

## **Context as the Text Determinant: A Comparative study of Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi's Socio-Political Backgrounds**



**Mohamed Abdulhasan Jasm Bahadlkhafaja**

Iraqi ministry of education

**ABSTRACT:** The current paper considers, for the first time, the most controversial feminist writers, in both the West and the East, the British Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) and the Egyptian Nawal El Saadawi (1931-2021 ) from a feminist comparative perspective. Choosing these two authors is due to their lasting contributions to the development of feminism in their respective societies. This study is undertaken to shed light on the most salient socio-political circumstances that have prompted the considered authors to write in a strikingly similar way despite the fact that they come from very dissimilar cultures, religions and epochs. The present paper, principally by employing theories of the American school of comparative literature, attempts to vividly manifest how Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi, through their writings, have shared with the reader their own experiences and sufferings to give an authentic example of women's misery in general. Such findings reveal that the integration of the authors' personal experiences with their theories enriches their works with conviction and passion, while the French Revolution in the West and the resistance of the British colonizer in many Eastern countries have been vital determinants in the way Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi have written their novels, namely *The Wrongs of Woman*, or *Maria* (1798) and *Women at Point Zero* (1973).

**KEYWORDS:** Wollstonecraft, El Saadawi, socio-political contexts, comparative literature

### **INTRODUCTION**

Dedicating almost their entire lives to the emancipation of humanity in general and women in particular, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin and Nawal El Saadawi have established a new model of writing which has immeasurable bravery in expressing opinions and dealing with various social, economic and political issues. They have dealt with women's oppression and subjugation in their societies and the world at large. They have committed themselves to free women from the manacles imposed by their masculine societies. They have challenged the patriarchal social system that renders women inferiors only because of their sex, and both have been interested in reviving the important role women once played in society and breaking away from the futile conventions that deprived women from their very natural rights.

Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek and Louise O. Vasvári (2013) examine the status quo of the humanities apropos the discipline of comparative literature and the domains of world literature, cultural studies, and comparative cultural studies. They suggest that it is necessary for the scholars of humanities to pay great attention to "contextual" and "evidence-based" work to ensure that "the study of literature and culture [is] a socially, politically, and economically relevant activity of scholarship today" (Tötösy de Zepetnek & Vasvári, 2013, p. 3). Barbara Harlow (1986) also states that the historical contexts, along with the ideological and political circumstances, are essential in shaping the authors' perspectives (p. 502). Accordingly, Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi were not born women's advocates. Both the patriarchal tyranny they have been subjected to within the family and the society, and their high sense of sensibility towards their sex are the major factors that have shaped their feminisms.

Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi believe in the power and the efficiency of their pens in challenging patriarchy. Therefore, their concerns have been essentially directed to their writings to achieve their goals. They have utilized literature, particularly fiction, as a tool to expose the reality of women's status in a patriarchal society and propagate their suggested remedies. Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi share their own experiences and sufferings with the reader to give an authentic example of women's misery in general. Their works can be seen as interpretations of their own experiences which are distinct from their early years. They have fictionalized the economic, social and political aspects of their lives to offer profoundly sensed texts. Hence, the sources that Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi have drawn their writings on are many and diversified.

Since the socio-political aspects are salient in the writings of Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi, the current paper concentrates primarily on these contexts. Socially speaking, the integration of their personal experiences with their theories enriches their works with conviction and passion, while politically, the French Revolution in the West and the resistance of the British colonizer in many Eastern countries, especially in Egypt, have been vital in shaping Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi's writings. The present study will

## Context as the Text Determinant: A Comparative study of Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi's Socio-Political Backgrounds

briefly investigate women's conditions in eighteenth century Britain and Arab women's status in the early twentieth century. Then Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi's social and political experiences will be examined, focusing on the most effective incidents they have experienced throughout their lives.

### Women's Status in the Western and Eastern Societies: Misery as a Shared Concept

With the expansion of civilization and intellectual development, feminists developed a deep sense of grievance against men, as the latter had deliberately withheld from females the possibility of substantiating that their inferiority is only concerned with the physical abilities and not those of the mind. Until the eighteenth century, men had deprived women of all the opportunities for development by prohibiting them from having sufficient education (Bouten, 1922, p. 3). And this is what Hannah More (1809) in her *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* calls a "singular injustice" (p. vii). By "singular injustice", More meant that females were given a very defective education; nonetheless, the "most undeviating purity of conduct [was] expected from them" (1809, p. vii).

In *Al-Untha hi al-Assil (Female is the Origin)*, first published in 1977, El Saadawi claims that in the second half of the twentieth century, historians and anthropologists impartially restudied history since biology, physiology and anatomy had refuted all the previously adopted theories which differentiated between sexes physically, psychologically and mentally (p. 158). Only then some light was shed on the male-female relationship, and scientists corroborated that women had lost their natural position which would have otherwise made them equal to men (El Saadawi, 1977a, p. 158). Cultivation of women, however, preoccupied thinkers' minds in the eighteenth-century England and the twentieth-century Arab world, principally Mary Wollstonecraft (Bouten, 1922, p. 3; Cohen, 2004, p. 586) and Nawal El Saadawi (Royer, 2001, p. 5).

In the eighteenth-century England, no emphasis was placed on the formal schooling of women as they were associated only with "social deportment" and "menial activities" such as sewing and water color painting, rather than any other activity that required intellectual competencies (Cohen, 2004, p. 586; Roberts, 1998, p. 4). On the Eastern side of the globe, Qāsim Amīn (1899) in his influential book, *Tahrir al-Mara'a (Woman Emancipation)*, comprehensively details women's status in the Arab world. Amīn states that when women are compared to men, they are considered nothing; and the way women are treated renders them equal to tools of man's gratification; used when men have desire and thrown out when the libido vanishes (p. 20). And in the light of women's inferiority, he maintains that slavery, ignorance, irrationality and obedience are attributed to women, while freedom, knowledge, rationality and command are all associated with men (Amīn, 1899, p. 20).

Regarding women's cultivation, Wollstonecraft believes that men delineate a kind of education that renders women inferiors and that the alleged mental deficiencies attributed to women can be overcome by affording women the same logical education as men. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* Wollstonecraft states:

... in the education of women, the cultivation of the understanding is always subordinate to the acquirement of some corporeal accomplishment; even while enervated by confinement and false notions of modesty, the body is prevented from attaining that grace and beauty which relaxed half-formed limbs never exhibit. Besides, in youth their faculties are not brought forward by emulation; and having no serious scientific study, if they have natural sagacity it is turned too soon on life and manners. They dwell on effects, and modifications, without tracing them back to causes; and complicated rules to adjust behaviour are a weak substitute for simple principles. (Wollstonecraft, 1792/1993, p. 88)

Nawal El Saadawi (1980) also maintains that the rate of women's "infantile morality" increases in rural areas due to the low standards of living and education.

However, the rate is much less among males as they do not receive the same neglect imposed on females (El Saadawi, 1980, p. 12). El Saadawi adds that with the improvement of the economic and educational standards and with transcending sex disparity women's infantile morality disappears (1980, p. 12). In his description of English women, Brockett (1870) states that children of the poor, of both sexes, were taught in the dame and national schools. And aside from such kinds of schools, girls were sent to the few endowed female schools and female seminaries or finishing schools which were unaffordable for lower class families (p. 98). And as a result of inferior education received by the poorer classes in England, a great number of females were unable to read and write.

Although middle and upper-middle class girls received better education than the poor girls as the former were trained by employed governesses (Brockett, 1870, p. 98), female education is generally deficient when it is compared to that of the males. Regarding the inferiority of female education to that of the males, Brockett comments:

The course of instruction for girls is much narrower, and less productive of mental development than that of the boys; and we all know how defective in every thing, except classical and mathematical training, is the higher education of young men in England. (1870, p. 100)

The idea of offering women a modest amount of rational education was fostered by the prevailing conviction that women's cognitive deficiencies are innate female characteristics. In his views on education, Jean Jacques Rousseau asserts that 'man and woman are not, nor ought to be, constituted alike in temperament and character, it follows, of course, that they should not be educated in the same manner' (as cited in Wollstonecraft, 1792/1993, p. 152). In the light of such male judgments, Wollstonecraft points out

## Context as the Text Determinant: A Comparative study of Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi's Socio-Political Backgrounds

that in a corrupt state of society, like that of the eighteenth-century England, there are many causes that "contribute to enslave women by cramping their understandings and sharpening their senses" (1792/1993, p. 88). She also specifies that the most mischievous one among other causes is the disregard of order (Wollstonecraft, 1792/1993, p. 88).

According to Wollstonecraft, the all-important precept is the orderly manner in which every activity should be done. She explicates that women who receive only a "disorderly kind of education" rarely attend to the precept with that extent of exactness that men, who "from their infancy are broken into method", observe (Wollstonecraft, 1792/1993, p. 88). However, Amīn ascribes women's deteriorated conditions to the autocratic governments that successively ruled most countries, conspicuously in the Arab World. The principle of using absolute force on the part of the ruler to ensure people's total obedience is reflected in the way women are treated by men. By subjugating women, Amīn (1899) argues, men are making up for their weakness in confronting the despotic authority (p. 19).

