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رئيس مجلس الأمناء
د/ حسن القلا

Altarfehya area - Badr City - Cairo
Tel. :(+202) 28650400
HotLine: 19592
E-mail : info@buc.edu.eg

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(Re)writing the History of the Female Subaltern: Radwa Ashour's *Siraaj* (2007)

Mona Salah Eldin ELnamoury
Department of English
Faculty of Arts, Tanta University, Egypt
Email: mona_elnamory@art.tanta.edu.eg

Abstract: This paper claims that the Egyptian academic, activist, translator, and writer Radwa Ashour, uses the novel as a medium to subvert colonialism in the way Edward Said proposed in *Orientalism.* In *Siraaj*, beautifully translated by Barbara Romaine, Ashour, on the one hand, reverses the colonial narrative and creates vivid female indigenous characters. On the other, she alienates the female characters that are attached to colonialism or support it. Despite their inability to directly speak back to the oppressors, the female subalterns change the history of subalterneity by taking part in a revolution against a colonially supported Sultan that is oppressed at the end. With the Urabi revolution looming as background event, Ashour obviously pinpoints that the lack of political consciousness and vision, expressed in the island's widespread illiteracy, doom the revolutionary acts of the subalterns. The study shows how Third World female writer Radwa Ashour subverts colonialism and the marginality of the "female subaltern" by escaping the trap of "representing" the subaltern; hence further marginalizing them, but slowly paving a rough uncertain way for them to be seen and heard in their variety and mystery. Moreover, by alienating the colonial or colonially supported female characters in the novel, she writes back to the empire. Pinpointing illiteracy as one cause of subalternity is another finding of the study.

Keywords: Said, Spivak, female subaltern, failed revolutions, feminism, political illiteracy.

Introduction:

Radwa Ashour (1946-2014), an Egyptian academic, activist, translator and writer, died after a long battle with cancer and left behind an impressive body of work including novels, short story collections, academic writing, literary criticism, and translated works. She was a strong advocate for the independence of universities in Egypt and a founding member of the 9th March Movement in 2004 which fought for the autonomy of universities from political influence.

Siraaj is the story of Amina, a widow and her son Said; inhabitants of an imaginary island off the east coast of Africa at the end of the nineteenth century during the peak of European imperialism. The story begins with Amina awaiting the return of her son Said who went out to the sea as a sailor like his father and grandfather. Because the sea had taken both father and husband among many others of the island's inhabitants, Amina is afraid.

Said is unharmed. He has simply missed his ship from Egypt and is looking for another way to return home. However, his return is far from swift as the British fleet surround Alexandria, bombard the city, and Said flees to the countryside like many other Egyptians after Urabi's defeat. In the countryside, he spends a year with a farmer's family that treat him like a son, and finally returns to the island to find that the British have already intervened in his homeland by building a camp on the far side. Said's journey, however, hardens him to the facts of life and broadens his perspectives. More importantly, it implants the spirit of revolution in this young man, preparing him to be a torchbearer later on when the island revolts against the totalitarian sultan.

However, revolt comes at the end. The slaves, the poor inhabitants, some of the sultan's own servants all rise against the palace freeing the prisoners in the dungeons. Victory is at hand, but the British interfere bombarding the rebels and killing the revolution. Almost all of the characters die except Amina who is seen alone at the end retelling the story of what happened to the dead residing in the stars.

This paper claims that in *Siraaj*, Ashour defies colonialism through her experimental game in imagining an island under the British influence and connecting it to Egypt at the moment of colonization through the character of Said. On the one hand, by highlighting several various female subalterns, their growing acts of defiance despite their constricting misery, spirited revolution and humiliating deaths, Ashour turns them into haunting figures; that is to say, she makes them heard in her arena of resistance: the novel. On the other hand, Ashour's delineation of the representatives of imperialistic and/or totalitarian powers is another act of post-colonial defiance in writing. As much as the female subalterns are made vivid in *Siraj*, the colonizers are turned into a fictive 'subaltern', a general unidentified entity in the same way the subalterns have usually been drawn in colonial texts. Not only that but the scene in which queen Victoria is portrayed, not as the "Mother Empress", but as a fat monarch leading a country where everything is turned upside down, reverses the usual stereotypes in the colonial texts. Being a female Third World activist writer, Ashour succeeds in hearing the female subalterns in her novel and giving them the chance to be heard away from what Rosalind Morris calls the "masculine-imperialist" ideology which is said to produce "the need for a masculine-imperialist rescue mission." (Morris 11) Typical stereotypes about Third-World women include powerlessness, ignorance, and submission. White First-World feminists should not speak for Arab women; only an Arab woman can authentically represent her sisters. This is what Ashour aims to achieve in *Siraaj*.

