

## Representing the Female Body in Arab Women Writers' Fiction: Nura Amin & Alifa Rifaat

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### Abstract

This study analyses the representation of female body in the fiction of Arab women writers, particularly in the stories of Nura Amin and Alifa Rifaat. That postmodern feminist criticism draws attention to the representations of body in literary texts interrogates the quest of literary theory for meaning and the effort to interpret the text. Patriarchal culture glamorizing manhood and thus mind over body has made the female body and sexuality invisible by controlling them. Underlining the body and its desires is a reaction to women writers' being silenced. This reaction is given through the reality of being a lesbian in the examined stories of Egyptian writers Nura Amin and Alifa Rifaat and thus the imposition of heterosexuality in male literature is transcended and the body, with all its needs and desires, is embodied in the narrative.

**Key Words:** body, Nura Amin, Alifa Rifaat, Arab literature, women writers

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# Arap Kadın Yazarların Kurmacasında Kadın Bedeninin Temsili: Nura Amin ve Alifa Rifaat

## Öz

Bu çalışma Nura Amin ve Alifa Rifaat'ın öyküleri üzerinden kadın bedeninin Arap kadın yazarların edebiyatında temsiliğini irdelemektedir. Post modern feminist eleştirinin edebi metinlerdeki beden temsillerine dikkat çekmesi, edebiyat teorisine uzun yıllar hakim olan anlam arayışını ve metni yorumlayabilme çabasını sorgulamaktadır. Erkekliği ve dolayısıyla bedenin karşısında aklı yücelten ataerkil kültür, bedeni ve kadın cinselliğini kontrol altında tutarak görünmez kılmıştır. Kadın bedeninin ve bedenin arzularının öne çıkarılması kadın yazarların susturulmasına verilen bir tepkidir. Mısırlı yazarlar Nura Amin ve Alifa Rifaat'ın irdelenen öykülerinde bu tepki lezbiyen olma gerçekliği üzerinden verilmekte, böylece erkek edebiyatın heteroseksüellik dayatmasının ötesine geçilmekte ve beden, tüm arzu ve ihtiyaçlarıyla kurguya dahil edilmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** beden, Nura Amin, Alifa Rifaat, Arap edebiyatı, kadın yazarlar

## Introduction

When Karin Littau wrote her book *Theories of Reading: Books, Bodies, and Bibliomania* in 2006, the predominant tendency in the literary world, notwithstanding the influence of French feminist movement, was still on sense making and meaning. Criticizing the concern of literary theorists with textuality, Littau presented a comprehensive historical account of reader-response theory and the practice of reading. The basic purpose of her writing a book on reading and body is to highlight a long-ignored relation between the two concepts and to emphasize the fact that reading is “physically conditioned” (p. 2). By inviting the reader to the act of reading as an agent with his/her bodily reactions, she relegated the dichotomy between mind and body. Not limiting the scope of her book to an account of how reading practices have changed together with the changing

conditions of time, she pointed at the necessity for a discussion of the sexual politics of reading and writing as well.

Littau's effort to give the body its due importance by highlighting the role of the emotions of not only the actual reader or writer but also the implied ones in addition to fictional figures motivated me to write this paper on the representations of body in literature, particularly the literature of Arab women writers. Another reason why I have chosen two women writers of Arab literature is the scarcity of critical readings of their works. I attempted to show that the stories of these writers have the very potential to move the readers with their emphasis on bodily desires and passions. In other words, as readers of a long ignored literary culture, we are invited into an emotional involvement with the texts which rejects the supremacy of mind over the body, and thus the dominance of patriarchy that associates mind with being male. In the literature of patriarchal culture, women are subtly criticized for acting under the control of their emotions rather than mind. The protagonists of the stories I chose are not readers themselves, yet the way they are portrayed as women with their bodily desires entails a reconsideration of the narrative level which modulates the emotions of the real readers. In other words, how the female characters are represented in the fiction of Arab women writers and how these representations are received reveal that writing through and reading about the body are political acts.