Since women are characterized with powerlessness, all the spheres of their lives are susceptible to exploitation by men who yearn to prove their powers, at least in front of women. Additionally, women in general are liable to degradation regardless of their positions, i.e. whether they are mothers, wives or daughters (Amīn, 1899, p. 20). On the other hand, El Saadawi in her *Al-Wajh al-Ari lil-Mar'a al-'Arabiyya* (1977b) (literally translated as *The Bare Face of Arabian Woman*; yet, it is freely translated in 1980 as *The Hidden Face of Eve*), argues that the woman portrayed by both old and modern Arabic literature is not the true Arabian woman. Drawing on history, El Saadawi demonstrates that women have preceded men in thinking and acquiring knowledge (1977b, p. 3). However, critics often state that, compared to men, Arabian women have entered the domain of knowledge and education too late (Mahdi & Shamsi, 2011, p. 136).

Several eighteenth-century female writers, such as Mary Astell, Sophia and Catherine Macaulay, preceded Mary Wollstonecraft in writing on women, their rights and their education. However, Wollstonecraft outlined a new radical way for a generation of women who were inspired by her ideas which were not touched by her predecessors (Todd, 2012, p. ix). She was ahead of her day particularly in advocating equal education for all society members, regardless of their sex. She proposes that all children attend school at the age of five and pursue the same curriculum to the age of nine. However, her proposal was based on a class bias as she suggests that "the young people of superior abilities, or fortune," who belong to the middle class, study academic subjects, whereas the working class children are to be taught the appropriate skills which are suitable for their situation (Wollstonecraft, 1792/1993, p. 253).

In the nineteenth century, the Arab world welcomed the age of *Al-Nahada* (Arab renaissance); a social, cultural and intellectual movement that prevailed in most Arab countries in the 1830s as an attempt to revive the Arab identity and the language which were highly affected by Napoleon's invasion of Egypt and then the Ottoman rule that followed (Zerukhi, 2000, pp. 88-89). Arabs tried to restore their identity chiefly by introducing a pure Arabic literature (Zerukhi, 2000, pp. 88-89). During that time, enlightened intellectuals realized the significance of the role women could play in promoting their societies. They also became aware of the importance of enabling women to access the suitable education without which women could not effectively take part in social and cultural activities, and more specifically, in literary production (Mahdi & Shamsi, 2011, p. 136).

Simultaneously, new terms such as *Ta'lim al-Nessa'* (Women Education) and *AlJam'iyat al-Nessa'ya* (Women Associations) appeared and became commonly circulated to signify women-related activities (Mahdi & Shamsi, 2011, p. 136). In addition, at the turn of the nineteenth century, many associations such as *Zahrat al-Ihsan* (1880) (The Flower of charity) and *Bakuret Sourya* (1880) (Syrian First-fruits) (Alnimnim, 2005, November 6, para. 10), and magazines like *Al-Mara'a* (1893) (The Women) and *Yaqdat al-Fatat al-Arabia* (1914) (The Awakening of Arab Girl) emerged (Mahdi & Shamsi, 2011, p. 136). Though specifically dealing with women's issues, these associations and magazines were administered by men. Al-Tah'tawi's *Al-Murshid al-Amin lil Banat wa alBanin* (The Reliable Guide for Girls and Boys) was published in 1872, in which he insisted that female education is of great importance; and that women's minds are equal to those of men's in the terms of thinking and comprehension (2012/1872, pp. 143-146).

Women before the age of *Al-Nahada* were not even allowed to leave home and it was not before 1932 when the first group of women were sent to study in the Egyptian universities from which so many men had graduated before (Mahdi & Shamsi, 2011, p. 136). Amīn (1899) mentions that women's scorn and degradation, specifically in the Arab world, continued to the end of the nineteenth-century as women's conditions started to ameliorate with men's intellectual improvement and the moderation of authority (p. 21). Haddad (1984) also points out that since Amīn's call for women's liberation in *Tahrir almara'a* (1899), the status of women and their role have witnessed tremendous change.

Despite the fact that women's cause has been maligned by some, it has been championed by others, and females have assumed positions in various aspects of life (Haddad, 1984, p. 146).

For El Saadawi, women's emancipation is fundamentally a political case as it does not only pertain to half of the society, it rather touches the whole society. El Saadawi explicates that restraining or ignoring women affects men and children as well and as a result the development of the whole society will be hindered (1977a, p. 152). Increased interest in Arab women's status has coincided with modernity and its impact on the Arab World. Thus, women's condition, role and goals have become "part and parcel

## **Context as the Text Determinant: A Comparative study of Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi's Socio-Political Backgrounds**

of revolutionary ethos that has permeated society" (Haddad, 1984, p. 137). To achieve a kind of parity with the West, liberal people, particularly intellectuals and politicians, tried their best to transform the institutions of the Arab society by implementing various developmental plans that would ensure the required social change (Haddad, 1984, p. 137).

Disgruntled with the fashion in which male writers have depicted women's misery, Arab female writers have embarked on the realm of writing, mainly fiction, to use their own feminine discourse in order to make their voices audible (Gohar, 2015, p. 50). They have employed their writings as means by which they could expose the major factors of women's oppression, which have been concealed in religious, conventional, traditional or cultural forms. On the other hand, because of their sex, western female writers of the 1790s were denied access to public education, and as a result they missed the opportunity of acquiring the necessary training in the classical curriculum, which was exploited by male writers, to form the basis of their writings (Sharma, 1990, p. 4). Limited education along with the growing realization that the novel is the best vehicle through which women may flesh out their personal experiences in the public, gave preference to novel over other genres in accomplishing this job, especially in expressing women's social, economic and political issues (Tompkins, 1961, p. 119).

### **Wollstonecraft's Social Life: The Ambitious Philosopher**

The pioneering feminist, theorist, reformist, educator, novelist and philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft was born in Spitalfields, London on the 27<sup>th</sup> of April 1759. She was the second of seven children of an English father, Edward John Wollstonecraft, the son of a successful weaver, and an Irish mother, Elizabeth Dickson Wollstonecraft (Johnson, 2002, p. xv). In an attempt to set himself up as a gentleman farmer, Wollstonecraft's father uprooted the family on a number of occasions. After several unsuccessful ventures in farming, Edward Wollstonecraft spent the family fortune and became a violent alcoholic, and the family finally settled in Yorkshire in a state of financial and emotional instability (Faubert, 2012, p. 12). Wollstonecraft's wandering later childhood and early adolescence was dominated by a weak, tyrannical father and coupled with her mother's fearful submission to her husband and the privileged status of the elder brother granted to him due to his sexual superiority (Todd, 2012, p. xiii).

These early formative years are of great importance in Mary's social and intellectual development. In a letter she wrote to her intimate friend Jane Arden, Wollstonecraft describes her early domestic life which was an absolute torment: "my father's violent temper and extravagant turn of mind, was the principal cause of my unhappiness" (Todd, 2003, p. 23). During their residence in Beverley in the 1770s, to escape from her father's brutality, her mother's submissiveness and the odious sex discrimination that gave Ned, Wollstonecraft's brother, the upper hand over his sisters, Wollstonecraft established an intense friendships with other girls, especially with Jane Arden (Johnson, 2002, p. xv). However, Wollstonecraft not only envied her brother but also her friend Jane, as Jane's father, a lecturer in science and literature, treated his daughters as if they were men. And this was exactly the kind of father Wollstonecraft was yearning for.

Wollstonecraft had a deep love for her devoted friend Jane Arden and for Beverley and the Yorkshire countryside in general. She later wrote, "when my heart is warm pop come the expressions of [Yorkshire] into my head"(as cited in Jacobs, 2001, p. 25). Wollstonecraft was jealous of Jane's attention to other girls and as a result, she quarreled with Jane. In one of her first letters to Jane Arden, she wrote, "I have formed romantic notions of friendship. - I have been once disappointed: - I am a little singular in my thoughts of love and friendship; I must have the first place or none" (Johnson, 2002, p. 16). However, Wollstonecraft retreated from her attitude towards Jane and forgave her (Jacobs, 2001, p. 23).

Unlike their brothers who studied "what all boys learned-- literature, classical languages and mathematics", Wollstonecraft and her sisters received lessons in sewing, adding up simple numbers and pleasing a spouse (Jacobs, 2001, p. 20). Notwithstanding, Wollstonecraft was taught some math by a worthy philosopher from Derbyshire. She also borrowed books and educated herself as shown in her letters to Jane which abounded with literary references to Pope, Dryden and Gray (Jacobs, 2001, p. 24). Furthermore, the early formative years Wollstonecraft spent with her family can also be seen as a schooling period. However, throughout these years she received bitter lessons of sex inequality and women's subjugation. Wollstonecraft's family left Beverley in 1775 to return south where Wollstonecraft's life turned into gloominess (Johnson, 2002, p. 16).

