Mahfûz, did not make his female protagonists (such as Mrs. Kirsha and Hamida) aware on their situation. Instead, they still needed male assistance to be conscious. In this case, the role is played by Shaikh Darwish. Considering the courage of Mrs. Kirsha, Shaikh Darwish said to Mr. Kirsha:

"O Kirsha, Your wife is a strong woman. Indeed, she has a masculinity which many men lack. She is really a male, not a female. Why don't you love her, then?"¹⁵

In the *Midaq Alley*, the position of Shaikh Darwish is very special. He has a kind of prophetic role. We are tempted to say that he is the *alter ego* of the author. In many cases he can perceive what most people fail to understand, and can see what is invisible to other people. In this case, he seems also to see something special happened in the relationship between Mr. Kirsha and his wife. He appreciated her strength and criticized the weakness of many men, including Mr.

Kirsha. For Shaikh Darwish, this situation should be the reason to love. For Mr. Kirsha, on the contrary, it is the very reason to hate her wife. He hated her strength that might threaten his own power. Shaikh Darwish's should be understood in the context that he is criticizing the weakness of men, by showing that their idealized power disappears (thus in fact they are weak) and, on the contrary, such power is possessed by woman who is supposed to be weak. Mahfûz, indeed, proposed a clear analysis on the power relationship between man and woman, but his analysis itself still belongs to the male. This process is different from that of *the Woman at Point Zero*, where women are represented as the actors of unmasking consciously and intentionally. The voice of Firdaus is typically the voice of feminist, who understand clearly what they want and the way to realize it. From the feminist point of view, *Midaq Alley* might be less radical in defending women's interest. Women no doubt are defended, but they are still put in the patriarchal framework.

Both authors are no doubt shaking the given standard, by which a woman is to be measured her dignity. They question subversively the assumption that the success of being a woman first and foremost should be measured in her steadfastness to preserve man-created values and honor by becoming a servile wife. Umm Hamida warned her daughter Hamida on the consequence of her strong personality: "God will never find you a husband; what man would want to embrace a burning fire brand like you?" It is not a curse but a realistic judgment on a girl like

Hamida. It is a deep fear of a mother. A woman will become a curse as long as she cannot find a husband. As an expert a marriage broker, Umm Hamida understands perfectly what kind of woman most wanted by a husband. Responding to her mother's curse, Hamida said convincingly: "I am not the one who is chasing marriage but marriage is chasing me. I will give it a good run, too!"¹⁶ Hamida's position on marriage must be scandalous. She touches the unshakeable institution, the only place where women can actualize their humanity. She proclaimed to reverse the relationship between marriage and herself. In this context, Hamida, as we will see, decided to utilize to improve her socio-economic condition. But, because marital institution is dominated by men, she also has to face this male domination.

In a more direct way, this confrontation is represented by Firdaus, whose main ambition is to disarm dominating men from their powerful institutions such as marriage. Unlike Hamida, Firdaus no longer believed in marriage, unless there is a room, where wife can create her own values and her own honor. Considering the given marital institution, she believed that so far "wife" is nothing more than man-created profession to preserve his identity. She exists not for her own sake but for the protection of man's identity. Even she does not have her own name but her husband's (such as Mrs. Kirsha, Mrs. Affi).

(2) Women and commodification

Both authors, in particular Mahfûz, represented the women's discontent on mar-

riage in the context of devastating poverty. Poverty appears as a deteriorating factor that worsened the unequal relationship between men and women. But it is this very situation that made women to be aware of their miserable situation. Their hard life taught them to be more courageous in facing their life and to be more realistic to search for the solution of their absurd. Firdaus completely agreed with Sharifa, her mistress, who once warned her saying: "Yes, (life is) exactly like a snake. Life is a snake. They are the same, Firdaus. If the snake realizes you are not a snake, it will bite you. And if life knows you have no sting, it will devour you."¹⁷ Sharifa's saying is just to explicate what Firdaus had already experienced with her greedy father, shameful uncle, and her cruel husband. Life, yes indeed, is poisonous, that is why she should also utilize her killing poison to defend herself. For Hamida, life taught her that cruelty of poverty deprived her from everything, including from her basic right as daughter to live with her own mother. That is why she refused to marry as long as marriage remains to be the institution to inherit poverty. This aspect must have been an important factor that attracted attention from the feminist from the third world countries, from Mexico to Indonesia, where poverty has humiliated the dignity of the people. For women this poverty sometimes afflicted them more seriously. In the *Midaq Alley* and *Woman at Point Zero*, the questions of women are raised in the context of the liberation of poverty, but, they fail and, tragically they fall victim to the cruelty of capitalistic sexual commodification.