The novel is based on a technique of a network of traditional and local enjoyable stories through which two things happen: characters are unfolded to the readers in an interesting way and a great story-telling tradition is revived, brought back expertly from oblivion. As Ashour notes, "stories captivate me; a woven web of womb and history" (*Sayyadu* 10). This is more than a writer's craftsmanship, it is Ashour's technique to combat colonialism by preserving an old tradition of stories from erasure. By highlighting the subaltern and bringing it from the margin to the center,

Ashour emphasizes the importance of these stories. Consequently, it is no coincidence that the novel ends with Amina retelling their story. In times when the killing machine has the upper hand, honoring the dead by continually telling their stories becomes crucial.

The Subaltern:

The term "subaltern" has evolved significantly within postcolonial studies field. Originally denoting a low-ranking British military officer, it was adopted by Antonio Gramsci to represent the marginalized social groups oppressed by dominant classes. Gramsci focuses on the wide range of subaltern identity to include all those subordinated by class, caste, age, gender and other factors. (Louai 5). Later, the Subaltern Studies group further expanded the term to encompass all oppressed subjects, including the working class, peasantry, women, and tribal communities. The term became renounced when Gayatri Spivak wrote her seminal work “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in 1988.

Spivak's starting point when it comes to the study of the sub-altern was the incident of the suicide of a seventeen-year-old Indian woman in her father's humble apartment on the onset of her menstruation. She chose that timing to deny any accusation of illicit pregnancy. Spivak confesses that this incident of utter failure of communication led her to the belief that the subaltern cannot speak. Spivak's various meditations on the female subaltern have spawned a series of critiques and responses that raise certain central questions in any discussion of the subaltern. In “Feminism in /and Postcolonialism, Deepika Bahri questions Spivak’s major starting point, “'Who can speak and for whom?' ' Who listens?' 'How does one represent the self and others?' Such questions point to heated issues concerning representation and essentialism; the relationship between First-World intellectual and the Third-World object of scrutiny." (Bahri 199)

Historically silenced groups, like women and racial minorities, weren't reflected in traditional colonial accounts. This lack of representation extends beyond literature and history, impacting political, economic, and legal arenas. People outside the dominant narrative have been denied a voice, essentially spoken for by those in power. Spivak's reference to the imperial intervention in the Indian Sati practice signifies her dissent of the colonizer's using the image of women to prove a point of superiority over the colonized. Western women do the same in what is called "maternal imperialism" The woman question, as Bahri says, remains a battleground for politics and any talk about democracy and civic rights, "Gender issues are thus inseparable from the general project of postcolonial criticism. " (201)

In her preface to *The Hidden Face of Eve* Nawal Elsaadawi, Egyptian writer and activist, argues that the oppression and exploitation of women together with the social pressures they are under do not pertain to Middle Eastern or Arab women only. In fact, Elsaadawi believes that a universalist theory of women's oppression should note that such oppressions

" constitute an integral part of the political, economic and cultural system, preponderant in most of the world-whether that system is backward and feudal in nature, or a modern industrial society that has been submitted to the far-reaching influence of a scientific and technological revolution. (Saadawi Preface) In fact, Saadawi warns that under the capitalist system the problems of working women increase and complicate; women start to face whole new punch of problems complicated by the loss of support they used to be afforded in the extended family system.

So, engaging with Gayatri Spivak's ideas of the subaltern, Amina, Tawadud, Uum Latif and Uum Ibrahem, the would have been subalterns, are *made* the central figures in the tale. On the other hand, Lady Alia the Sultan's lawful wife, Queen Victoria the head of the empire, Prince Mohamed's British wife and Princess Salma of Zanzibar; that is to say colonial or colonially supported characters, are pushed into the margin. Notably, the novel shows us several other types of the subalterns; namely, the sultan's harem of who the reader knows nothing, the slaves of who the readers have glimpses in the character of old lonesome Ammar, and the pearl divers to who Amina's late husband belong. The rich and complicated tapestry of the subaltern in *Siraaj* supports Spivak's opinion that the subaltern should not be stereotyped. In fact, there is an inherent difficulty in representing the subaltern other simply because it is not a homogeneous or unbroken unity; rather, it is divided, various, and complex. Each has a specific voice and a story to tell; hence, the importance of the stories in the novel, or the individual little dramas. In a nutshell, in *Siraaj*, not only is the subaltern shown to be hybrid and complicated, but the roles of the marginalized subaltern vs the central hegemonic are reversed resulting in a subversion of the colonial texts.