The next phase in Wollstonecraft's life began in Hoxton, which is located on the outskirts of London. In Hoxton, an intimate relationship was formed between Wollstonecraft and Mr. Clare, a neighboring reclusive scholar and clergyman and his friendly wife. Not only did the Clares invite Wollstonecraft to come and study but also to live with them, a suggestion which Wollstonecraft accepted immediately. At that time, Wollstonecraft's education developed from randomly chosen books in Beverley to follow Mr. Clare's regimen of instruction (Jacobs, 2001, p. 26). One day through this nurturing relationship, Mr. Clare took Wollstonecraft to meet Francis (Fanny) Blood, another girl taught by Mr. Clare. It was love at first sight, Wollstonecraft declared (Jacobs, 2001, p. 26). Wollstonecraft's meeting with the engaging Fanny lightened the gloominess she faced after leaving Beverley (Johnson, 2002, p. 16).

Fanny was pretty, smart, delicate, talented and superior to anyone Wollstonecraft had ever met. Godwin in the *Memoirs*, first published in 1798, describes the relationship of her first love as "a connection . . . originated about this time, between Mary and a person of her own sex, for whom she contracted a friendship so fervent, as for years to have constituted the ruling passion of her

## Context as the Text Determinant: A Comparative study of Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi's Socio-Political Backgrounds

mind" (Godwin, 2001/1798, p. 50). Like that of Mr. Clare, Blood's acquaintance contributed a lot to ripen the immature natural abilities of Wollstonecraft. In a letter she composed to Jane Arden, Wollstonecraft described their friendship and how she loved Fanny "better than all the world beside. . . . To live with this friend is the height of my ambition", she added "[Fanny] has a masculine understanding, and sound judgment, yet she has every feminine virtue" (as cited in Faubert, 2012, pp. 14-15).

It seems that Wollstonecraft's resorting to intimate female relationships serves as a compensation for the sullied love and affection she received within her family. Continuing his adventures, Edward Wollstonecraft plagued his family with dire financial woes when he moved the family to Laugharne and Wales in 1776-7 and then back to Walworth, a suburb of London. Due to the financial deterioration of her father, Wollstonecraft resolved to take a job as a paid companion to Mrs. Dawson, of Bath. It was one of the few professions conventionally available for middle-class women (Johnson, 2002, p. xv). In *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787),

Wollstonecraft comments on her repulsive employment:

Few are the modes of earning a subsistence, and those very humiliating. Perhaps to be an humble companion to some rich old cousin, or what is still worse, to live with strangers, who are so intolerably tyrannical, that none of their own relations can bear to live with them, though they should even expect a fortune in reversion. It is impossible to enumerate the many hours of anguish such a person must spend. (1787, pp. 69-70)

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Wollstonecraft abundantly writes about the subject of women's unequal access of worthy jobs in the eighteenth-century Britain. She devoted chapter IX of the *Vindication* (entitled: Of the pernicious effects which arise from the unnatural distinctions established in society) to discuss middle-class women's inability to cope with the financial problems due to a dearth of decent careers. Wollstonecraft states how women of little means and insufficient education are pushed into prostitution to win their daily bread:

Business of various kinds, they might likewise pursue, if they were educated in a more orderly manner, which might save many from common and legal prostitution. Women would not then marry for a support, as men accept of places under government, and neglect the implied duties; nor would an attempt to earn their own subsistence, a most laudable one! Sink them almost to the level of those poor abandoned creatures who live by prostitution. (Wollstonecraft, 1792/1993, p. 229)

Her self-esteem which does not allow her to live upon another's bread and her great ambition to become a teacher induced Wollstonecraft to establish a school for girls in Newington Green in 1784 (Pennell, 1885, pp. 23-24). The period of two years she spent teaching in her own school left "an indelible mark on *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*" (Johnson, 2002, p. 26) which is the first book that established her as an author. In 1787, Wollstonecraft worked as translator, reader, and later as reviewer and editorial assistant for Joseph Johnson, an influential eighteenth-century London bookseller and publisher who published most of her books (Wollstonecraft, 1792/1993, p. xxxv). During her work with Johnson she madly fell in love with Henry Fuseli, a married painter in Johnson's circle of writers and artists. She proposed to live with him and his wife in a threesome, but was refused; she fled to Paris as she was tormented by her passion (Faubert, 2012, p. 68).

Her moving to France, in fact, was not only to move away from Fuseli but also to witness the progress of the French Revolution at first hand (Tone & Jon, 2009, p. i). Out of a complicated relationship with Fuseli, she fell in love and lived with the American Gilbert Imlay, the father of her first daughter Fanny whom she named after her closest friend Fanny Blood (Faubert, 2012, p. 68). Wollstonecraft attempted suicide twice because of Imlay's infidelity (Tone & Jon, 2009, p. i). After the long agony of her relationship with Imlay, Wollstonecraft established a satisfactory relationship with William Godwin (Todd, 2012, p. ix), the father of her second daughter Mary, writer of the well-known gothic novel *Frankenstein* and later to become Shelley's second wife. Wollstonecraft died of repercussions resulting from childbirth on the 10<sup>th</sup> of September and was buried in St. Pancras Churchyard (Faubert, 2012, p. 69; Tone & Jon, 2009, p. i).

The relationship between and later on the marriage of Wollstonecraft and William Godwin brought the couple notoriety which resulted in several diatribes. Interestingly, the facts Loomis (1802) introduced in *Letters of Shahcoolen*, a series of letters written to discredit Wollstonecraft's radical ideas and unveil their harmful consequences in America (Todd, 2012, p. xiii), were taken from Godwin's (1798) *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. In the *Memoirs*, Godwin frankly publicized Wollstonecraft's private life, particularly her unconventional relationship. Loomis's *Letters of Shahcoolen*, however, was an attack not on Wollstonecraft's literary works but on her character, who was believed to be "waging war against everything feminine", (Todd, 2012, p. xiii).

### Wollstonecraft's Political Activism: "A Hyena in Petticoats"

The seventeenth-century France produced some champions of equality, such as Matie de Gournay and Francois Poullain de la Barre, who represent the theory of sexual equality which is based on the denial of purely sexual differences rather than physical which may be traced back to Plato (Bouten, 1922, p. 6). Such ideas were widely supported and circulated during the period of the far-reaching social and political upheaval that preceded the French Revolution and the revolution itself which lasted from 1789 until 1799. This period had an immense influence on Wollstonecraft who, during that time, grafted women's cause on the larger cause of

## Context as the Text Determinant: A Comparative study of Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi's Socio-Political Backgrounds

humanity as its consequence (Bouten, 1922, p. 22). For that reason, from a primarily educational writer, an interest she effectually wrote about, Wollstonecraft shifted her attention onto the political issues of her time (Tone & Jon, 2009, p. xii).

At the beginning of her work with the influential philosopher Joseph Johnson, Wollstonecraft had translated many of his books and she also started writing children's books; nonetheless, her attitudes changed after meeting many of the liberal writers whom Johnson used to invite. Wardle (1947) notes that Wollstonecraft "gradually assimilated their [liberal writers'] opinions and broadened her own" (p. 1000). Moreover, through her friendship with Johnson, Wollstonecraft met a circle of radical writers and artists such as Thomas Holcroft, William Blake, Henry Fuseli and Anna Latitia Barbauld (Faubert, 2012, p. 68) with whom she exchanged views on various political issues. However, it was in France where Wollstonecraft's reputation and ambitions were transformed (Tone & Jon, 2009, p. xii). From an "obscure school ma'am dabbling in fiction", Wollstonecraft became for many of her contemporaries the "symbol of women's potentialities- and for others, a shameless vixen" (Wardle, 1947, p. 1000), or a "Hyena in petticoats" (Johnson, 2002, p. 1).

As the French Revolution was brewing at the time, it has become a vital determinant in Wollstonecraft's activism. During the early phase of the revolution, a group of radical writers in Britain were exchanging views on education and human rights, and "so were preparing the public for Wollstonecraft's feminist ideas" (Todd, 2012). Other enlightened authors, such as Bacon, Locke, Adam Smith, Voltaire, Leibniz, Buffon, Hume, Monboddo, Hutcheson, Kant, Joseph Priestley and Richard Price also had their salient influence on Wollstonecraft's literary works, especially her two *Vindications* (Knott & Taylor, 2005, p. 31). However, Jean Jacques Rousseau permeated Wollstonecraft's thought from 1788 on. During her residence in France at that time, as one of the members of the British expatriate colony in Paris, Wollstonecraft wrote her *Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution* (1794), which was seen as a completion of Rousseau's great scheme by which she was inspired.