Since in the first chapters, Hamida is very aware that poverty, had made her suffer. Poverty is really identical to suffering in its deepest sense. Because of poverty she could not live with her own parents; instead, she lived with Mrs. Umm Hamida. Because of unwanted poverty she even cannot understand her real mother. Indeed poverty appears to be destiny as her birth itself. In this case, her tragic situation is really similar with Ashur Abdullah's in Mahfuz' *Harafish*.¹⁸ Both protagonists, while they were still baby, were abandoned by their parents because of their poor condition. Economic situation has separated bitterly a new-born baby from her mother.

Understandably it is her strong belief that only richness can possibly transform her numerable to honorable life. But how can the uneducated and poor Hamida become rich? For Hamida, there is no choice than through marriage. From her surrounding she had learnt that marriage is the most possible way to mobilize his social status vertically. Her girl friend enjoyed a worthy life, only after the "fortune sent a rich contractor who transported her from her numerable hovel to a fairy-tale life."¹⁹ While dreaming a wealthy husband, however, Hamida did not find a rich man but Abbās, the barber, who rent a room in front of her house. Hamida, however, Accepted Abbās' proposal on the condition that he had to provide her with a flat! Despite the difficult condition, Abbās accepted it. *Al-Fātiha* was recited to conclude their engagement. Two days later he went to el-Kabir to realize his dreaming into reality by earning money with British soldiers.

During Abbas' absence, however, came the wealthy Alwan to Mrs. Umm Hamida to ask Hamida to be his second wife. Without any hesitation Hamida accepted this "fortune", ignoring the resumed engagement with 'Abbās. For Hamida, marrying with Mr. Ridwān must be more promising in order to realize her dreaming to be a decent wife. But her dreaming to be a descent wife was never realized, because Mr. Ridwān died unexpectedly. Instead, she met a professional pimp who offered her a magic way to move from the poor condition of Midaq to luxurious life in the mansion. This time, this fortune did not come from marriage but from being free woman!

Considering Hamida's story, we recognize immediately how she became gradually aware of the value of herself. His story shows a process of valuation of oneself. Hamida is a symbol of a courage to value. This valuation can be found also in the figure of Firdaus until she was reminded by Sharifa who said: "Neither Bayumi, not any of his cronies realized your worth, because you failed to value yourself highly enough. A man does not know a woman's value, Firdaus." But different from Hamida's experience, Firdaus' background is close to the experience of being humiliation rather than to poverty. Her interaction with men had taught her that she suffered a lot, only because she is a woman. She was deprived from her rights to be fully human merely because of her womanhood. However, the two heroines tried to terminate their miserable condition by utilizing the same weapon: professional prostitution. By means of this pro-

fession, Hamida wanted to regain her new-found exchange-value, and Firdaus her new-realized freedom. Their experiences seemed to have made them deeply alienated from themselves, that they are no longer capable to give value on themselves, instead their values are always decided by men.

What do the two novels want to say by making Hamida and Firdaus professional prostitutes? Why prostitute and not, for instance, career women? In the context of literary creativity the term "prostitute" obviously has metaphorical meaning to express aesthetic experiences. It is often said that aesthetic experience is closely related to the experience of freedom, honest, openness, and so on. In this case, the term "prostitute" must serve as a type of category to describe man-woman relationship in different way. Indeed, the production of meaning of these novels is closely related to our ability to interpret this central metaphor El-Sa'dawi, as we have seen above, believed that "the prostitute seems to symbolize real woman, woman without a veil or a mask". Nevertheless, we can read these novels in completely different way: the metaphor of prostitute signifies the tragic defeat of women who rebels against marital institution.