While Ashour makes the existence of colonialism instantly felt in Egypt as seen in the ruthless bombardment of Qaitbey's Citadel by the British navy, on the island, boots of the imperial colonizer are not directly felt by the masses, but, rather the dominant social, political, religious and economic pressures of the local sovereign; the reader keenly sees the sultan at a loss, "On his accession to power, they had come demanding that he refrains from setting up a base on the island for any other country, and he had agreed. But they wanted a legal document, and how could he refuse, with no power to resist them? The choice was a hard one, both alternatives bitter: if he said no, they would depose him, and if he said yes, they would control him." (Ashour *Siraaj* 11)

The Sultan practices diplomacy, knowing that he has to win the British to his side or else bear with their hostility; exactly in the same way that many countries behave now towards the USA. The islanders lack the political perspective to understand the significance of the British base on the island. Only at the end do the characters realize that their miserable reality as subalterns has been enforced and reserved by the alliance of their dictator with colonialism.

Colonialism is subverted in the novel and so are the totalitarian regimes that allow colonial powers to suck the blood of the peoples. Ashour examines how dictatorships use their power to mystify information and control people for their best interests. For instance, this is manifested in the decree prohibiting coffee on a religious basis.

> On his return, Sa'eed brought with him those coffee grains and when Amena opened the sack and saw the green grains, she didn't recognize them and so she asked hi
>
> He answered,
>
> It is coffee.
>
> Coffee?
>
> Yes.
>
> But it is interdicted.
>
> By whom?
>
> The judge outlawed it claiming it is a heresy …
> It was announced on this island that coffee is prohibited by the Sultan …
>
> (74)

Is it still valid to talk about colonialism when almost every colonized nation has become an ex-colonized one? The answer is self-clear; Palestine for one is still colonized and Palestinians are being erased continually in the same way the Native Americans were erased. More important, though, there is the neo-colonialism that is predating on the same nations nowadays. So, what the ex-colonized can do according to Che Givara is to "eliminate the foundations sustaining imperialism" that is to say to work on the reasons that keep the ex-colonized nations in utter dependence. (Young 21) I would identify illiteracy as the most important reason that keeps the colonized/excolonized in their miserable position. In *Siraaj* illiteracy is tackled subtly in the story of Tawadud who, ironically enough, works as the messenger/connector among the different parties of the surge. Her existence with what she represents of ignorance and missed chances foreshadows the islanders' lack of political awareness and hence the failure of their revolution.

The "Novel" as an Arena of Resistance:

According to Boehmer's analysis of Said's post-colonial theories that were basically formulated in *Orientalism* and other works, Said believes that there is a basic distinction between colonized and colonizer and that the natives are being ruled partly through being represented " in censuses, newspapers, anthropological studies, and the law as weak-willed, inferior, secondary, effeminate, and unable to rule themselves." (Boehmer, 351) Literature is no exception and Edward Said seems to propose that imperialism has been the scaffolding of the European novel. Orientalism, thus, is a way of controlling, a systemic discipline to further

study/scrutinize/objectify the orient/ \east/\Palestine/\Africa/Third world…etc.

However, the novel as a genre may serve as an arena of resistance if the novelist acquires the right historical reading and writing tools. "He names such resistant reading *contrapuntal*. It is the kind of reading that brings about colonization and its resistance simultaneously. (Mcloed 147) In the terminology of music contrapuntal is two or more musical tunes happening at the same time probably answering one another. So, Edward Said would suggest that postcolonial writers and critics find ways of answering the colonial oppressor back by exploiting the struggles over meaning which take place within texts of the empire themselves." (Boemer 352) According to Boemer, Said seems to argue that postcolonial writers can subvert the feelings of inferiority and unworthiness and "appropriate" the "cultural vocabulary" of the dominant texts and myths of colonial Europe to serve their own ends. (Ibid) By doing that, they ridicule and refute how they themselves have been represented in the canonical colonial texts. Moreover, crucially, in so doing they express their own subjectivity, their own perceptions of the world. "As writers and critics, therefore, they exercise not only aesthetic but political agency. They use texts as tools that have worldly, anti-colonial effects, that change hearts and minds"(Ibid). Ashour does this in her own way: she concerns herself with the colonizing moment and how it affects the colonized on different levels either in historical Alexandria, or on the imaginary island. Ashour records her refusal and resentment of colonialism by going back to the colonization moment marginalizing the colonizer for the sake of the colonized subalterns. Colonization is delineated as one of the insurmountable forces facing the characters; totalitarian regimes, illiteracy and poverty being equally distressing and oppressing.