Reconsidering the representations of body in literature takes the basic arguments of the French feminists one step further since writing about the body creates a new language different from the language of the patriarchal culture. The socially constructed nature of gender restricts the language of the female to the language of the patriarch, creating an insurmountable gap. The male embraces the language of the patriarch by imposing his own rules and forcing the female to reach this patriarchal discourse (Irzik and Parla, 2004). The woman writer goes beyond these restrictions by creating her own language and this language is certainly the language of the body. Writing about sex for instance, be it about the sexual needs of a woman or the descriptions of a sexual act, is an overt challenge to the suppressing language of male literature that silences women by showing them either in their

domestic realm as wives, mothers, or romantic lovers or as dissident figures disobeying the social norms and conventions. The woman writer rewrites her body and constructs a new text to show that a woman is first a woman and obviously an individual with her needs, passions, and desires. As it is mentioned in the following section, the woman writer makes her silenced voice heard and her body seen again in the world of literature that has deliberately chosen to unsee her presence.

## **Body in Literature**

Literary theory has always been concerned with emotions, acknowledging their influence on the reader as well as the writer. The ancient distrust of emotions was replaced with the emphasis of the Renaissance on the mission of art to 'teach' the audience by evoking their senses. According to Sir Philip Sidney, for instance, the aesthetic power of the text had a direct effect on the emotions of the reader and made him/her a more virtuous person (2002). Though 18th century Romanticism also glamorized literature that 'moves' the reader, the emphasis was not on the emotions of the reader but rather those of the poet. The Romantic poet was a gifted creator embodied with the aesthetic insight to create out of his emotions. The power of emotions and passions, however, has been disdained in contemporary theory since the main function of literary criticism is accepted to make sense of the text. The universal conception of the reader as a rational individual with a critical distance to the text is an Enlightenment legacy, which has its roots even in the times of Plato (Leitch, 2010). The reintroduction of emotions in literature in the sixteenth and eighteenth century was criticized by the modernists who adopted a textual approach. Even the reader-response theories of the twentieth century could not fully incorporate the affective responses of the reader. The reader-response theories of Stanley Fish (1980) and Wolfgang Iser (1976) do not reject the affective responses of the reader completely, yet the reader is still the one who makes use of connotations and implications in a text to reach its meaning. With the postmodern editions of the old texts, the emphasis on the meaning of the text is now undermined, and interpretation is no

longer the primary act expected from the reader. Now that meaning and thus mind is not regarded superior to emotions, the body can now reclaim its significance both for the reader and the writer. With the efforts of the feminist thinkers, the body can return to postmodernism. Though deconstructionists like Harold Bloom (1973) and Jacques Derrida (1967) underlined the impossibility of sense-making, their concern was primarily with the influence of ideology and culture rather than the mind/body or meaning/emotion dichotomy. The gender of the reader is regarded as a social construct that defines his/her intellectual capacities. Thus, the modernist approach to make sense of the text and the postmodern emphasis on the difficulty of making sense both rejected the presence of the body in literature. Reading has become "synonymous with sense-making, and reading for sensation, the critical concern for centuries, has come to an end" (Littau, 2006, p. 10). The concern of feminist theory under the leadership of French feminists such as Helene Cixous (1976) and Luce Irigaray (1977) with body draws attention to the negligence of both the body of the reader and bodily representations that reflect cultural and political attitudes about sexuality and gender in literature.

One of the achievements of postmodern feminist theory is to remind the possibility that the woman writer constitutes her text through her body and the woman reader is moved by the text. Arguing that understanding is not necessary for the reading experience, they reject the supremacy of mind over the body. In doing so, they encourage women writers to write about the body, senses, and passions. The woman writer now writes not with the intention of encoding the text with meaning but out of a desire to let her emotions speak. The woman writer can now prove that it is too restrictive to describe writing, as much as reading, as solely the workings of mind. The long engagement of the feminist theory with the socially constructed nature of gender sheds light onto the debate on body/mind dichotomy since defining the body as female and the mind as male is an act of constructing gender. Theories about the constructedness of gender, such as those in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (2010), present a historical account of how the female body has come to be defined as a lesser form of the male body.