Looked from the feminist tradition, here we see obviously a type of victim feminism, i.e. feminist tradition that tends to represent the women's condition by means of victimization of women. The figures like Hamida and Firdaus are evidently profiles of victims of the social condition that tends to discriminate women. They can be categorized into

victims as long as we see them from their incapacity to incorporate themselves into a given society. In the case of Hamida, she is a victim of patriarchal structure of power in the familial life and its consequence for the distribution of wealth. She was frustrated, because she could not actualize her ambition to change her economic condition through a given social structure. She was very aware, as it is said above, that to marry a husband of her class would never give her a hope to improve her economic condition. Additionally, she also realized that as a woman, it was still unusual to work outside the house. That is why she was very jealous with the Jewish girls, about which Hamida said: "If only you had seen the factory girls! You should just see those Jewish girls who go to work. They all go about in nice clothes. Well, what is the point of life then if we can't wear what we want?"²⁰ By this, Mahfuz emphasize women's economic right, the realization of which should be manifested through the freedom to work. Looked from this point of view, Hamida, indeed, can be considered as the victim of the patriarchal economic system. As a woman, she had no direct access to the economic life. Economically, a woman was absolutely dependent on her husband. The similar frustration was also experienced by Firdaus, particularly since she could not continue her education to university level, although in her final examination she "come[s] out second in the school and seventh countryside."²¹ For his uncle, however, it was unthinkable to send her to the university. Besides the economic reason, he also said: "To university? To a place where she

will sitting side by side with men? A respected Shaikh and man of religion like myself sending his niece off to mix in the company of men?"²² Ironically, instead, he felt secure to send her to Shaikh Mahmūd to be his wife!

Looked from these stories, a woman prostitute first and foremost speaks about the victimization of women. Prostitution is a way to terminate a chain of women's suffering. Until this point, these novels are not very much different from Mahmūd Tāhir Lāḥin's *Hawwa' bilā Adam* (1934; *Eve without Adam*), where "modern woman" Hawwa', the central figure of the novel, was not understood by her relatives and friends, and failed to find a husband, because she was too intelligent to be a wife. Different from Hamida and Firdaus, Hawwa terminated her suffering by killing herself. In the *Hawwa' bilā Adam* we see clearly how an Arab male writer killed the heroine and her ambition. He warned Arab women that if they wanted to be career women, they should be ready not to have husband ('Adam'). In *the Midaq Alley*, Hamida was defeated, and in the *woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus was sentenced to death. However, by making them prostitutes, the authors - in one way and another - still lead the woman demonstrated their power with determination. From this perspective, these novels can be integrated also into the tradition of power feminist.

By adopting the metaphor of prostitute, we see gradually how Firdaus and Hamida were transformed from the powerless creatures in the familial life into powerful personalities in the streets. By tills metaphor both

authors undoubtedly have a more spacious room to express the women's desire to actualize their humanity. The metaphor of prostitute made them free to transgress the given symbols. In regard with the literature, Julia Kristeva said that great writers "can immerse their readers in the semiotic. The task of critics is to help writers and readers find this crisis in the symbolic function of literature itself"²³ In different way, Roland Barthes indicated that in every mode of literary writing there is "a double postulation: there is the impetus of a break and the impetus of a coming to power"; this means that "literary writing carries at the same time the alienation of History and the dream of History".²⁴ What kind of power does this metaphor provide and how does this metaphor function as locus where alienation and dream occur at the same time? Or, following, Kristeva, how does this metaphor subvert the symbolic function in such a way that we enter in a new semiotic area?

Becoming prostitutes, Firdaus and Hamida were not only liberated from the suffering derived from the patriarchal structure of familial life, but also created a breaking situation where they both were forced to create values for their life. On the first place, what they experienced was the exchange-value of their womanhood or, more precisely, one function of their woman's sexuality. They found themselves valuable, because they could exchange one of their use value of their body for money. This can be seen in Firdaus' first experience to receive a tenpound note from her "consumer". For Firdaus, it was really a magic, surprising experience that

she could hold in her fingers "a ten pound note"²⁵ of her own money, that note did not belong to her father, mother, uncle, nor her husband; that note belonged to herself and she was in complete possession of it. Moreover, she also realized that the money was not a given-money, not a gift, but came to her through her work. In short, she earned money, she make money. Indeed, she almost could not believe she herself could made money. This experience was intensified by the fact that with the money she could choose food she wanted to eat, clothes she wanted to wear, hotel where she wanted to sleep, and a man with whom she wanted to sleep. For her, as if it were for the first time money can buy, money can be an exchange, money has power: "Was, it possible that a mere piece of paper could make such a change? Why had I not realized this before? Was I really unaware of this through the years? No. "In this case, the most important thing is the fact that the power she had from money originated from her body. Undoubtedly, this is a splendid experience of value. By means of money, she experienced the value of her body. She felt herself valuable." Here we see that a value can be experienced, because someone feels him/herself having access in creating that value, he/she appears as the creator of the value. Value is created to protect one's interest.