To return to the specific point related to this research, Gayatri Spivak adapts Edward Said's theories and takes it to another direction of the heterogeneity of the subaltern. Oppression crushes some people more than others. Thus, to Spivak the female subaltern is more crushed than others. Spivak,

> has often insisted on the specific *gendered* forms which mark out heterogeneous colonial experiences and forms of understanding. She has also noted the extent to which post colonialist forms of analysis have, in their many blind spots to gender issues, taken up traditional masculinist positions. (Boehmer 353)

Siraaj is an attempt to make the subaltern the subject of his/her own history. It is as if Ashour wants us to see the roots of the repeated failure: illiteracy, ignorance, inequality between men and women, slavery. History tends to deliberately ignore what it thinks of as trivial dramas of unimportant people though in reality it is the fine social fabric of life especially at its lower levels. As will be shown in more detail shortly, in *Siraj*, Ashour dares to make the female subalterns themselves try to speak

for themselves. She makes them the driving forces of the tale; heroines in a particular sense. Amina is the main character who starts and ends the narrative. Though she begins as a traumatized widow, she embraces the rebels' defiance against the sultan and is the one who keeps the history of the crushed subalterns alive through her continuous narration. The illiterate Tawadud is the connecting force among the different groups of the subaltern rebels in their surge; chosen particularly for her free daring spirit. The Egyptian wife, Uum Ibrahem keeps the house during her husband's absence fighting with Urabi. She also takes the abandoned traumatized stranger Said and keeps him safe as one of her own children. Even Uum Latif, Lady Alia's dog-like servant, awakens to the bitter reality of her servitude when her nephew Hafez is thrown into the dungeons. Only after Hafez is in danger, she dares to express her defiance. Thus, the novel pictures "unimportant" women who take strong action, move the story forward despite their confiscating positions. In all her ideological stances, Ashour holds on into being a third-world female citizen. Her heritage in both has been stifled as she admits,

> I write, partly because, in the process of decomposing and recomposing which writing involves, something might appear, make sense, become a little less unintelligible. And, also, because the free play of the imagination and the exercise of the power to create, to draw characters, to construct space and temporality, to effect shifts, transitions and changing time speeds, to manipulate words and sentences, is a reappropriation of a threatened geography and a threatening history. But more important, writing is a retrieval of a human will negated. (Ashour "Eyewitness" 88)

Only in writing does Ashour restore the direly needed balance. The world that urges her to write is a world of inequality and split; a split that comes from the discrepancy between the people of the West and the people of the non-West. The novel, then becomes her arena of resistance.

Because *Siraaj* embodies Ashour's attitude towards the West and its alliances with third world dictatorships, it does not only convey a new kind of maternal historical memory that records and stores the heart-rendering human details behind the male-dominated historical statements, but it portrays the female subaltern in a vivid way making it the subject rather than the object. In this way, Ashour draws the imperialistic West as distant, and sub-alternated though definitely still aggressive. She subverts the West's celebration of itself as the subject of post-colonial narratives, and revives the female subaltern to be full humanity.

However, in light of feminism, Ashour's stances are subtly subversive. She sees that women's rights cannot be achieved except after the whole society has gained its rights of stability and freedom. Feminism and post-colonialism join together in certain areas of interest. "The conjunction may be partly explained by the fact that both approaches champion resistance to entrenched singular forms of authority (patriarchy, empire)

'from below' or from positions of so-called weakness. (Boehmer 343) With that said, one needs to consider what Ashour says about her stance as a feminist writer. Though definitely a feminist, her stance rests on a wider occupation: the plight of human injustice, particularly the regional plight of being culturally and economically occupied.

> I am not a fierce supporter of feminist literature, but I don't negate whoever brings it into play. What is important as far as I am concerned is the application: would it be a smart discussion that takes into consideration the artistic and aesthetic values of the text? Or would it be a mere light discussion that categorizes the woman writer and believe women writings should only be a burst of emotions or only be about the writer's relationship with men? What I mean is that we should widen the scope, not narrow it. (Ashour "Thaqaftna")

Ashour writes from the background of an Egyptian and an Arab. She believes that the main challenge of the Arab woman writer is not the patriarchal culture per se, but rather "an external factor represented in the colonization of the region that had kicked out what remained of the small margin of freedom". (Al-Assal 184) However, Ashour's female protagonists, and female characters in general, have a loud and clear voice that the reader can never miss. This is exactly why Ashour is one of the icons of feminist writings.