However, Rousseau and Wollstonecraft's views of women's social possibilities were almost "diametrically opposed" (Bouten, 1922, p. 68) for Rousseau deliberately eliminated the female half of the society in his scheme *The Social Contract*.<sup>1</sup> *Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution* was clandestinely shipped chapter by chapter from France to Wollstonecraft's London publisher. The work "interwove a detailed chronicle of the early stages of the revolution with a triumphalist account of Enlightenment's advance across Europe and America" (Knott & Taylor, 2005, p. 31). Alas, Wollstonecraft experienced only the beginning of these days due to her premature death. Mary Wollstonecraft, as one of the Jacobins, was distinguishable from her contemporaries in the light of her radical ideologies which espoused the French Revolution, which has often been identified as the defining moment of modernity (Taylor, 2011, p. 187).

Not only did Wollstonecraft welcome the French Revolution but also most of Johnson's circle of writers who saw the revolution as "a major change in the course of human affairs" (Tone & Jon, 2009, p. xii). They also thought of it as the "realization of a providential plan for human history" (Tone & Jon, 2009, p. xii). On the 1<sup>st</sup> of November 1790, when Edmund Burke, an Irish conservative thinker, published his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in which he vehemently condemned the revolution. His polemical *Reflections* was immediately followed by a flurry of reactions, "an estimated four hundred pamphlets were published in the war of words during the decade that followed the revolution in France" (Taylor, 2011, p. 187). Impressively enough, at the end of same November 1790, Wollstonecraft published her *Vindication of the Rights of Men* which is a riposte to Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Frazer, 2011, p. 603; Taylor, 2011, p. 187).

Not only did she become a well-known author to radical intellectuals such as William Godwin and Thomas Paine (Tone & Jon, 2009, p. xii), the publication of *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* "established Wollstonecraft as a major force among English radicals" as well (Faubert, 2012, p. 22). It was the first response to Burke's polemical work and then it was followed by Paine's well-known response, *Rights of man*, published in 1791 (Faubert, 2012, p. 22), and William Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* in 1793 (Taylor, 2011, p. 187). These thinkers embraced and derived their arguments from the French Revolution promises represented by liberty, equality, democracy and fraternity from which "eighteenth century speculation derived its colour" (Bouten, 1924, p. 153; Taylor, 2011, p. 187).

Wollstonecraft called into question the possibility of having certain innate qualities or intelligence that grants some people special rights. In the *Vindication of the Rights of Men* she negates the belief that "the class system reflects a natural hierarchy of people" which justly appoints particular people as leaders of others (Faubert, 2012, p. 3). She also proposes that virtue cannot flourish without equality among all members of the society (Wollstonecraft, 1792/1993, p. 59). The spirited reception and the success of the *Vindication of the Rights of Men* convinced Wollstonecraft to write her second *Vindication of Woman* in 1791, which was published by Johnson in 1792 to largely positive reviews (Faubert, 2012, p. 22). Enlarging on the political tenets adduced in the

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Social Contract* seeks to address:

How can we be free and live together? Or, how can we live together without succumbing to the force and coercion of others? We can do so [according to Rousseau] by submitting our individual, particular wills to the collective or general will, created through agreement with other free and equal persons. (Friend, 2004, 2.c. Rousseau, para. 7)

## Context as the Text Determinant: A Comparative study of Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi's Socio-Political Backgrounds

*Vindication of the Rights of Men* (Guralnick, 1977, p. 155), Wollstonecraft applies these principles to women's social conditions in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

Margaret King (1991) also points out that the American declaration of all men's equality and the French declaration of man's rights motivated Wollstonecraft in 1792 to claim for women the same natural rights (p. 237). In the *Vindication of the Rights of*

*Woman*, Wollstonecraft indicates what Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1953) and Nawal El Saadawi in *The Hidden Face of Eve* (1982) have later propounded.

Wollstonecraft debates that women are not born "intellectually weaker, vainer, and more conniving than are men, but that culture makes them so" (Faubert, 2012, p. 3).

In an attempt to articulate her own emotions and propagate her feminist ideas by attracting as many readers as possible, particularly women, Wollstonecraft decided to fictionalize the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in her last novel *Maria, or The Wrongs of Women* (Poovey, 1982, p. 111). However, reformulating her insights in the *Vindication of Woman* has been a wearisome task. Poovey (1982) states that Wollstonecraft has had difficulty in reconciling her intended purpose with the genre which here shapes the structure of the work (p. 112). *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman* represents "the most progressive stage in [Wollstonecraft's] revolutionary feminism" (Goodman, 2015, p. 13), as she has been certain that such genre has the ability to articulate her own emotion and in the same time attract a female audience (Poovey, 1982, p. 111).

Mary Wollstonecraft worked so faithfully to serve humanity in general and women in particular. Nevertheless, she has been subjected to a severe chastisement in return (Pennell, 1885, p. 1). Although the sexual freedom which Wollstonecraft experienced in her life "influenced men of the French Revolution on the subject of women's rights" (Agustín, 2007, p. 133), by the end of the century a loud chorus of condemnation reverberated through Wollstonecraft's "intellectual reputation as well as her personal character" (Taylor, 2003, p. 247). Her radical feminist ideas, however, were transferred into "libertine propaganda" (Taylor, 2003, p. 247). Consequently, Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, however, was received with shock, horror, and derision when it was first published early in 1792 (Janes, 1978, p. 293). Due to her controversial ideas, Wollstonecraft has been ridiculed and dubbed with various epithets.

Horace Walpole's epithet in which he called her "a hyena in petticoats" has been the most notorious one (Johnson, 2002, p. 1). Richard Polwhele went even further to "index her under 'P' for prostitute" (Johnson, 2002, p. 1). The Reverend Polwhele in *The Unsex'd females* (1798), provides his own criticism against Wollstonecraft. He considers her early death in childbirth as "a judgment against her perverted femininity and against the philosophy of her life" (Todd, 2012, p. xiv). Twentieth-century detractors such as Richard Cobb, Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia Farnham supported the ideas of Polwhele as well. Cobb accused Wollstonecraft of "malevolence and social destructiveness" (Todd, 2012, p. xiv), while Lundberg and Farnham (1947) also accused her of "perverted sexuality" (pp. 941-944).

Like Polwhele, these twentieth-century critics were convinced that Wollstonecraft's premature death was "a culmination of a perverted attempt to turn people from the decencies of life" (Todd, 2012, p. xiv). In *Love, Morals and the Feminists*, Constance Rover (1970) also notes that Wollstonecraft's associations with Godwin and Imlay augmented the association between feminism and immorality in the public mind (pp. 14-17). The campaign of chastisement Wollstonecraft has received is essentially attributed to her feminist theories which she has spared no effort to promote. Her efforts to encourage females to be independent thinkers and to dissociate themselves from the feminine traits that keep them subjugated by males were regarded as sexual perversion in her age.

### El Saadawi's Social Life: The Discomfort of a Non-conformist Woman

A pioneer voice of feminism in Egypt and the Middle East (Abouzeid, 2016, p. 537), gynecologist, psychiatrist, theorist, reformist, educator and novelist Nawal El Saadawi was born on the 27<sup>th</sup> of October 1931 in Kafir Talha, a small village outside Cairo, Egypt. Like Wollstonecraft, she was born in a huge family. The second among nine children, Nawal spent her childhood and early adolescence in this rural area where she used to see the green fields and the fascinating nature. Her mother was an upper class woman; her father, however, was the only son to his poor mother whom El Saadawi greatly admired for her bravery in publically rejecting women's subjugation (Golley, 2010, p. 131). El Saadawi's grandmother used to courageously challenge *al-Umda* (the head of the village) and brandish her hand in his face, angrily crying out against his orders: "we are no slaves" (El Saadawi, 1992, p. 7). Nonetheless, she lacked the medium (i.e. education) wherein she could propagate what she believed in. Raised by parents of two different classes, El Saadawi is always proud to mention that she was very fortunate to grow up in an atmosphere that encouraged education and knowledge.

El Saadawi usually shows her gratitude to her father who offered her some kind of freedom and encouraged her to pursue her education (Golley, 2010, p. 132). Her acknowledgment to her father rather than her mother is rather an "alliance with working class positions" (Golley, 2010, p. 132). Issues of class divisions which are vividly echoed in her own family which consisted of poor peasants, have always been El Saadawi's focus since her childhood (Golley, 2010, p. 132). El Saadawi has been more sympathetic

## Context as the Text Determinant: A Comparative study of Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi's Socio-Political Backgrounds

towards her paternal relatives rather than her upper class maternal ones, and such inclination is present in all her literary works as she usually associates women's status with that of the lower class people and slaves who have been deprived of their essential rights. Her family was looking forward to moving up the social ladder from the lower class of the peasantry to the higher class of the governmental employees.