In this case, the function of metaphor of prostitute is similar to that of "madman" of Nietzsche, who proclaimed the decadence of Western culture. Like the mad-man, the prostitute undertook a kind of *Umwertung aller Werte* (revaluation of all values). But, unlike

the mad-man, the prostitute focused only on the existing values that fasten the man-woman relationship. Unlike the mad-man, the metaphor of prostitute include the mediation, through which someone experiences the value. Otherwise, value remains metaphysical.

In the patriarchal familial life, this kind of experience is almost absent, because women have no opportunity to experience directly the exchange-value of their life by means of economic activities. In the Arab Muslim family, said Fatma Memissi, "economic support is given in exchange for obedience".²⁶ It is this very obedience that alienated women from the value of their life. Instead, they merely experience man-made values. Moreover, in the racial life, they even are increasingly losing their body, as if they were sexless or - as many resists said - "an angel in the house". This situation is beautifully depicted by the experience of the male protagonist in Alifa Rifaat's "Distant View of Minaret" who dug her fingernails into her husband's back, "compelling him to remain inside her" and imploring him to give "just one more movement". Ignoring his wife's desire, he blamed her saying: "Are you mad, woman? Do you want to kill me?". The story goes on: "Therefore she had submitted to her passive role, sometimes asking herself: 'Perhaps it's me who's at fault. Perhaps I'm unreasonable in my demands and don't know how to react to him properly.'²⁷ El-Sa'dawi, as an Arab feminist, must not ignore the female frustration of this kind. Understandable she depicted here and there how Firdaus regained her consciousness

through sexual experiences - on the fact that she has a body, by which she can feel her life. However, this situation is not only monopolized by the Arab family but also by the western. In America, for instance, this alienation of women was unmasked by Betty Friedan in her classic *Feminine Mystique* (1966), where she voiced the angst of woman who found themselves "unwaged housewives and consumers"²⁸ and sexually frustrated women.

In these novels, this kind of experience is no doubt very significant and at the same time crucial in the women's process in discovering their power to value themselves. By means of prostitution, women felt their body first and foremost through the exchange value.

From this point of view, she might be considered as decadent human being, because she reduces her humanity into exchange value, and human relation into commodity relation. However, we should not forget that by means of metaphor of prostitution, the authors - in particular el-Sa'dawi - fictionalized the women's consciousness of her own power 'in deciding the cost of the exchange values. A woman prostitute is not a sexual slave but rather sexual worker, and prostitution is not sexual slavery but sexual enterprise. A sexual slave and sexual slavery can be found solely in the family, where women are deprived of their capacity to value their body, even of their right to enjoy their sexuality. A professional woman prostitute, however, has her own power to decide the cost of the exchange value. From Firdaus'

experience, we learn how powerful a woman is, so that she can force men to obey her as it was said by Sharifa:

*"She is the one who determines her value. The higher you price yourself, the more he (man) will realize what you are really worth, and be prepared to pay with the means at his disposal. And if he has no means, he will steal from someone else to give you what you demand."*²⁹

Following the biography of Firdaus, we also learn that exchange value is not the only value a woman gives to her life. By commodifying her body, Firdaus learnt that she could also give another values to her life. The exchange value, thus, becomes a new metaphor within which a woman can desire another values, including unnamed invaluable value. What is most important here is the consciousness that a woman can create her own value and the understanding how a woman should protect her own value. In order to protect the exchange value, she knows very well that she should decide the cost as highly as possible. Here we see that what is important is not the value itself, but the power of creating -values for themselves. Thus Firdaus will become Firdaus (Paradise) and Hamida "someone who praises" instead of malediction. The metaphor of prostitution is closely related to the women's desire to regain their power to valorization their life and to decide the way to protecting their own values.