The Female Subalterns Speaking in *Siraaj*:Tawadud:

The female characters in *Siraaj* are of two types. The first type is the innately rebellious which is manifested in the character of Tawadud who declares to her children male playmates that she will go to "India, to Sind and beyond. And you will see for yourself when I come back from my travels bringing marvels with me." (Ashour *Siraaj* 34). She is a dreamer who has dreamt of exploring new places and acquiring unexplored knowledge, "And why shouldn't she dream, when the door to her hut opened onto the sea with its great waves, while ships came and went and the mariners around her filled the island with the sights they had seen on their journeys, and the stories they had to tell painted the days and nights in colors more brilliant than those of sunrise." (Ibid 34, 35)

Tawadud acts to achieve her dreams. She hides behind a tree to cut her hair like a boy and wears one of her brother's gilbaabs. She goes to the port and asks one of the ship captains to allow her to work with the crew. Seeing how gentle her figure is, the captain asks the boy-disguised Tawadud to come back in two years. However, in two years, "her breasts matured and her buttocks grew round, and no longer could any seaman, no matter how dim his eyesight, mistake her for a boy." (35) The narrative leaves the reader to figure out the rest of this story, like the reproach or beating up the girl had as a result of cutting her hair or the confiscation she felt as her body betrays her and grows into womanhood preventing her from

the freedom of playing or exploring for herself. The next stop in Tawadud's confiscating world takes the reader to the world of stories. Accompanying her servant mother to the judge's house, she discovers the freedom that stories give to the reader or listener as she listens to the judge reading for his son,

> Then she heard a melodious voice. It wasn't reciting the Qur'an, but it was reciting something. She walked in the direction of the voice, and saw through an open door the judge sitting cross-legged on a couch with a book in his hands from which he was reading to his son. To one side, she saw the walls of the room covered with shelves bearing a great many books bound with leather covers , black, green, blue, and red, their spines inscribed with gold lettering that fascinated her. The reading held her in thrall, such that she forgot about her mother and about the one-eyed judge's face, which had always frightened her. (36)

This little adventure leads Tawadud to repeated visits to the judge's house where she would crouch under the sofa in an uncomfortable position. However, she was ready to remain there forever as long as her thirst for knowledge was quenched. The stories themselves, obviously from the traditional book of Kalela Wa Demna, take the reader into important cultural areas and convey important messages about collective movements against hostile forces like the story of "The Wisdom of the Dove" (37)

However, the magical world of knowledge is denied Tawadud when the judge discovers her hiding place and dismisses her of the house after slapping her on the face. The narrative does not picture her physical pain, rather her psychological one as she is suddenly deprived of the stories. She goes to Ammar the slave, a renounced story teller and asks him to finish the story that was in the book, but Ammar surprises her that he knows no book stories. She steals a book from the Judge's library, "She opened her box and took out the book. She ran her hand over its cover. Then opened it and gazed intently into the series of letters in their graceful and orderly cursive script. She stared and stared, as if the lines might in the end reveal to her their hidden riches." (35) It was at that moment, when Tawadud realizes that all the people around her are as ignorant as she is, and decides never to marry except from a man who reads and writes and has books like the judge, "Scores of men have asked for her, but she's as stubborn as a mule. She declares that the only one she'll marry will know how to read and write, and will own books like the ones the judge has." (46) Tawadud realizes that she has to acquire male agency to get what she wants of life; she becomes determined to acquire the right agency.

When the surge begins, Tawadud joins the collective movement against the Sultan, and works as the chief messenger between the different parts of the subaltern islanders; it is her final act of defiance against the patriarchal trap. She starts as a person intrigued by the mystery of the letters she carefully hides in her bosom: who is the slave woman she carries the messages to? How does she know reading and writing when "There were no women on the entire island who could read, apart from the daughters of the Sultan. Even the judge's daughters had not learned this skill." (40) However, without getting any answers to those questions, she keeps being an active part of the revolution till the end.