Woman is weaker than man; she has less muscular strength, fewer red blood cells, a lesser respiratory capacity; she runs less quickly, lifts less heavy weights—there is practically no sport in which she can compete with him; she cannot enter into a fight with the male. Added to that are the instability, lack of control, and fragility that have been discussed: these are facts. Her grasp of the world is thus more limited; she has less firmness and perseverance in projects that she is also less able to carry out. This means that her individual life is not as rich as man's (p. 69).

For Beauvoir, biological characteristics do not suffice to make a definition of what a man and a woman is. Rather, social and cultural practices define the body as man and woman. Within a restrictive patriarchal culture, the body of the woman is the passive recipient of cultural codes. Judith Butler (1999) similarly argues that women are identified with their sexualized bodies, which inhibit their freedom to become an autonomous subject. Giving credit to Beauvoir's premise that "one is not born but becomes a woman", she contends that gender is constituted by "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame" (p. 43). If the female body is the signifier of gender, then being a woman is necessarily conditioned to act in accordance with the impositions of a patriarchal culture. Rather than acknowledging her body, patriarchal culture or male literature defines woman with what she does not have. As Andrew Bennett also points out, woman "can only be defined through her lack of identity" (2005, p. 88). Going beyond these impositions is possible by redefining the body through a new language. Writing about the unspeakable, or what is left hidden so long, is a liberating act in the literary world which strives to subvert the norms of patriarchy. The fiction produced in both the West and the East after the proliferation of the feminist ideas, particularly those of French feminists, either reflect how the female sexuality is feared and suppressed or present the female body as an entity with its needs and desires. Thus, the female body has come to exist as something that arouses both fear and wonder for the male world. As Kate Millett also points out in *Sexual Politics*, the constitution of the identity of a woman is dependent on how she is defined in relation to her body (1970):

While patriarchy tends to convert woman to a sexual object, she has not been encouraged to enjoy the sexuality which is agreed to be her fate. Instead, she is made to suffer for and be ashamed of her sexuality, while in general not permitted to rise above the level of a nearly exclusively sexual existence (p.116).

Constituting a female text is a way to go beyond the restrictions imposed on women writers and resist the patriarchal power mechanisms behind them. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue in their well-known book *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), the acknowledgement of women writers by the literary world that has so long ignored them depends on their resisting the male texts which imprison them in the house:

Since both patriarchy and its texts subordinate and imprison women, before women can even attempt the pen which is so rigorously kept from them they must escape just those male texts which, defining them as 'Cypers', deny them the autonomy to formulate alternatives to the authority that has imprisoned them and kept them from attempting the pen (p. 13).

Women writers who are previously seen dangerous due to their creative powers now boldly resist the restrictions on female sexuality and produce a literature about the body. I will discuss two of them from Eastern literature: Nura Amin, whose short story "My Mother's Friend" transgresses patriarchal cult of true womanhood and sexuality by writing about a lesbian relationship and Alifa Rifaat, who reflects the unfulfilled bodily desires of her protagonists in her two stories "The Distant View of a Minaret" and "My World of the Unknown".

## **The Literature of Arab Women Writers**

The fact that the names of Arab women writers have long been unheard in Arab literature is directly related to the existing power dynamics rooted in mind/body dualism. No less different from the West, the social and political attitude of the East about gender roles rests on the superiority of reason to emotions. As in many spheres of

life, literature also has the dominance of the male as the ultimate representative of rational and intellectual thinking. In line with the rejection of women from economic and political life, the unwillingness to acknowledge their creative potential in literature has imprisoned them into the domestic realm. What Arab women have experienced in the East is by no means the problem of the region itself. As Nawal El Saadawi (2007) pointed out in her book *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*, the suppression of women within the domestic realm is also an important issue in the West as the same power dynamics operate in different societies: “We the women in Arab countries realize that we are still slaves, still oppressed, not because we belong to the East, not because we are Arab, or members of Islamic societies, but as a result of the patriarchal class system that has dominated the world for thousands of years” (p. xxxv). The stories examined in this paper elaborate on the issue of female awakening with their emphasis on representations of the body. In doing so, they stand out as a reaction to the negligence of emotions and bodily representations in favor of mind in both Western and Eastern literary theory.

