

books, namely comfortably exotic tales of the Middle East. Another review spoke of “an Oriental Romeo and Juliet.” Given the current German debates about immigrants and Islam, one is uncertain how the confessional rivalries and mutual hatreds that Schami depicts would be understood by a German audience (or British or American, for that matter), but the book’s chief villains are Christians or the very secular agents of the state.

If Anthea Bell’s translation sometimes seems dry and flat, that is in fact a compliment to her fidelity to the original German style, which reads like a traditional, but not very graceful 19th-century novel. The novel’s German background occasionally reveals itself in proper names, e.g. “Jusuf” and not “Yusuf” or “Schams” not “Shams.”

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NAWAL EL SAADAWI. *THE NOVEL*. TRANSLATED FROM THE ARABIC BY OMNIA AMIN AND RICK LONDON. Northampton, MA: Interlink Books, 2009. 236 pp. ISBN 978-1-56656-732-9. Paper: \$15.00

“What does writing mean? This question turned around and around in the young woman’s head as she tried to sleep.” (*The Novel*, 50)

Inarguably, Nawal el Saadawi’s novel is a complex exploration of this very question, as well as several others. It is an exploration of the relationship between writing, selfhood, and politics, both in their domestic articulations (which is to say local conditions in Egypt), and in the larger Arab world and the global arena. *The Novel* does not have an easily recognizable plot; rather it is a novel in which the lives of the main characters (Roustum, his wife Carmen, his friend Samih, the young aspiring female novelist who is the lover of both men, and their extended circle of friends—in particular Gamalat) are deeply entangled with those of the characters in the juvenilia by the budding female writer and in the posthumously published best-seller by the more established writer, Roustum’s wife Carmen. *The Novel* is a novel about novels.

Saadawi’s *The Novel*, like that of her nameless protagonist, opens with a puzzlingly nameless neophyte female writer introduced as follows: “twenty-three years old. Her father, unknown [. . .] no family, no university degree, no national identity card” (1). Both Saadawi and her fictional writer-character immediately establish the act of writing as an act of self-creation. The act of writing oneself into being is a central motif in the novel: “her life became her first novel” (1). If this act of fictional self-referentiality immediately signals the metafictional quality of Saadawi’s novel, other elements suggest this as well, especially the lack of a central protagonist or a clearly discern-

ible plot. The young woman's work is as much about itself—how it comes into being— as it is about herself and all the key players in the unfolding social and political drama. It is about the affluent, morally bankrupt, and corrupt politician-novelist Roustum, who is a key character not only in Saadawi's *The Novel* but also in the young female writer's novel and in Carmen's novel, as well as about their wider circle of friends. It is also a novel about grotesque material deprivation, misogynistic and adulterous sex, contempt for religious hypocrisy, and disdain for political opportunism. Accordingly, it's a novel that draws attention to its own fictionality. Nevertheless, if for some critics metafictionality has come to mean a lack of political commitment or resistance to the realist tradition, this novel does not fit neatly into such a narrowly defined category. Despite its metafictional quality, *The Novel* is a highly politically charged work whose relationship to its immediate context made it subject to censorship throughout the Arab world when it was first published in 2005.

The originality of this work lies both in its creative inventiveness and in its metafictional edge. The act of writing in *The Novel* becomes the site where the politics of self, nation, and globe are evaluated through an unsparing political lens that critiques the moral bankruptcy and political corruption that compromise lives, especially women's lives, in this decidedly modern Arab client state. This state is easily identifiable as modern-day Egypt but could also be expanded to encompass the contemporary Middle East, as Saadawi's more recent writings, starting with *The Fall of the Imam*, have begun to do.