Her father was the first in the village to attain higher education and take off the traditional rural costumes to put on the suit and tie as he was appointed "General Controller of Education for the Province of Menoufia in the Delta region to the North of Cairo" (El Saadawi, 2006b, pp. 7-8). In her early years, El Saadawi saw women's suffering and their struggle for survival in a society that crushed women under patriarchal conventions. In her description of the women of her society El Saadawi states, "beneath the smiles of the women I could detect the sadness, the tears that had dried over the years, the gloom which enveloped memories of their wedding night" (as cited in Aptheker, 2009, p. x). In 1937, when Nawal was only six, she underwent circumcision, a polite term for genital mutilation.

All females were subjected to circumcision regardless of their social class and the place where they lived, i.e. in a big city or in the country. El Saadawi describes the horrible moments of circumcision, "I screamed with pain despite the tight hand held over my mouth, for the pain was not just a pain, it was like a searing flame that went through my whole body" (El Saadawi, 1980, p. 8). Nightmares, similar to the painful incident of circumcision, have followed El Saadawi, especially during the period she spent in the rural areas as a medical doctor. She says that circumcision destroyed her childhood once and for all, and it "deprived [her] during [her] youth and for many years of married life from enjoying the fullness of [her] sexuality and the completeness of life" (El Saadawi, 1980, p. 9). She adds that such experiences "can only come from all round psychological equilibrium" (El Saadawi, 1980, p. 9).

Due to its profound physical and psychological impact on women's lives, El Saadawi has depicted the circumcision experience in her examined novel, *Woman at Point Zero*. Her protagonist, Firdaus, undergoes circumcision in a very young age. For Firdaus, not only the physical sensation is lost in genital mutilation but also the psychic bond with her mother is broken. The participation of her mother in the circumcision changes the way Firdaus sees her mother, i.e., the mother-daughter relationship is vitiated. In 1942, Nawal obtained a primary school certificate with excellent grades; however, none of her family was delighted with her success. What vexed El Saadawi was the duplicity and the sex-discrimination with which her family treated her (El Saadawi, 2009, p. 155). With such sexual division, El Saadawi realized that gaining high grades or any other achievement was of no use for females and she had to find a more effective way to prove herself.

Like Wollstonecraft, the bewildering question El Saadawi frequently asked was "why was [her brother] treated better than [she] was in all ... matters?" (El Saadawi, 1980, p. 9) Her brother had complete freedom while she was confined to home cooking and cleaning, only because she was a girl. Differentiation between male and female was very common in almost all families disregarding their class or the level of education. Although El Saadawi's parents, as educated people, tried to eliminate any kind of sex discrimination and prevent their son of dominating his sisters, she used to feel that, in practice, it was not the case, as her brother was granted privileges by birth. He used to beat her, seize her toys and tear up her dolls (El Saadawi, 2006b, p. 36); nonetheless, she used to violently rebel whenever such differentiation took place (El Saadawi, 1980, p. 10).

The discriminatory events between El Saadawi and her brother firmly implanted the idea of sex discrimination in her mind. She repeatedly asked her parents why her brother had such superiority despite the fact that she was doing better than him at school. Nonetheless, her parents could not provide a reasonable answer to her question. The only answer she received was "It is so ..." to which she would retort, "Why should it be so?" and again the answer was unchanged, "Because it is so ..."; El Saadawi adds that when she was in an obstinate mood, she would repeat the question again and again, and when her parents grew impatient, they would say "He is a boy, and you are a girl". They would finally attribute the case to religious reasons and justify "God said it should be so" (El Saadawi, 1980, p. 10; El Saadawi & Wilmuth, 1995, p. 436).

El Saadawi has passed through three failed marriages. The first husband was her classmate Ahmed Helmi, a physician and an activist who sturdily stood against the British colonizer. They have a daughter, Mona Helmy, who like her mother is a writer, poet, and activist (El Saadawi, 2016, p. 154). El Saadawi divorced Helmi in 1956, as she realized that he was trying to dominate her (El Saadawi, 2000, p. 12; Newson-Horst, 2010, p. ix). Her second husband was an Egyptian millionaire who used his masculine power to prevent El Saadawi from writing. He used to tear up her papers and throw them out of the window (El Saadawi, 2006b, p. 77); however, she refused to give up and insisted to continue her writings which was everything for her. She finally petitioned for separation to gain her freedom. El Saadawi is greatly inspired by the words her father reiterated "if the price of freedom is expensive, the price of slavery is even more costly" (El Saadawi, 2006b, pp. 81-82).

In 1946, El Saadawi married Sherif Hetata, who was imprisoned for thirteen years due to his political behavior. Hetata, a medical doctor, a writer and the translator of many of her well-known works into English, became her lifelong husband and companion until 2010, when they divorced for undeclared reasons. They have a son, Atef Hetata, who is a film director whose interest is tackling social problems (El Saadawi, 2016, p. 154). For El Saadawi, being a divorced woman in a society like Egypt is to be stained with shame for the rest of her life; however, El Saadawi looks at divorce as the complete freedom and emancipation from subjugation if the husband is the typical oppressor who enslaves his wife (El Saadawi, 2006b, p. 81). Though the dominating



## Context as the Text Determinant: A Comparative study of Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi's Socio-Political Backgrounds

traditions and conventions have exhausted El Saadawi, they have been the main motives that have prompted her to seek radical social changes.

### El Saadawi's Political Activism: The "Simone De Beauvoir of the Arab World"

From her early life, El Saadawi found the freedom in going out especially the times she spent at school. She used to ask questions, discuss various matters, listen to people and try to help the poor as much as she could. The plight of women and their struggle, particularly against the patriarchal institutions and conventions, represented the spark for El Saadawi's revolution. She set women's emancipation as her ultimate goal and as a chastisement many Arab critics have dubbed Nawal El Saadawi "Simone De Beauvoir of the Arab World" (Al Wassil, 2009, July 9). She has been called with such epithet due to the controversial ideas she has propounded. According to El Saadawi, the oppression experienced by females is economic, psychological and sexual in the same time while males' oppression, on the other hand, is only a socio-economic one. She adds that women are oppressed by authority, husband and the patriarchal family as well (El Saadawi, 2006a, p. 25).

In marriage, for instance, women are physically, psychologically and mentally subjugated and this subjection is firmly supported by moral, religious and legal conventions. These conventions in turn allow men to marry more than one wife, divorce their wives with or without reason, insult and beat them and confine them to housework. Marriage certificate, El Saadawi (2006b) proposes, is no more than a contract by which women are legally possessed by men (p. 25). One of the contradictory concepts adopted by the patriarchal society which El Saadawi, like Wollstonecraft in her *Vindication of Woman* (1792/1993, pp. 203-204), severely criticizes is the duplicity in dealing with women's bodies. She argues that the commercial value of a female's body contradicts its moral and religious values. Where the female body is disrobed in advertisements and commercial promotions, it should be veiled according to religious and moral conventions (El Saadawi, 2006d, p. 30).

The other contradictory aspect, Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi agree on, is honor and women's chastity. Dishonorable deeds can be carried out by both men and women; nonetheless, the punishment is received only by women. Sometimes men are even proud of their illegal, immoral and irreligious sexual relationships (El Saadawi, 1990b, pp. 3941). Moral principles, El Saadawi points out, should be followed by all people regardless of their sex, color or social class. When chastity is expected from one race or class and other races and classes are exempted, it indicates that chastity is a law imposed by the patriarchal social system rather than a moral value as they perpetually claim (El Saadawi, 1990b, p. 39). El Saadawi, from an early age, was also aware of the social responsibilities exclusively imposed on women as the "carriers of the family honor", which is, in fact, the honor of the society as a whole (Abouzeid, 2016, p. 538).

Patriarchal social conventions such as virginity, honor, circumcision, degradation and subjugation by both family and husband are all invested against women in order to render them inferiors. This unreasonable way of treating women has urged El Saadawi to expose such issues in almost all her works in an attempt to reveal the hypocrisy and duplicity of patriarchy. El Saadawi believes that all societies are in need of authentic facts about women to replace the false concepts traditionally attributed to women, particularly what men have unjustly written about them all over the world. She adds that her travel to most countries and her acquaintance with developed, underdeveloped, capitalist and socialist societies as well as reading history and literature (El Saadawi, 1990a, p. 9) have interacted with her own experience as a woman to contribute to forming a deep insight about women's oppression and how it should be encountered.

El Saadawi's experiences in domestic and professional life, in which she has been close to those troubled and oppressed people, have had persistent effect on her mind. Consequently, she has successfully interpreted these incidents into her diversified literary works. Her practice as a medical doctor as well as the period she spent in her exile in the West "anchor her views in a humanism that pierces the veneer of exploitative practices in several cultures" (Royer, 2001, p. iv). From 1963 until 1972, El Saadawi occupied the post of the direct general for public health education. In addition to her position as a governmental executive, she was appointed the chief editor for *Health Magazine* in Cairo which was also closed down due to its instigative materials (El Saadawi, 2016, p. 155).