Although Arab literature has a long history with its diverse forms of writing, fairy tales and poems being the most noteworthy ones, women’s appearance in the literary world with their novels and short stories is quite recent. Starting from the 19th century, they started to go beyond the domestic realm with their writings about being a woman. Just as their works reflect the problematic of being a woman in the East due to the restrictions introduced by cultural and religious practices, they also point out that what lies at the root of such restrictions is not region specific. The subordination of women in the East and the West is argued to be dependent on different social and cultural factors, yet the very problem of gender inequality is universal and finds similar expressions in the literature of different regions. Arab women writers are still different from their Western counterparts in that they can engage in literary production as long as their domestic responsibilities allow them. For this reason, short story is a more preferred genre than novel as it leaves time for the woman writer to deal with her chores at home as well (Cohen-Mor, 2005). In other words, there is still a long way for total emancipation



of the woman writer in the literary world despite her efforts to challenge mainstream literature.

The two stories examined in this paper have prominent sexual connotations and articulate the issue of sexual dissatisfaction of women in marriage. The protagonists in the stories of Nura Amin and Alifa Rifaat find sexual fulfillment in their intercourses with others but men. A sexual affair between two women in Nura Amin's "My Mother's Friend" is a direct challenge to the heterosexual codes of patriarchy. In Alifa Rifaat's "My World of the Unknown", the female protagonist reaches the pinnacle of sexual fulfillment during her intercourse with a snake addressed as "she". In a way, the stories show the extent of repression on female sexuality and how it is challenged through a new language in literature. The sexual undertones of the narratives are poignant challenges to the obsessively controlling patriarchal culture. The emphasis on the bodily desires of women and vivid portrayals of the body in the narratives resist the patriarchal restrictions on women and their representations in literature. They also point at two major issues of what Naomi Nkelah defines as "Arobo-Islamic feminist discourse": marriage and sexuality (2008, p. 22).

Nura Amin's much acclaimed story "My Mother's Friend" revolves around a lesbian relationship between the narrator's mother and her friend, Abla Safa. Abla Safa is portrayed as a mysterious figure in the neighbourhood, adored by both men and women. The narrator knows that Abla Safa has a woman friend in every house of the town as these women are fascinated with her. She is also an autonomous woman who, despite being the object of male gaze, rejects a man in her life and visits her women friends only when she wants. Though her body arouses the attraction of men who "could not take their eyes off her" (2005, p. 81), she is able to free it from all impositions about gender. The female narrator witnesses Abla Safa "cupping her hand around the breast of Auntie Asmat's maid" (2005, p. 81) and realizes that her mother is disturbed by the sight. She later on realizes that Abla Safa does the same thing with her mother too before they lock themselves in the bedroom until her father returns home from abroad. After that incident, Abla Safa stops visiting other women's houses but the protagonist's mother.

The lesbian relationship is obviously a challenge to the enforcement of heterosexuality in the patriarchal culture. The fact that the narrator is a child who senses that there is something fascinating in Abla Safa's relationship with women invites the reader as well into a different experience of reading women's literature. For the narrator, Abla Safa's touching the breast of another woman is not different from an infant's cupping her mother's breast. She does not blame Abla Safa or Auntie Asmat's maid for "committing a shameful act" as "all infants cup their mothers' breasts while suckling, even on the street or during a visit" (2005, p. 81). The sexuality of female body in this respect is not described as dangerous and the love between two women is not condemned. Amin's choice to narrate a lesbian relationship from the eyes of a child is in a way a call to the reader to adapt an unquestioning attitude towards female sexuality.