(3) Women and state

Both in the *Midaq Alley* and *Woman at Point Zero*, we recognize immediately that

the female heroines experienced the state's authority differently. In the *Midaq Alley*, the state's authority is most clearly fictionalized in the threatening presence of the British soldiers who humiliated both Egypt's men and women. The British soldiers made the Egyptian young men their volunteers in the military camps and the women prostitutes in the night clubs. The local government - including their policemen - were almost practically powerless in defending their miserable people from the barbaric exploitation of the imperialist British government. Through his novel, Mahfuz succeeded fantastically to fictionalize the brutal cruelty of imperialism and the unlimited suffering of being colonized, the pleasure of power and the frustration of powerlessness. This cruelty ironically, did not yet cease - as we see in the *Women at the Point Zero* - three decades after the British imperialists had left the country. In one way or another the local government seems - consciously or not - to replace the brutal role of the imperialist soldiers in exploiting the citizens. For the ordinary people like Firdaus, Hamida, Abbas, and the like, independent Egypt is being experienced not very much different from the colonized Egypt. For them the state tends to demand the people rather than to serve.

In both novels, we see that the state's demanding and repressive power is not only experienced through its terrifying institutions such as prison (where Firdaus was waiting her execution) and policeman, but also through the state's system of values (or ideology) by which people are continuously educated - formally or informally - so that

they might be more docile in conforming themselves with the state's authority. Generally speaking, this education is mainly intended to make the people believe unconditionally in what the state demands from the people. In this regard, there are two important notions that can be found both in the *Midaq Alley* or *Woman at Point Zero*: patriotism and protection. Patriotism implies an heroic spirit of people to defend their country - their patria. In this context, the state has responsibility to maintain the patriotic spirit of the people so that they are always ready to defend their country, especially from the external danger. Additionally, both novels also deal the function of the state to protect the people from the different types of internal dangers. The state claims on the right to protect the people from possible inconveniences. Indeed, we see here that these two fundamental notions are very close to the *raison d'être* of the state. We will see how the two novels represent these two types of responsibility of the state and how the realization of the responsibility is experienced by the female protagonists.

When Firdaus was still living in the boarding school, she already realized that the meaning of 'patriotism' is so paradoxical: "When they pronounced the word 'patriotism' I could tell at once that in their heart of hearts they feared not Allah, and that at the back of their minds patriotism meant that the poor should die to defend the land of the rich, their land, for I knew that the poor had no land."³⁰ Some years later, when she became a highly paid prostitute, Firdaus was forced to pay the dear cost of patriotism, when

a policeman came to her bringing a message from "a very important personally from fore' country" who happened to visit Egypt. Unlike the story of patriotism in her school textbooks, this time she had not to defend "the land of the rich" but had to save the reputation of the ruling regime, she had not to die in the bloody battlefield but had to satisfy the lust of a very important personality in a luxurious bed in the five-stars hotel. Unexpectedly, however, Firdaus refused to obey the policeman, even though he insisted that if she really loved her country, if she was a patriot, she would go to this important personality at once, otherwise she would insult the great man and this means that it would endanger the relations between two countries! Although threatened to be sent to jail, she resisted him persistently. Instead, she said to him that she "knew nothing about patriotism" and that her country had not only given her nothing, but had also taken away anything she might have had, including her honor and her dignity.³¹ Here we see how patriotism was presented by the ruling regime and how the ruled resisted the biased patriotism. From the part of the state, patriotism first and foremost means the right of the state to demand its people to sacrifice their life. On the contrary, from the part of the people, patriotism means the duty to fulfil a demand decided by the state without necessarily realizing the reason. In other words, patriotism means sacrifice for one person and pride for another. But what is a state? "Who is state?"

A similar situation can be found also in the *Midaq Alley*, where the local government

felt to be responsible to provide English soldiers with the best Egyptian daughters such as Hamida. Before Abbās' departure for the military camp, Shaikh Darwish, after reciting the holy "Throne Verse", said to Abbās cynically: "You have now become a volunteer in the British Army and if you prove yourself a hero, then it's not unlikely, that the King of England will carve out a little kingdom and appoint you ruler in his place."³² While Abbās was working with the British Army, his fiancée, Hamida, disappeared from Midaq Alley working in a night club, where the most visitors are British soldiers. In the *Midaq Alley*, the value of patriotism is subject to the economic necessity.