Loathing her status as an illiterate woman, insisting on marrying an educated man, stealing the symbol of knowledge; namely the Judge's book, are Tawadud's acts of subversion to patriarchy. Tawadud carries the feminist suicidal trait of the girl who commits suicide in Spivak's essay: her attempt to elope and disguise as a boy as a child, her adventures listening to the judge's stories under his sofa, her refusal to marry except from a learned man, and finally her participation in the revolution without knowing what she is getting herself into are all attempts to escape a confiscating reality imposed on her by patriarchy. Her death at the end is caused by colonialism, though.

Amina, the Keeper of the Tale:

The second type of the female subalterns in *Siraaj* is the slowly-awakened type as seen in Amina and Uum latif. To different degrees, they come to contradict the traditional oriental stereotype of women; namely the downcast weak one. Amina is a widowed bread-winner of the family which consists of Said and herself. She raises the boy all by herself. Though she does not prefer the open acts of defiance against the sultan at the beginning, she gets immersed in them later on. She starts her defiance with plotting with Tawadud to steal from the Sultan's kitchen provisions and bake for the prisoners in the dungeons to make them stronger and better able to fight with them in the upcoming uprising. Not only do they do that, the two women use coffee to enable them to continue baking day and night. Amina's courage is incarnated in drinking the "forbidden" coffee with her son, in plotting with Tawadud to bake bread and take it to the plantations. She takes her courage to an extreme when she witnesses all the massacre and narrates it,"Amina saw everything, as she sat in the shadow of a crucified man in whom she had discerned a resemblance to Said. It wasn't Said, she knew, but she sat without moving for three days and nights until the guards brought down his body, and she took it from them. "(81)

Amina's acts of defiance continue to the end. She stops baking for the sultan "even if she wanted to, her fingers would not obey her." (82) Amina's ultimate act of subversion is keeping the tale told; preserving the story/history by keeping it alive in her tale. Though Amina's defeat at the end is the physical defeat of humanity against the power of the military machine, her soul is never defeated, "She tells her story without stopping, except to make sure they are following it." (82)

Uum Latif, the Dog-like Servant of Lady Alia

Uum Latif the kitchen supervisor is an interesting character who starts by being the watchdog of Lady Alia, the sultan's wife. She follows her around, "…out of breath, repeating over and over, "As you wish, my lady," and "Your wish is my command," and "You command and we obey, oh jewel of the island and saint of its blessing."" (5) However, in the course of the story when her favorite nephew, Hafez is caught mingling with the slaves' plantation and is thrown into the dungeon, Uum Latif begs Lady Alia who refuses her appeal ruthlessly,"The poor thing came to the kitchen today with her eyes puffy from crying. Then she went to Bint al-Mohsen to try to win her sympathy…..she pleaded with her and kissed her head and

hands, and entreated her by all that was dear to her to take pity and intercede with the sultan on Hafez's behalf.…Bint al-Mohsen's answer was "no" (70)

The Egyptian Uum Ibrahim

Uum Ibraim, the Egyptian wife who takes Said in and keeps him safe and sound for a whole year is another female figure centralized in Ashour's narrative. Her stability and genuine female instinct go against her mother- in-law's warnings of 'the stranger'. She treats him as one of her sons and when he falls ill, she "tended him, as fearful and anxious as if he had been one of her own children." (20) It could be the resemblance to her own son Ibrahim, and it could simply be that he was 'a stranger, some mother's son' (Ibid) Not only that, but Uum Ibrahim keeps the house while her husband is fighting with Urabi and when he comes back distressed and utterly changed, she is patient till he gradually overcomes his trauma and gets back to normal. It is true that the reader does not know much about Uum Ibrahim's story, but during the time Said spends in Egypt, she seems to hold everything in place. The last lines of the chapter entitled "An Account of what Happened to Said" ends with her last gesture of kindness as she hands him a basket "filled with bread she had baked specially for him" (Ibid)

Juxtaposed to the female subaltern, given the opportunity to try speaking for themselves in Ashour's novel, are the other female characters who are sub-alternated purposefully because they represent either colonialism or colonially supported totalitarianism.

The Queen of the English

Queen Victoria, who in reality never sets foot outside Europe, makes an imaginary appearance in the novel. She is ironically and comically discussed by the female subaltern characters in the Sultan's kitchen. The working women in the kitchen wonder about all the extra food preparations and then Uum Latif reveals the reason; the English Queen is visiting the island.

> "That is right. The queen of the English."
>
> "Does a woman rule the English, then?"
>
> "A woman rules them. Such as foreigners, with them everything is upside down!"
>
> Tawadud said, smiling mischievously, "Everything is upside down with them. They wear their sandals like gloves and walk on their hands." (4)

The scene establishes the alienness of the English while extending their strangeness from the viewpoint of the simple women to a moral question: does the queen have slaves? If yes, does she sleep with them? If yes, surely the offspring will be hers? The women measure the whole situation up to what they know of the world of

patriarchal monarchy. They come up with the conclusion that if the idea is as simple as reversing the roles, then the English walk on their hands.