A number of approaches are open to readers who want to understand in depth what is clearly one of Saadawi's most complex and theoretically ambitious novels—a novel that follows a trend already seen in later works especially, as I have already pointed out, in *The Fall of the Imam*. Readers may choose to read this novel as a specific commentary on the condition of women in Egypt and the Arab world as a whole. The multiple stories of infidelity, betrayal, masochism, and entangled sexual relationships, prostitution and illicit sexual liaisons, especially in the lives of Roustum, Carmen, Samih, Gamalat and the aspir-

ing young female novelist, provide ample material for this approach. Nevertheless, in and of itself, this approach results in a limited and ultimately reductive reading. Alternatively, one could read it as an allegory, and therefore a commentary on political events and the political climate in the Middle East—the war in Iraq, the Palestinian aspirations for statehood, Egypt's ambiguous role within the political process in the Middle East, and the Arab resistance to Euro-American imperialism. The names of key players (George Bush, Tony Blair, José María Alfredo Aznar López and his successor José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero) are specifically invoked at key moments in the novel. Within this rubric, it could also be read as a specific commentary on the mutability of life in modern day Egypt and the Arab world in their encounters with global imperialism and their status as client states. Alternatively, the variety of ideological statements made by the author herself and theoretical perspectives—psychoanalytical, postmodernist, feminist—provide another lens through which to consider the novel as an experimentation with the narrative form, an attempt to grapple with representing the unrepresentable, to transcend its conditions of possibility and to map a utopia that seems at best unattainable in the present.

Whichever approach seems appropriate to the reader, several issues are clear in this novel. The relationship between the novel and its immediate contexts is unambiguous: the physical setting is Cairo, a city where the religious, the political, and the personal are never far apart; a city in which moral questions at the family level are intertwined with corrupt, governmental authority at the national level. This novel leaves no aspect of contemporary Egyptian national life unexamined: here the entangled relationships between men and women are a clear reflection of the lack of moral probity and political integrity that defines domestic and national life seamlessly. Here Cairo is a city in which, through their actions, the very custodians of the moral codes undermine the religious structures and strictures that ostensibly govern people's lives. It is a city in which mosques and brothels percolate throughout the physical landscape—contradictions clearly embodied in the transgressive life of Gamalat,

whose religious and political commitments are at best suspect despite physical appearances but whose life opens itself up to multiple and contradictory readings.

The relationship between place, politics and selfhood is established early on in the novel: in the newly released novel by the neophyte writer, the protagonist Roustum is a candidate for election to the membership of the “Shura Council, the upper body of Parliament [who] at fifty four is the youngest candidate” (2). Yet his life of deception and moral depravity, coupled with his background, renders his ability to play such an important national role suspect if not altogether meaningless. Yet this novel is not so much about Roustum as it is about the emergence from obscurity by, and the agency of, the women whom he uses and abuses. Thus, if one were to choose to read Saadawi’s novel from a feminist perspective, the ultimate approach would be to read it as a work that contests and rejects the notion of Egyptian feminism as what Evan Mwangi appropriately terms “a feeble philosophy that needs sheltering from predatory and perverse metropolitan feminist theories” (*Africa Writes Back to Self: Meta-fiction, Gender and Sexuality*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press. 2009, x). Rather, the feminist theory that it postulates is one which—while insistent on the ways in which Egyptian women’s selfhood cannot exist outside its political context—is neither constrained to be perpetually reactive to nationalist anxieties nor forever given its *raison d’être* by its Western nemesis. Thus, in this novel, women’s identities are organized around, defined by, and resisted within a recognizable religious, social and political order.

The central question in the novel remains: can writing perform the political function of a multi-faceted disclosure without exposing the writer to censure and/or censorship? The novel opens and closes with this particular question. In the opening sentence the narrator asserts: “The novel caused tremendous outrage.” This is the same fate that greets Carmen’s posthumously published novel. As the novel ends, Roustum’s wife Carmen is on her deathbed; her death coincides with the release of her latest novel, also called *The Novel*, which lays bare the hypocrisy, the moral corruption, the political machinations

of her husband, which are a mirror of the entire political establishment. It is also the fate of Gamalat who, we are told, disappears from existence with nothing left but the letter she writes to the young writer whom she has come to see as her daughter. *The Novel* is best read as an unremitting search for a language that might best represent the complex culture of contemporary Egypt in a way that focuses on but does not privilege the external circumstances that both enable and circumscribe the production and consumption of literary texts; as a reflection on the multiple contradictions that define life in the larger Middle East; and as an attempt to renegotiate the relationships among aesthetic and cultural forms, theoretical formulations of textuality, and political formations in a continuous state of mutation.