But, different from the protagonists of the el-Sa'dawi's novel, Mahfūz represented their heroes as defeated victims of the English brutality. But, in essence, we find a deep similarity of the two novelists in dealing with the notion of patriotism. Both portrayed patriotism as an ideological instrument of the government to exploit their own people. The government speak about the national pride, the dignity of the country; yet ironically, they sold their country for their own interest. Thus they questioned critically the value of patriotism.

The other notion criticized in both novels in regard with the state is the way -the state actualizing its responsibility to protect the people from different types of internal insecurity. In this case the state represented itself as an institution that is entrusted by the people to protect the people's interests. This representation can be seen in the way men of state such as policeman handling the people by emphasizing that they acted in the

name of the state. From this point of view, for certain people like Hamida and Firdaus the state is primarily experienced as a disciplinary institution equipped with the coercing power. Through its coercive apparatus such as policeman, state claim its right to discipline deviant and deviating persons such as professional prostitute. "Deviant", because she cannot be categorized 'into morally good citizen; and "deviating", because her existence constitutes a moral threat to the society. "You're a prostitute," said a young police to Firdaus, "and it's my duty to arrest you, and others of your kind. To clean up the country, and protect respectable families from the likes of you." Yes, it is a moral discourse typically preached by men or women of religion or civil servant. At the first glance, we see how responsible this policeman is on the common good. However, in fact, what the police is most concerned is nothing but to show his absolute power over her. Through this menace, he just wanted to establish a power relationship, upon which he might be able to do whatever he wants from her. In this case, the policeman is preparing a power relationship before saving. "But I don't want to use force. Perhaps we can agree quietly without a fuss. I'll give you a pound: a whole pound. What do you say to that?"³³ I don't want to use force! How kind this policeman is to Firdaus; he did not want to utilize his "right" to harm her! But what we see later is really a tragic but common practice among the men and women of the state: exploiting a woman by corrupting the state's power. The policeman is not only disinterested to search for the way to protect the miserable Firdaus

but also disregarded her humanity, only because she is a prostitute. A human being like her has been socially constructed as the social enemy, that her existence is unwanted, even should be abolished. That is why unsurprisingly, after screwing her, he said unscrupulously: "What are you waiting for? I have no money on me tonight. I'll give you money the next time."³⁴ By saying this, we see how he is incapable to be just himself.

By analysing the notion of protection, we see that the concept of "protection" attributed to the state is really in crisis. People no longer believe 'm the state's commitment in realizing this duty on the base of justice. Referring to the damned British soldiers who have killed Abbās, Hussain said: "We left them [the British soldiers] surrounded by the policeman, and who can expect any justice from them?"³⁵ What is more significant from this novel is the way el-Sa'dawi indicated the failure of the state in protecting the women's interests in the familial life. As we have seen above, the idea of "protection" in the marital life assumes the incapacity of women to protect themselves. The independent women like Firdaus persistently refused this assumption. Instead, they preferred street, "the only safe place in which I could seek refuge, and into which I could escape with my whole be."³⁶ But it happened that in the street what she found is not a protector but a roaming monster, i.e. the state. Escaping from the poisonous mouth of one monster, she was accepted by another monster. Thus she found herself always unprotected.

As we have seen, Firdaus escaped from her uncle, her husband, and the house of Bayumi, because she felt unprotected from the absolute power of men over women. In different case and different degree, the feeling of being unprotected is also experienced by the female protagonists in the *Midaq Alley*. Generally speaking, we see a common experience among these women: in their own family they felt themselves unprotected from the excessive male power. From this point of view, it really sounds so absurd when the policeman said: "It's my duty to arrest you, and others of your kind. To clean up the country, and protect respectable families from the likes of you." In this case, the meaning of "respectable families" is being betrayed by bitter experiences of Firdaus, Hamida, Mrs. Kirsha, Mrs. Alwan, Mrs. Saniya Afffi, and even Mrs. Ridwan Husaini. It became clear that the term "respectable families" is completely man-made definition. This definition ignores the aspect of justice and equality in treating their wife. On the contrary, this definition emphasizes the docility of women in accepting their husband's treatment.