It was during this time that she went to America to pursue her postgraduate studies in Public Health at Columbia University in New York in 1965-6 (El Saadawi, 2016, p. 155). This period doubtlessly offered El Saadawi the opportunity to see and experience western women's freedom firsthand. In her nonfiction work *Al-mara' Wa alJins* (1969) (*Women and Sex*), she uncovered the crimes committed against women's bodies, such as circumcision and defloration. Owing to her frank writings on sexuality and introducing feminist ideas, El Saadawi was dismissed from her position as the direct general for public health education (Malti-Douglas, 1995, p. 7). Being jobless, she resorted to writing as the only medium through which she could articulate her resentment and chastise the oppressive patriarchal social system in a similar way to that of Wollstonecraft.

While conducting a research on neurotic women in Qanatir Prison in Egypt, where she worked as a psychiatrist, El Saadawi met Firdaus only one night before her execution; she later became the heroine of her novel, or rather her creative non-fiction (Cooke, 2007, p. vii), *Woman at Point Zero*. Writing this novel, in particular, widened the campaign of censure against her even further (Selim, 2004, p. 237). El Saadawi's contentious presentation of such matters engendered so much controversy that she lost her job

## Context as the Text Determinant: A Comparative study of Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi's Socio-Political Backgrounds

and then she had to go to Lebanon both for protecting herself from Islamist conservatives and reprinting her book which became widely read throughout the Arab world. Nawal El Saadawi has been the first Arab woman to discuss women's sexuality which is intentionally avoided by most writers of both sexes (Accad, 1987, p. 42). She has been extraordinarily courageous to frankly and scientifically deal with customs and taboos such as "honor and virginity, work and education for women, marriage, polygyny, divorce, and finally the importance of sex and women's right to orgasm, as well as the very touchy subject of genital mutilation" (Accad, 1987, p. 42).

Delving in such sensitive topics by a woman in a traditional society like that of Egypt has given El Saadawi's writings the power to shock, move and inspire. However, her controversial ideas have set her the target of detractors. Malti-Douglas (1995) notes that "no Arab woman's pen has violated as many sacred enclosures as that of Nawal El Saadawi", and as a result "[i]s it any wonder that many an Arab male intellectual has dismissed her in my presence as at best an opportunist and at worst a whore" (p. 3)? Due to her bold writings, El Saadawi envisions herself as if she were living behind invisible walls and exiled within her own country; nonetheless, she does not surrender. She often confirms that no authority in the world has the ability to wrest the pen from her hand and she will continue putting her thoughts on paper, although the patriarchal institutions have an utter control over all channels that might reach the general public. El Saadawi's uncompromising views led her to prison in 1981 as she criticized the Egyptian president Anwar El Sadat (El Saadawi, 2000, p. 12; Malti-Douglas, 1995, p. 7). El Saadawi's imprisonment actually offered her firsthand experience of women's resistance to the violence of the authority, and fascinating insights into the formation of female community.

Malti-Douglas (1995) adds that El Saadawi is usually accused of ruining not just the daughters of the Nile but those of the entire Middle East (p. 3). Her husband, Sherif Hetata, also mentions that the media has been against El Saadawi since she does not abandon what she believes in and does not comply with the authority (1992, p. 9). Because of her steadfast positions, many accusations have been imputed to her such as inducing to debauchery and moral corruption, opposing Islam and its rules, writing for the West which is against Egypt and Arab countries, and the odd accusation that she is encouraging women in Holland to divorce their husbands (Hetata, 1992, p. 9)! Besides, Saiti and Salti (1994) state that since the publication of her first semi-fictional work *Muthekkarat Tabibah* (1958; translated in English as *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, 1988) up to the present day, El Saadawi has been under attack by everyone "from local politicians and religious figures to readers and literary critics" (p. 153) as no female oppressor is exempted from her censure.

El Saadawi debates that females oppression is practiced on multiple levels; hence, women "want liberation from national oppression, from colonial or international exploitation, from legal oppression, from sexual oppression and from family oppression" (El Saadawi & Beall, 1989, p. 34). El Saadawi's political attitudes in particular and the sensitive issues she frequently addresses render her as one of the most defiant writers whom critics usually avoid. And that is why very little has been written both in the West and the East about a widely read author whose works have been translated into more than forty languages some of which are taught in many universities around the world (Amin, 2016, p. 158). The most available studies on El Saadawi are merely scathing attacks (Malti-Douglas, 1991, pp. 111-113; Saiti & Salti, 1994, p. 172; Smith, 2007, p. 59). In consequence of such facts, the current study primarily relies on El Saadawi's own books to investigate her socio-political background about which she has amply written in most of her theoretical and fictional works.

The political activism of El Saadawi's father and his scathing censure of corruption, autocracy and the oppression of the colonizer and its sycophants, have had a massive influence on El Saadawi's political position. Her father belongs to the generation of the 1919 Revolution which advocated the importance of education for Arab people in general and females in particular. It also concentrated on disregarding the unreasonable conventions that distrust women's mental abilities and consider them loins that should be kept behind the walls (El Saadawi, 2006b, p. 59; 2009). El Saadawi's father was known for his opposition to the ruling class and his support of the poor who have been suffering from ignorance and diseases. Her father believed that the optimum solution was to change the regime through a revolution led by the oppressed people themselves (El Saadawi, 2006b, pp. 268-269).

Like Wollstonecraft, El Saadawi herself witnessed the impact of poverty during the years of the British colonial empire. She has lived among the poor of her village and observed their misery firsthand. In her description of the situation of the local children, El Saadawi writes:

In [the villages] of Menouf and Kafr Tahla I often saw children who were blind, or with one eye open and the other closed, or with a white spot creeping over the black pupil, or with swollen eyelids exuding pus and with flies all over their faces. (as cited in Aptheker, 2009, p. x)

In 1951, when El Saadawi was a medical student in Cairo University, she took part in the patriotic demonstrations organized by students against the British occupation. She describes her feelings during these enthusiastic moments, "I am walking among them without body, name, father, mother and family, they are my family, my parents and my home" (El Saadawi, 2006b, p. 299). El Saadawi once said, "Fighting for more justice, more freedom, and more love--that is my identity" (as cited in Royer, 2001, p. i)! Despite the fact that women were expressly prohibited of taking part in any social protests or political activities at that time, El Saadawi and some of her classmates broke the heavy metal door which was shut to prevent female students from joining the protest. El Saadawi relates that during this transcendent moment an anti-colonial consciousness blended with a nascent feminist one, and:

## Context as the Text Determinant: A Comparative study of Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi's Socio-Political Backgrounds

the hundreds of [women's] arms became a single powerful arm that twisted the metal, snapped it with the strength of anger building up since the day they were born, with the force of a dream suppressed in childhood, with the power of a great love imprisoned in the chest, with all the pent-up hatred against doors, and chains, and locks, with all the hope of a coming freedom.(El Saadawi, 2009, p. 287)

In her *Muthekarati Fi Sijin al Nisaa* (2000) (My Memoir in Women's Prison), El Saadawi comments that her unforgivable crime is being a free woman at a time that has room only for slaves, and she has the ability to think while the authority tries to invalidate any role that intellectuals try to play in the society (p. 11). Her parents were liberated, and freedom has flowed in her blood since her childhood. She has seen her mother rebelling against the military authority of her father and against her husband when he shouted at her. She has also seen her father rebelling angrily against the authority and the British. And she has heard her paternal grandmother singing against oppression, poverty and the gloomy years (El Saadawi, 2000, p. 11). El Saadawi bravely rejected male domination and refused to conform to patriarchal rules which were strictly followed in her society.

When her older brother tried to slap her, she lifted her hand higher and slapped him; and when her first husband tried to subjugate her, she divorced him. Furthermore, when the health minister asked her to choose between obedience and dismissal, she said "dismissal" and lost her position (El Saadawi, 2000, p. 12). El Saadawi criticizes the exploitative global trend of consumerism and the modern capitalist world which is directed principally against women (Ladele, 2016, pp. 136-137). In her speech against globalization, El Saadawi states that if globalization means spreading the Western ideas, values and culture only, she stands against it and considers it domination: "the powerful dominate the weak, and they call that globalization"(as cited in Royer, 2001, p. iv).

However, El Saadawi has appealed for a global resistance wherein all efforts unify to come up with an effective power that can change. Being dissident, according to El Saadawi is "to struggle, to liberate oneself and others in one's family, in one's community, locally and globally" (El Saadawi, 2006c, p. 116). She also insists that local and global struggle should not be separated; it is better to be called "glocal struggle" (El Saadawi, 2006c, p. 116). In the forward to *A Daughter of Isis* (2009), El Saadawi's autobiography, Bettina Aptheker maintains (2009) that Nawal El Saadawi "embodies the international struggle for women's liberation" (p. ix). In 1988, El Saadawi's name appeared on the death list of the Islamic Fundamentalists' due to her bold propounding of crucial social issues, and consequently she was forced to flee Egypt.