The dissident voice in Amin's story is also the answer to all the restrictions women face in their domestic life. Being a woman in the Arab culture is determined by how properly she fulfils her responsibilities as a wife, sister, and mother. In this respect, the image of the true woman portrayed in the West in the 19th century and still pampered in the contemporary culture through the media is also the image of true woman in the East. The fact that family, state, and religion are universally accepted as the pillars of a well organized society and women as the mothers of the big family called the nation, they are expected to serve these ideological entities (Welter, 1966). The parameters that the American women had to comply with in the 19th century constitute the "cult of true womanhood", which is observed in many other cultures characterized by patriarchal values as well. The arguments of Barbara Welter in the article "The Cult of True Womanhood" and Naomi Nkealah in "Reconciling Arabo-Islamic Culture and Feminist Consciousness in North African Women's Writing" reveal the social standards that constitute this image of true woman.

The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues-piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife-woman. Without them, no matter whether there was fame,

achievement or wealth, all was ashes. With them, she was promised happiness and power (1966, p. 152).

Arab feminists are concerned with a number of issues affecting women in their societies, issues such as culture constraints, gender segregation, class stratification, economic exploitation, religious intolerance and political oppression. Two main subjects, however, occupy central stage in Arabo-Islamic feminist discourse, namely, marriage and sexuality (2008, p. 22).

The image of the true woman is seen to be formed by religious impositions both in the East and the West. Sexuality becomes the very tool that determines the way women behave, talk, and wear in public as it is also the apparatus that makes them an object of gaze. On the one hand female sexuality is regarded to be something dangerous and need to be curbed. On the other hand, it is the very source of attraction for the male. Patriarchal power mechanism uses sexuality as both the cause and the method of controlling women, thus creating a gender hierarchy. Submitting to the social codes about sexuality and gender, women are made to live in heavy restrictions.

Transgressing the constraints on women becomes possible by using a dissident language in Nura Amin's story. Lesbian relationship between Abla Safa and the narrator's mother stands out as a challenge to the central position of heterosexuality in patriarchal culture. Rejecting a male as her partner for her emotional and sexual fulfillment, the woman questions the gender roles so long imposed in society. Not concerned with any of the virtues mentioned like "piety" or "purity", she rejects to have the traditional roles of being the wife or the mother. The traditional male control of the female body is replaced with the competence among the female characters. When the narrator's mother sees Abla Safa touching the breasts of the maid, she gets frustrated, pulls her daughter's arm harshly towards their apartment and starts to "toss things around the apartment" (2005, p. 81). Nura Amin's story reverses the power dynamics between men and women by having two female characters competing over Abla Safa and a male character who is unaware of his wife's lesbian relationship. In this respect, Amin's narration very closely echoes what the French writer Monique Wittig (1975) wrote in her subtly construc-

ted book *The Lesbian Body*. As Margaret Crosland also underlines in the introduction to Wittig's book, the female world "is no longer parallel to the male world but evolves and revolves on its own in space and time". Crosland argues that in this female world, "the starting point of life and civilization can after all only be the body" (1975, p. 6). The bodily references in Nura Amin's story, thus, after all constitute a female world where the female body is not suppressed and sexuality not restricted. The female text of Nura Amin now reflects the female reaction to patriarchal limitations. The fact that this reaction is expressed through a lesbian relationship illustrates that Nura Amin shows her reaction by using a theme which is seen as a taboo in culture. Lesbianism is both feared and deliberately ignored as it carries the risk of transgressing social norms. As Gilbert and Gubar (1979) show; however, identifying themselves with what is feared is a way for the women writers to reject the restrictive identity constituted by the values of patriarchal culture: "In projecting their anger and dis-ease into dreadful figures, creating dark doubles for themselves and their heroines, women writers are both identifying with and revising the self-definitions patriarchal culture has imposed on them" (p. 79). The dreadful figure in Amin's story is obviously Abla Safa and the narrator ends the story expressing her wish that one day Abla Safa will cup her breast with her hand and imagines her breast "budding and blossoming in her hand" (p. 82).