For the figures like Firdaus, the state has completely failed in their responsibility to protect the people for two reasons. *Firstly*, in practice men and women of the state undertook double repression on the deviant figures such as prostitute. *Secondly*, they failed to protect the women inside the family life. From this point of view, the state is really an institution to protect the interest of men, including their interest in the family life. That is why Firdaus said in a firm determination:

"I became aware of the fact that I hated men, but for long years had hidden this secret carefully. The men I hated most of all were those who tried to give me advice, or told me that they wanted to rescue me from the life I was leading. I used to hate them more than I was and could help me change my life. They saw themselves in some kind of chivalrous role - a role they had faded to play under other circumstances. They wanted to feel noble and elevated by reminding me of the fact that I was low. They were saying to themselves: 'See how wonderful I am. I'm to lift her out of the mud before it's too late, that slut of a woman.'"³¹

By saying this, indeed, the power of state is put into question. The state is critically challenged, because it does not give a space for women to realize their humanity according to their own interpretation. The professional prostitution, in this case, is really inspiring metaphor of an uncompromising attempt to rebel radically against the coercive structure of the state with its male-dominating ideology. It is a fictionalization of strong desire of a woman who rediscovered her ego that so far has been repressed by a patriarchal society. In this case, a professional prostitution is inevitable consequence of the given state. Thus it is the family, society, and state that made a woman prostitute. No woman wants to be a prostitute in the sense that she is a "yes-man" woman in any condition. What they want to be is a human being who can say "yes" to herself and, if necessary, to say "sorry, no man". But women are brought up in a family, society, and state, where the existing values are man-made, outside of which a woman will be called a prostitute, that is a woman who says "sorry, no man". "I am not a

prostitute," said Firdaus convincingly, "but right from my early days my father, my uncle, my husband, all of them taught me to grow up as a prostitute."³² The profession of prostitution, in other words, "had been invented by men". This profession has been a part of the evolution of patriarchal culture. Looked from the feminist point of view, prostitution is a social construction made by men who want to exclude women who refuse to be the object of the male dominating power. Prostitution is one of categories, by which men exclude independent women from patriarchal society. This is one of the clearest consciousness offered by the novel - a consciousness on reality that cannot be completely manifested in discursive but expressive way. What she's really searching for is not money but invaluable dignity. When a prince from the Arab ruling family realized this, he said: "You are verily a princess. How did I not believe you right from the start?" And he added: "At first I thought you were a prostitute."³³ Yes, the prince became confusing to recognize her identity, whether she is a princess or a prostitute.

Undoubtedly, el-Sa'dawi, as other Muslim feminists, expected the state's intervention to improve the women's condition in her country. This means that feminist movement should also touch the political sphere. Understandably, together with other Egyptian woman activists, she established Arab Women's Solidarity Union (1985), by which they want to "Protect and improve Egypt Family's Law" and "to articulate women's other problems."³⁴ In Muslim countries, however, we see that for a certain group of Muslims, Muslim women today have gone

to far. That is why their movement should be restricted. These groups of Muslim often criticized the government for having permitted female de-seclusion.

In order to maintain their power, understandably the ruling regime cannot ignore this kind of demand. If they did not give more opportunity to the women's movement, it does not mean they do not disagree with their aspiration, but, first of all, because they need political support from several groups of Muslims. Thus, women became the victims of political interest.

Is it possible for the feminists to struggle against the coercive power of the state? Both authors terminate their novels with a tragic ending. Abbās - using Hussaini's words "has been killed! The British murdered him", "whereas Hamida was seriously injured. She returned to her Midaq Alley desperately, voiceless. Only Shaikh Darwish tries to hope against all hopes saying:

"Let he who dies of love die sad, there's no good in any love without death. Oh Lady of Ladies (Sayyida Zainab), oh fulfiller of all needs ... mercy ... mercy. Oh yes, everything comes to its nihāya."³⁵

While waiting her execution, Firdaus said: "Tomorrow morning I shall no longer be here. (...) All my life I was looking for something that would fill me with pride, something that would nuke me hold my head high, higher than the heads of everyone else, especially kings, princes and rulers. Every time I picked up a newspaper with the picture of one of them in it, I would spit on it (...) I spit with ease on their lying faces and words, on their lying and words, on their lying newspaper."