El Saadawi moved to America where she taught in Duke University and the University of Washington in Seattle as well (El Saadawi, 2016, p. 156). She returned to Egypt in 1996 and as an attempt to move the stagnant water, break the restrictions and urge for political reformations, she stood as a candidate in the 2005 presidential election in Egypt (El Saadawi, 2016, p. 157). Although she was forced to withdraw her candidacy, her attempt resulted in amending the 76<sup>th</sup> article of the electoral legislation which opens the door for more than one candidate to compete for the president position (Khalil, 2005, para. 7).

El Saadawi was not so much interested in her medical profession which is, according to El Saadawi, unable to remedy people's major sufferings. She believes that sickness and poverty are related to "politics, to money and power, that medical practice was removed from our everyday life" (El Saadawi, 2009, p. 352). El Saadawi usually states that she has nothing left to fight with but her pen; with which she can defend herself, her freedom and human's freedom all over the world. She also considers her pen as the only medium through which she can express the misery of the poor, women and slaves (El Saadawi, 2000, p. 12). For El Saadawi:

Writing became a weapon with which to fight the system, which draws its authority from the autocratic power exercised by the ruler of the state, and that of the father or the husband in the family. The written word for me became an act of rebellion against injustice exercised in the name of religion, or morals, or love.(El Saadawi, 2009, p. 352)

## CONCLUSION

In reading a novel penned by either Wollstonecraft or El Saadawi, the reader will not fail to sense the plight the authors have as they write. The passions and depths of the novelists' own reactions to their lives stock all the essential ingredients of their dramatic fictions. However, Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi's novels' power to fascinate has not only been attributed to the effectiveness of the incidents that shaped their writings, but also to the impassioned way they demand social justice and defy categorization. Despite the fact that feminism has been nascent in their place and time, Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi have strongly responded to this movement or, more accurately, they have led feminism through their theoretical and fictional writings.

Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi have had a prodigious inclination for education from their early childhood at a time when education for females had been neglected (El Saadawi, 1980, p. 12; Faubert, 2012, p. 13). Both have studied philosophy, medicine and history (El Saadawi, 1986, p. 11; El Saadawi & Wilmuth, 1995, p. 437; Faubert, 2012, p. 13), although Wollstonecraft was almost self-educated (Faubert, 2012, p. 13). And delving into history, in particular, has offered them vast knowledge about women's high position in ancient societies and the rights they once enjoyed. Their awareness of such historical facts and their acquaintance with other sciences have consolidated their social and political activism whereby they struggle to restore women's extorted rights.

## Context as the Text Determinant: A Comparative study of Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi's Socio-Political Backgrounds

Living among oppressed people has given Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi an exact image of the reality of their societies which they have desperately wanted to improve. The aims they have set for themselves have kept them intimately attached to people whom they have defended. The circumstances under which these authors have lived in their early lives with their families have given them first-hand experience of several feminist matters about which they have later written. Such issues include sex discrimination and disrespect for females within both the micro (family) and the macro society, their lack of rational education, the dearth of decent jobs and the trap for women that is marriage.

Because of their daring method of criticism and the controversial ideas they have propounded, especially in criticizing rules and traditions, Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi have been chastised fiercely and most of their works have been banned in an attempt by the authorities to prevent their works any effects they might have on society members, principally on women. However, these two writers have remained steadfast in their struggles against patriarchal system and its oppressive institutions. Their nonconformity has pushed them to lead tormenting lives in masculine societies that strictly follow traditions and conventions. They have combined their proficiency in writing with their awareness of the gender-based oppression to introduce subversive texts which have the potential to improve females' conditions.

### REFERENCES

- 1) Abouzeid, A. (2016). [Review of the book A daughter of Isis: the early life of Nawal El Saadawi, by N. El Saadawi]. *Gender and Development*, 17(3), 537-540. doi:10.2307/27809256
- 2) Accad, E. (1987). Freedom and the social context: Arab women's special contribution to literature. *Gender Issues*, 7(2), 33-48. doi:10.1007/BF02933925
- 3) Agustín, L. M. (2007). *Sex at the margins: Migration, labour markets and the rescue industry* London & New York: Zed Books.
- 4) Al-Tahtawi, R. (2012). *Al-murshid al-amin lil banat wa al-banin* [The reliable guide for girls and boys]. Cairo: Dar Al-Kutub Al-Massri. (Original work published 1872).
- 5) Al Wassil, A. (2009, July 9). Simone de Beauvoir Iil al-arabiya: Intisar al-muthakaf amam al-harb wa ideololjjiya wa al-mawta [Simone de beauvoir to Arabic: The victory of educated to write against war and the ideology of the dead]. 14997. Retrieved from <http://www.alriyadh.com/445163>
- 6) Alnimnim, H. (2005, November 6). Al-sowt al-nessa'i al-adabi yassdeh muntho karnein [The literary feminist voice has been warbling for the last two decades]. Retrieved from <http://www.alittihad.ae/details.php?id=36520&y=2005>
- 7) Amin, O. (2016). Introduction: Why is Nawal El Saadawi banned? In N. El Saadawi (Ed.), *Diary of a child called Souad* (pp. 1-24). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- 8) Amīn, Q. (1899). *Tahrir al-mara'a* [Woman emancipation]. Cairo: Al-Turqi Librery.
- 9) Aptheker, B. (2009). Forward. In N. El Saadawi (Ed.), *A daughter of Isis: The autobiography of*
- 10) Nawal El Saadawi (pp. pp. ix-xii). London & New York: Zed Books Ltd.
- 11) Bouten, J. (1922). *Mary Wollstonecraft and the beginning of female emancipation in France and England*. Amsterdam: Kruyt.
- 12) Bouten, J. (1924). *Mary Wollstonecraft and the beginnings of female emancipation in France and England*. *Neophilologus*, 9(1), 153-153. doi:10.1007/BF01508600
- 13) Brockett, L. P. (1870). *Woman: Her rights, wrongs, privileges, and responsibilities*. Cincinnati: L. Stebbins.
- 14) Cohen, M. (2004). Gender and 'method' in eighteenth-century English education. *History of Education*, 33(5), 585-595. doi:10.1080/0046760042000254550
- 15) Cooke, M. (2007). Forward. In N. El Saadawi (Ed.), *Woman at point zero* (pp. vii-viii). London & New York: Zed Books Ltd.
- 16) El Saadawi, N. (1977a). *Al-untha hi al-assil* [Female is the origin]. Beirut: Institution of Arabic Studies.
- 17) El Saadawi, N. (1977b). *Al wajah al 'ari lil mar'a al 'arabiyya* [The bare face of the Arabian woman]. Cairo: Madbouli.
- 18) El Saadawi, N. (1980). *The hidden face of Eve: Women in the Arab world* (S. Hetata, Trans.). London: Zed Books.
- 19) El Saadawi, N. (1986). *Muthakarati fi sihin al nisa'a* [My memoir in women's prison]. Cairo: Dar Almustekbel Alarabi.
- 20) El Saadawi, N. (1990a). *Dirasat 'n al-mara'a wa al-rajul fi al-mujtama'a al-arabi* [Studies on woman and man in the Arab society]. Beirut: Institution of Arabic Studies.
- 21) El Saadawi, N. (1990b). *Woman and Sex* [Almara' wa aljins] (4th ed.). Alexandria: Almustaqbel.
- 22) El Saadawi, N. (1992). *Ma'raka jadida fi qadhiyat almara'* [New battle in the woman's issue]. Cairo: Sina.
- 23) El Saadawi, N. (2000). *Muthekarati fi sijin alnisaa* [Memoirs from the women's prison]. Beirut: Dar Aladab.
- 24) El Saadawi, N. (2006a). *Al mara'a wa al sira'a al nafssi* [Woman and psychological struggle] (Vol. 2). Cairo: Madbouli Librery.
- 25) El Saadawi, N. (2006b). *Awraqi hayati* [My papers are my life] (Vol. 2). Cairo: Madbouli Librery.