The following scene is described from the eyes of Amina and Tawadud who seek to find any news about Said from the sailors of the English queen's ship. They accidently witness the queen's reception by their Sultan. The queen is described as wearing different clothes that leave her bosom exposed and waist defined. Her dress "spread voluminously in still heavy folds like a tent set up to accommodate several people," (6) as if the dress symbolizes her empire which almost forces different people together under her protection. She is also described as a "stout" woman, whose features are "submerged" in a round face that seemed to rise directly from the shoulders with no neck (Ibid); a figure that is compared to the skinny bodies of most of the characters of the novel to show how the "Empire" sucks peoples' blood. However, the comparison does not stop at that. Even the sultan "…beside her massive form he appeared slight and insubstantial." (Ibid) However, the climax of this scene is weighing the queen on a scale and giving her a present of pure gold that equals her weight. "The sultan wants to honor the queen with a gift of her own weight in gold." (Ibid) Noting that the scene describes her basically as fat woman wearing folds and folds of "stiff heavy" cloth, the queen's weigh is surely "the ruination" of the sultan! (7) This entire scene clearly conveys what imperial power, represented in queen Victoria, does to its colonies: ruination. The hierarchical order of exploitation that unfolds itself in the narrative clarifies the necessity of imperial alliance with the dictatorship at the end. To conclude, belittling the Mother Empress Victoria in the eyes of the female subalterns subverts the canonical colonial narratives and mimics what the Western feminists do in "objectifying the non-Western female subalterns.

Lady Alia Bint Almohsen, the Sultan's Childless Lawful Wife

As the daughter of the colonially-supported king of Yemen and then wife the colonially supported sultan of this imaginary island, Lady Alia has also been sub-alternated in the novel. The reader knows nothing about her inner life, motives, dreams. All that is known of her is her ruthlessness and the fear she sends in the hearts of all the people in the castle. Even the sultan is terrified of her; she is capable of casting a spell of black magic on him turning him impotent,"Whispers went around that one of his enemies had put a spell on him so that he became impotent from nightfall until dawn. All eyes were upon Bint Al-Mohsen as she trudged around in her sandals of wood inlaid with gold and jewels, for who else might the culprit be?" (12)

In other instances, the sultan is seriously terrified of Bint al-Mohsen as equally as he is terrified of the English, and the slaves. In his most dire need of human communication, he cannot afford to open his heart to a young bride, "what if she was hiding a dagger, or some poison? What is she was in league with the slaves or the English or the princes or Bint al-Mohsen? (59) The reason to Lady Alia's ruthlessness is given right at the beginning, " But lady Alia—by the will of God the most high and powerful—had remained childless, stalking about in her sandals of wood inlaid with gold and jewels, so that hearts trembled with fright and children ran in terror, and

none in the high house could breathe freely except when Bint al Mohsen, bearing lavish gifts and accompanied by her serving women set out for Yemen to visit her father." (3) However, this possibility is also negated immediately "The absence of children wouldn't harden a tender heart" (3) The analogy is stricken with Ammar the slave who is childless, motherless, fatherless, yet spreads his love and tenderness to all the people in the island.

In Ashour's narrative, Lady Alia remains a distant heartless tall figure who spreads terror in all the hearts around her including the sultan's harem and the sultan himself.

Prince Mohamed's English Wife

This minor character is only heard of and described in the furious sultan's language as an "emaciated she-goat" that his son Mohamed took as a wife when he went to study in England. Refusing all the novelties that his son brought back with him, and throwing him into the dungeons, the sultan orders that his British wife is deported to her country even though Bint al-Mohsen pleads with him because the British woman was "with a child." (56)

At Bint al-Mohsen's demand that they keep the English woman till she delivers and leaves them the baby, the sultan accuses her of going crazy, "Bint al-Mohsen had become un-balanced, lost her head—what could she want with a leprous child whose mother was a Christian?" As a representative of colonialism, the British wife is never given the chance to speak or explain. She remains a mystery and open for any interpretation by the reader. She is mostly sub-alternated.