The idealized descriptions of lesbianism in Wittig's book and Nura Amin's decision to narrate a lesbian relationship in her story are both valiant responses to the dominance of heterosexuality in mainstream literature. Wittig (1975) defines lesbianism as "a theme which cannot even be described as taboo" (p. 9) in literature, thus her book is seen to have paved the way for discussions of divergent forms of relationships. Nura Amin's stories similarly manage to bring female sexuality into discussion and lesbianism has continued to be chosen as the subject matter by many other writers as well. Wittig (1975) likens women to the Amazons in her book arguing that the "Amazons are women who live among themselves, by themselves and for themselves" (p. 9). In a way, the pages of Wittig's book present an alternative world for women who have long been silenced

in literature. In Amin's story, the male character appears as merely an absence since it is during the times when he is travelling for business that the narrator's mother meets Abla Safa in her bedroom. In this respect both writers challenge the male literature that has disregarded the female presence in literature through certain codes and taboos.

Nura Amin's daring treatment of sexuality in her work finds its counterpart in the Egyptian writer Alifa Rifaat's story "My World of the Unknown". Female sexuality is examined through the attraction of the narrator to a snake, which is rumored to be a female spirit. The narrator, who is also the female protagonist of the story, engages herself in sexual fantasies, again in the absence of the male character - her husband who is always very busy with his work - as she finds her life in her new house dull and monotonous. Given the task of finding them a new place to stay by her husband, the narrator takes the morning train to the new city her husband is ferred. Unable to find emotional fulfillment in her marriage, she fantasizes about finding the true love of her life and thus sees their move to a new city as one of those "many mysteries in life" or "unseen powers in the universe" (2005, p. 61). She narrates her story as a mysterious journey between "this tangible world of ours and another invisible earth" (2005, p. 61). This dream-like atmosphere of the story also shows that the female protagonist creates an alternative world where she does not need her husband to feel emotionally or sexually satisfied. The story is full of descriptions about the sexual awakening of the narrator and her relationship with the snake transforms her into a more vivacious woman: "At last I rose from my place, overwhelmed by the feeling that I was on the brink of a new world, a new destiny, or rather, if you wish, the threshold of a new love" (2005, p. 69). The lesbian relationship between the narrator and the snake reveals the regenerative nature of female sexuality. In the absence of her husband, she responds to the "call" (2005, p. 61) and enters a world of love. Lesbianism in Rifaat's story reveals the possibility of a new reality for the female body constructed by the restrictions about gender and sexuality. As Judith Butler (1999) also points out in *Gender Trouble*, "the lesbian' emerges as the third gender that promises to transcend

the binary restriction on sex imposed by the system of compulsory heterosexuality” (p. 26).

Quite parallel to the analogies of snake in the history of literature, the snake figure in Rifaat’s story is used to rebel against the gender codes in patriarchal literature. The narrator expresses her amazement at finding herself in a sexual relationship with a snake and in doing so uncovers the presence of a new female literature. Through the written word, the female body regains its long rejected presence and reality. Speaking on behalf of the silenced women writers, Monique Wittig (1975) argues that “we possess an entire fiction into which we project ourselves and which is already a possible reality. It is our fiction that validates us” (p. 10). In Alifa Rifaat’s fiction, the descriptions of the elation of the protagonist exemplify this new reality in that her womanhood is validated through her sexual intercourse with the snake. Her body gains a new reality and presence, which makes it possible for her to define her existence through her body:

I felt her as she slipped between the covers, then her two tiny fangs, like two pearls, began to caress my body; arriving at my thighs, the golden tongue, like an *arak* twig, inserted its front tip between them and began sipping and exhaling; sipping the poisons of my desire and exhaling the nectar of my ecstasy, till my whole body tingled and started to shake in sharp, painful, rapturous spasms (2005, p. 73).