## Context as the Text Determinant: A Comparative study of Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi's Socio-Political Backgrounds

- 26) El Saadawi, N. (2006c). Creativity, dissidence and women. *European Institute of the Mediterranean*, 14(18), 113-118. Retrieved from [http://www.iemed.org/publicacions/quaderns/14/qm14\\_pdf/18.pdf/view](http://www.iemed.org/publicacions/quaderns/14/qm14_pdf/18.pdf/view)
- 27) El Saadawi, N. (2006d). *Qadyat al mara'a al masriya al syasiya wa al jinsya* [The political and sexual case of the Egyptian woman] (Vol. 2). Cairo: Madbouli Library.
- 28) El Saadawi, N. (2009). *A daughter of Isis: The autobiography of Nawal El Saadawi* (S. Hetata, Trans.). London & New York: Zed Books Ltd.
- 29) El Saadawi, N. (2016). *Diary of a child called Souad* (O. Amin, Trans.). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- 30) El Saadawi, N., & Beall, J. (1989). Empowering women for gender equity. *Agenda Feminist Media*, 5(1989), 33 doi:10.2307/4065647
- 31) El Saadawi, N., & Wilmuth, M. E. (1995). A feminist in the Arab world. *Women & Therapy*, 17(3-4), 435-442. doi:10.1300/J015v17n03\_17
- 32) Faubert, M. (2012). Introduction. In M. Wollstonecraft (Ed.), *Mary, a fiction and the wrongs of woman, or Maria* (pp. 11-71). Canada: Broadview Press.
- 33) Frazer, E. (2011). Mary Wollstonecraft and Catharine Macaulay on education. *Oxford Review of Education*, 37(5), 603-617. doi:10.1080/03054985.2011.625165
- 34) Friend, C. (2004). Social contract theory. *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved from <http://www.iep.utm.edu/soc-cont/>
- 35) Godwin, W. (Ed.). (2001). *Memoirs of the author of a vindication of the rights of woman*. Canada: Broadview Press Ltd. (Original work published 1798)
- 36) Gohar, S. (2015). Narrating the marginalized oriental female: Silencing the colonized subaltern. *Acta Neophilologica*, 48(1-2), 49-66. doi:10.4312/an.48.1-2.49-66
- 37) Golley, N. A. (2010). *Reading Arab women's autobiographies: Shahrazad tells her story*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- 38) Goodman, R. T. (Ed.). (2015). *Literature and the development of feminist theory*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- 39) Guralnick, E. S. (1977). Radical politics in Mary Wollstonecraft's "a vindication of the rights of woman". *The Eighteenth Century*, 18(3), 155. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/openview/ba18b0df83f22a8a164cc93e6e51810d/1?pqorigsite=gscholar&cbl=1818415>
- 40) Haddad, Y. Y. (1984). Islam, women and revolution in twentieth-century Arab thought. *The Muslim World*, 74(3-4), 137-160. doi:10.1111/j.1478-1913.1984.tb03451.x
- 41) Harlow, B. (1986). From the women's prison: Third world women's narratives of prison. *Feminist Studies*, 12(3), 501-524. doi:10.2307/3177910
- 42) Hetata, S. (1992). Introduction. In N. El Saadawi (Ed.), *Ma'raka jadida fi qadhiyat almara'* [New battle in the woman's issue] (pp. 8-11). Cairo: Sina.
- 43) Jacobs, D. (2001). *Her own woman: The life of Mary Wollstonecraft*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.
- 44) Janes, R. M. (1978). On the reception of Mary Wollstonecraft's: A vindication of the rights of woman. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 39(2), 293-302. doi:10.2307/2708781
- 45) Johnson, C. L. (2002). *The Cambridge companion to Mary Wollstonecraft*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 46) Khalil, M. (2005). *Intikhabat al-ri'asa al-massrya: Tarshihat haqaqet aghradeha* [Egyptian presidential election: Candidacies achieved their aims]. from <http://elaph.com/Web/ElaphWriter/2005/8/84746.htm?sectionarchive=ElaphWriter>
- 47) King, M. (1991). *Women of the renaissance: Women in culture and society series*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press.
- 48) Knott, S., & Taylor, B. (Eds.). (2005). *Women, gender, and enlightenment*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- 49) Ladele, O. A. (2016). Globalisation and African women's bodies: Some fictional representations. *International Journal of English and Literature*, 7(8), 135-142. doi:10.5897/IJEL2015.0735
- 50) Lundberg, F., & Farnham, M. F. (1947). *Modern woman: The lost sex*. New York: Harper & Brothers.
- 51) Mahdi, M., & Shamsi, W. (2011). *Al adab al nisa'y mustalah yata'arjah bayn mua'yd wa mua'ariz* [Arabic feminist literature is swinging between support and refusal]. *Contemporary literature studies*, 7(2), 135-152. Retrieved from <http://fa.journals.sid.ir/ViewPaper.aspx?id=150957>
- 52) Malti-Douglas, F. (1991). Nawal al-Sa'dawi and the escape from the female body: From handicap to gender & Nawal al-Sa'dawi and empowerment through medicine. In F. Malti-Douglas (Ed.), *Woman's body, woman's word : gender and discourse in Arabo-Islamic writing* (pp. 111-144). Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- 53) Malti-Douglas, F. (1995). *Men, women, and God (s): Nawal El Saadawi and Arab feminist poetics*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

## Context as the Text Determinant: A Comparative study of Wollstonecraft and El Saadawi's Socio-Political Backgrounds

- 54) More, H. (1809). *Strictures on the modern system of female education: With a view of the principles and conduct prevalent among women of rank and fortune*. Princeton: Samuel West.
- 55) Newson-Horst, A. (2010). *The essential Nawal El Saadawi: A reader*. In A. Newson-Horst (Ed.), . London & New York: Zed Books.
- 56) Pennell, E. R. (1885). *Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin*. London: WH Allen.
- 57) Poovey, M. (1982, January). *Mary Wollstonecraft: The gender of genres in late eighteenth century England*. Paper presented at the *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* (Vol. 15, No. 2, pp. 111-126). Duke University Press.
- 58) Roberts, L. H. (1998). *Young Mary Wollstonecraft's schooling and its influence on her future pioneering agenda for the rational education of women*. England: ERIC.
- 59) Rover, C. (1970). *Love, morals and the feminists*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Books.
- 60) Royer, D. (2001). *A critical study of the works of Nawal El Saadawi, egyptian writer and activist*. New York: Edwin Mellen Press.
- 61) Saiti, R., & Salti, R. M. (1994). *Paradise, heaven, and other oppressive spaces: A critical examination of the life and works of Nawal El-Saadawi*. *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 25(2), 152-174. doi:10.1163/157006494x00059
- 62) Selim, S. (2004). *The novel and the rural imaginary in Egypt, 1880-1985*. London & New York: Taylor & Francis Group.
- 63) Sharma, A. (1990). *The autobiography of desire: Jacobin women novelists of the 1790s*. (Doctoral dissertation, The Pennsylvania State University). Retrieved from <http://elibrary.ru/item.asp?id=6648555>
- 64) Smith, S. (2007). *Interview with Nawal El Saadawi (Cairo, 29th January 2006)*. *Feminist review*, 85(1), 59-69. doi:10.1057/palgrave.fr.9400322
- 65) Taylor, B. (2003). *Mary Wollstonecraft and the feminist imagination* (Vol. 56). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 66) Taylor, N. (2011). *Jane Hodson, language and revolution in Burke, Wollstonecraft, Paine, and Godwin*. *Modern Philology*, 108(3), 187-190. doi:10.1086\_658998
- 67) Todd, J. (2003). *The collected letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- 68) Todd, J. (2012). *Mary Wollstonecraft: An annotated bibliography* (Vol. 39). London & New York: Routledge.
- 69) Tompkins, J. M. S. (1961). *The popular novel in England, 1770-1800*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- 70) Tone, B., & Jon, M. (2009). *Introduction*. In M. Wollstonecraft (Ed.), *Letters written during a short residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (pp. i-xlii). New York: Oxford University Press.
- 71) Tötösy de Zepetnek, S., & Vasvári, L. (2013). *About the Contextual Study of Literature and Culture, Globalization, and Digital Humanities*. In S. Tötösy de Zepetnek & T.
- 72) Mukherjee (Eds.), *Companion to Comparative Literature, World Literatures, and Comparative Cultural Studies* (pp. 3-35). New Delhi: Cambridge UP India.
- 74) Wardle, R. M. (1947). *Mary Wollstonecraft, analytical reviewer*. *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 62(4), 1000-1009. doi:10.2307/459145
- 75) Wollstonecraft, M. (1787). *Thoughts on the education of daughters: With reflections on female conduct, in the more important duties of life* Available from [https://books.google.iq/books?hl=ar&lr=&id=GbZYAAAACAAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA1&dq=Thoughts+on+the+Education+of+Daughters:+With+Reflections&ots=vxX\\_Sh5VIu&sig=cp6mKG\\_IZg6MZdaulbxbdIMXwjg&redir\\_esc=y#v=onepage&q=Thoughts%20on%20the%20Education%20of%20Daughters%3A%20With%20Reflections&f=false](https://books.google.iq/books?hl=ar&lr=&id=GbZYAAAACAAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA1&dq=Thoughts+on+the+Education+of+Daughters:+With+Reflections&ots=vxX_Sh5VIu&sig=cp6mKG_IZg6MZdaulbxbdIMXwjg&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=Thoughts%20on%20the%20Education%20of%20Daughters%3A%20With%20Reflections&f=false)
- 77) Wollstonecraft, M. (1993). *A vindication of the rights of men and a vindication of the rights of woman*. New York: Oxford University Press Inc. (Original work published 1792)
- 78) Zerukhi, I. (2000). *Musahamet al-ameer abdukkadir fi al-nahda al-arabyia [Prince abdukkadir's contribution to modern Arab renaissance]*. *Revue Sciences Humaines*, N/A(14), 87-96. Retrieved from <http://revue.umc.edu.dz/index.php/h/article/view/1131>