Princess Salma of Zanzibar

She is another minor character that is "represented" rather than given the space to unfold herself as a real character. She is the sister of Zanzibar's 'sultan who ran off with a German officer and marries him only to come back years later "unveiled like foreign women, dressed in clothes like theirs. And wearing a hat with a feather in it." (42) Princess Salma can do as she pleases simply because she comes "in the protection of a German warship." (Ibid) There are fears that the Germans, because they too have colonial aims in the area, may depose the sultan and appoint her as the "sovereign of the island." (Ibid)

Princess Salma, thus, is an example of colonially-supported females in the novel who are sub-alternated by Ashour and juxtaposed with the other female characters she centralizes in her arena of resistance.

In short, the fearful sea in *Sirraj* turns out to be more generous to all the islanders on this imaginary island, than the sultan and Lady Alia. Tawadud puts it in a nutshell when she says, "We serve them in miserable drudgery all day long so that they can fill their bellies. Then we go to them with a request whose fulfillment will cost them nothing but a word, a word that will bring us back to life, and they refuse it." (70) However, there is a hierarchy of misery; on the top, there is Britain (Western imperial powers). Below, there is the Sultan side by side to the Egyptian khedive (local totalitarian regimes.). Then, there are the rebels in Egypt and on the island:

Urabi, Mahmoud, Abo Ibrahim the farmer, Hafez and Said supported in their endeavors by the female characters who also revolt for their own reasons. Then, there are the pearl divers, and the workers, the farmers, the servants, children and the slaves. However, it is a pyramid that is repeatedly turned over by the power of the story in which the rebels act without fear, slaves collect and celebrate "home" in their own way, and women are finally engaged and act together though ideologically differently towards a common end. They fail at the end because they all lack the necessary information of the life threatening struggle they are in; something that restricts their planning and makes them forget to envision what should be done after overthrowing the colonially-supported sovereign. Ignorance/illiteracy is the key of the anti-colonialism/anti totalitarianism repeated failure as is subtly portrayed by Ashour.

However, there is an ominous sign in the rebels' dependence on the illiterate woman Tawadud as the messenger that connects all parts of the revolutionary force; an omen that foreshadows the expected failure of the uprising. The slaves, sailors, and the rest of the subjugated island inhabitants plot accurately for their popular uprising, however, they fail to realize the new power relations created by the imperial pressure of the British military base on the island. The revolutionary 'will' is present, but the subtle organizational skill, the tactic, and political consciousness are all absent. Consequently, depriving Tawadud the poor girl from the skill of reading and writing signifies a deadly blockage, a prison, an abortion of the dream of freedom. Neither men nor women can be free until they are literate.

So, as sensitive and important writing and reading are to Ashour—being the tools in which a female finds her distinctive voice, eases the suffocating tensions of society and keeps a woman's sanity—depriving all the female characters on the island except for the sultan's daughters from the skills of reading and writing indicates the constriction and enclosure of life. This is part of the general feeling of severe oppression that hovers all around the novel which is never eased to any of the characters except by immersing oneself in the magic of story-telling.

Ashour's concern for the slaves, the imprisoned, the servants, and children is deeply feminist springing from maternal interests. Her concern for the traditional activity of story-telling, both a conventionally female activity and a preservation of collective memory from the erasure of the colonial practices is equally feminist. Post-colonialism and feminism intersect in almost every aspect of the novel.

To conclude, this paper has attempted to show that, with an enlightened third world female activist and writer like Radwa Ashour, Spivak's theory of the subaltern can be extended to literature with a greater optimism than in history. On the one hand, Ashour does not fall into the trap of "representing" the female subalterns jeopardizing its mystery, entirety and variety. Rather than "typifying" the female subalterns, in

Siraaj, Ashour has carved uneasy paths for them to reveal themselves slowly and speak. Although the female characters in the novel come alive and unforgettable, a great deal of 'who' and/or 'what' they are is left unsaid and needs the reader's active participation. On the other hand, she has purposefully alienated/sub-alternated the other colonial or colonially supported female characters in the narrative in almost the same way that the colonial texts have previously done with the colonized subalterns. Ashour's writing project in *Siraaj* points out two important things; first, that the novel/storytelling is an effective arena for resistance; it is a space where the colonial narratives are subverted and reversed in Edward Said 's way. Second, Ashour could create a hybrid various type of the colonized female subalterns with better opportunities to speak rather then remain silent. In *Siraaj*, female subalterns come to realize their subalternity and they struggle at a certain point to free themselves from the constrictions of their colonially supported patriarchal world. Though they are eventually crushed by the colonial powers at the end, they become haunting characters and keep their story alive.

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