The snake symbolism in the mythology and literature of various cultures associates the animal mostly with either sex drive or fertility. In line with Freud, some thinkers find an analogy between the shape of the snake and the penis, thus thinking it as a symbol of sexual instinct. In many African and Chinese cultures where snake is not a symbol of sexuality, it stands for maternity and fertility due to the fear the animal arouses in people (Mundkur, 1983, p. 176). In literature, the most popular snake figure is found in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, in which the snake, or rather the serpent, is portrayed as a seductive figure that misleads Adam and Eve and causes them to sin. The Medusa, likewise, is both an enchanting and horror evoking figure in literature since she mesmerizes those who look at her with

her frightening beauty. The snake in Alifa Rifaat's story continues this tradition of inserting the snake as a tempting character in the narration. When the protagonist first sees the snake in her new house, she feels scared and tells her husband about her. However, she at the same time worries that he may kill the snake. The figure of the snake, in this respect, is quite parallel to the monster figure that Gilbert and Gubar (1979) underline in their book. Women writers who are accepted to be dissident due to their creative potentials are likened to monsters, which is a direct opposite to the angel figure in the house. Like the snake, the monster woman is controlled and subdued. The woman writer however, deliberately chooses to be the monster woman in order to prove her identity both as a woman and a writer. Identifying herself with the frightening figure of the snake, the woman writer challenges the negative connotations that have restricted her creative powers and finds a chance to redefine her identity: "The snake curled round on itself in spiral rings, then tautened its body and moved forward. The sight gripped me; I felt terror turning my blood cold and freezing my limbs. My senses were numbed, my soul intoxicated with a strange elation at the exciting beauty of the snake" (p. 68). Like the Medusa figure in literature, the snake in Rifaat's story has a regenerative power behind its frightening look. As in Nura Amin's story, in "My World of the Unknown", the protagonist transgresses the sexual codes imposed by heterosexuality thanks to her relationship with a snake she addresses as "she". The narrator in Rifaat's story turns into a new woman sexually fulfilled and self satisfied: "At last I rose from my place, overwhelmed by the feeling that I was on the brink of a new world, a new destiny, or rather, if you wish, the threshold of a new love" (p. 69). The female protagonists of both Amin's and Rifaat's stories experience a new womanhood as they redefine themselves through their relationships with a female.

Recreating a new language by writing about their body is an example of doing more than deconstructing male language and socially constructed representations of gender. This is also a regenerative act as it rejects to get stuck with the past. In "The Laugh of the Medusa", Hélène Cixous encourages women writers, who have long

been forced to feel shame about their creative potential, to write about their body as it is something that “must be heard” (1976, p. 880). Writing about the body is a struggle which will reveal how female sexuality is censored as something dangerous and the female unconscious is shaped by the restrictions of patriarchal language: “By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display - the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions” (1976, p. 880).

Nura Amin and Alifa Rifaat’s stories both exemplify how female sexuality is freed of its restrictions in Arab literature. Descriptions of lesbianism in the stories are overt challenges to the conventional female figure in patriarchal literature. The first-person narration in both stories invite the reader to witness the reintroduction of body in female writing. By writing about their sexual drives and bodily needs, women writers manage to show the body as an agent. This at the same time enables the writers to subvert the long held conventions in the representations of women in literature. Since female characters imprisoned in the domestic realm are seen as just women with specific duties at home, they are not portrayed as women with a physical body. Writing about the body, thus entails the reader to engage in a new language. Nura Amin and Alifa Rifaat, together with several other women writers in their countries, become representatives of this new language. They write about how a woman experiences her body and/or what a female body reveals about being a woman. Female body, in this respect, returns the literary world moving the reader and freeing the woman writer of restrictions about writing. Women writers now reject being silenced and speak/write through the body. The new language of these woman writers reestablishes their relation to their bodies, which makes it possible to acknowledge womanhood, female identity, and her subjectivity.



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