She was facing her death courageously saying: "Everybody has to die I prefer to die for a crime I have committed rather than to die for one of crimes which you have committed."⁴³

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Catatan

¹ Terry Eagleton (1983), *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 150.

² These writers already produced very influential writings: Riffat Hassan, *Woman and Human Rights*; (1996); Fatima Memissi, *Beyond the Veil*. Rev. Edition. London: al-Saqi Books; Nawal el-Sa'dawi (1977), *The Hidden Face of Eve*. Tr. Dr. Sherif Hetata. London: Zed Press; Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (1973).

³ Terry Eagleton (1983), 196.

⁴ Gillian Freeman (1967), *The Undergrowth of Literature*. London: Panther Modern Society.

⁵ Mahfuz, Najib (1989), *The Middaq Alley*, tr. Trevor le Gassick. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press.

⁶ Nawal el-Sa'dawi (1977), *Woman at Point Zero*. Tr. Dr. Sherif Hetata. London: Zed Books.

⁷ Nawal el-Sa'dawi (1977), 166-7.

⁸ *Sahih al-Bukhari*, VII, 4.

⁹ WPZ, 86-7.

¹⁰ WPZ, 51.

¹¹ WPZ, 44.

¹² MA, 88.

¹³ WPZ, 92.

¹⁴ WPZ, 89.

¹⁵ MA, 88.

¹⁶ MA, 22.

¹⁷ WPZ, 54.

¹⁸ Najib Mahfuz, *Harafish*, 4.

¹⁹ MA, 34.

²⁰ MA, 24.

²¹ WPZ, 32.

²² WPZ, 36.

²³ Maggi Humm (1994), 101.

²⁴ Roland Barthes (1967), *Writing Degree Zero*, tr. A. Lavers & C. Smith, preface by Susan Sontag. N.Y.: Hill & Wang, 87.

²⁵ VPZ, 64.

²⁶ Fatima Memissi (1985), 172.

²⁷ Alifa Rifaat (1985), *Distant View of a Minaret and Other Stories*. London: Heinemann, 1-2.

²⁸ Maggi Humm (1994), *Contemporary Feminist Literary Criticism*. N.Y. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 89.

²⁹ WPZ, 54-5.

³⁰ WPZ, 28.

³¹ WPZ, 90.

³² MA, 95.

³³ WPZ, 62.

³⁴ WPZ, 62.

³⁵ MA, 244.

³⁶ WPZ, 51.

³⁷ WPZ, 88-9.

³⁸ WPZ, 98-9.

³⁹ WPZ, 98-9.

⁴⁰ Kevin Dwyer (1991), *Arab Voices. Human Rights in the Middle East*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 184.

⁴¹ MA, 243.

⁴² MA, 245-6.

⁴³ WPZ, 103.

Al-Tha'labi's account of Fir'awn: From the birth of Mûsâ to the contest between the former's Magicians and the latter

AL MAKIN*

This paper tries to argue that to understand classical exegetes' account on the Qur'anic narratives is not to judge their interpretation based on the modern mode of thought as most Modern scholars offer. However, we should find what is the significance of the story for the teller. After presenting Western and Muslim modern scholars' responses to the classical interpretations of the narrative of Fir'awn, the reading of the story in al-Tha'labi's *Qisas al-Anbiya* will observe the characters involving in recounting the narrative, examine its setting and plot and try to appreciate who is Fir'awn, according to the author. I will focus on the work's four chapters (*abwâb*): the birth of Mûsâ, his murder of a Fir'awnite man and his fight to Madyan, Fir'awn's rejection of the messenger's call, and the contest between Mûsâ and Fir'awn's magicians.

The Qur'anic Fir'awn

The Qur'anic verses narrate the story of Fir'awn in a puzzling style, not providing any detail as to its identity, place, and time. The verses which contain this tale are scattered in many different places, in various *sûrahs* and *âyaats* of the Qur'an. All are disconnected from one another. A certain group of verses provides little information then changes to another subject. It is hard to grasp the story as a whole without collecting these verses and reconstructing the narrative. Supposing this task has already been completed, we still face another problem of construing his identity. Relying solely on the Qur'anic verses, the explanation of a specific time and place attached to the Qur'anic Fir'awn, for example, remains inaccessible, since none of these verses mentions this information.