

***Harem Years: A Chronicle of  
an Egyptian History***

*A New Historicist Reading of Huda Shaarawi's Memoirs*

***Dr. Jaidaa G. Hamada***

**English Department**

**Faculty of Arts**

**Alexandria University**



“It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change”.

### **Charles Darwin**

Combining strength of will, intelligence and a conspicuous responsiveness to change, Huda Shaarawi managed not only to “survive”, but, more influentially, to make the act of surviving possible for others. In the early 1920s, when the winds of change were blowing hard over Egypt, she became an active leader in the country’s fight for political independence, in addition to her leading the longstanding struggle for women’s rights, focusing on education, the right to vote, marriage laws, among many other concerns. Her refusal to be baulked by the restrictive conventions of her day is climaxed in removing her veil at the Cairo Train Station in 1923; an act of defiance that had far-reaching consequences on the then marginalized status of Egyptian women within the stultifying harem culture. Towards the end of her life, Shaarawi set out to write her memoirs; an endeavour that could be aptly hailed as her “final feminist act” (Badran, Preface 1). In 1987, Shaarawi’s memoirs were brought to light when they were translated by Margot Badran and published under the title *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist*<sup>1</sup>. The importance of these memoirs lies not only in their offering insight into Shaarawi’s private life, family life and the challenges she had to surmount, but also in the way they offer enlightening glimpses into the social and political state of affairs of Egypt at an instrumental point of its history. A helpful tool in amplifying understandings of Shaarawi’s memoirs is to view them from the lens of new historicism, the critical practice named by the critic Stephen Greenblatt to “signal a turn away from the formal decontextualized analysis that dominate[d] new criticism”, and also to describe an interest in “the embeddedness of cultural objects in the contingencies of history” (“Resonance” 308). According to Greenblatt, new historicism is a textual practice, not just a theory or a doctrine of literary criticism. As he describes it in his seminal book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare*, it is primarily a means of “interpretation” (qtd. in Murfin and Ray 241). It is the aim of this paper to examine Huda Shaarawi’s memoirs *Harem Years* as a chronicle of an Egyptian history; an authenticated conduit of *interpreting* some aspects of Egypt’s social and political makeup at a decisive moment in its

history. Since “as a critical practice [new historicism] treats literary texts as a space where power relations are made visible” (Brannigan qtd. in Bertens 179), *Harem Years* will be examined as the locus of encounter between Shaarawi’s budding feminist consciousness and her gendered society.

In their broadest sense, the memoirs embody a variety of discourses in a form that largely “novelizes” the cultural and social changes of the author’s time (Quawas). The way the personal is interspersed with the political finds its clearest expression in Shaarawi’s words “I would have separated from my husband ... if it had not been for the nationalist movement. My attention was drawn from the private life to serving my country” (111). These lines may be viewed as capturing the kernel of the book: how history transcends being merely a backdrop against which Shaarawi charts her life story, to become bound up with her own personal life. Understanding one thus becomes indispensable to understanding the other. In other words, the text in which she recounts her story and the historical context in which it is embedded become interdependent, thus typifying the aim of new historicism: to grasp the “historicity of texts and the textuality of history” (Montrose qtd. in Murfin and Ray 243). From the standpoint of new historicism, there is no seamless overarching unity; rather, there are shifting “representations” of several “histories” (Rice and Waugh 252). Before viewing Shaarawi’s memoirs as a “representation” of one of these “histories”, or as a chronicle of *an* Egyptian history, a brief survey of new historicism becomes imperative.

Between the 1920s and 50s, and before the advent of New Criticism, the majority of critics focused on a work’s historical content and based their interpretations on the interplay between the text and its historical context, including the author’s life or his/her intentions in writing. Literature was seen as a reflection of the historical world in which it was produced. Furthermore, history was perceived to be stable, linear, and unitary. However, with the advent of New Criticism, the prevalent approach became text-oriented, viewing texts as self-contained and self-referential objects, and focusing on relationships within the text to uncover its form and meaning. Particular attention was accordingly given to symbolism, imagery and rhythm. In the 1970s, New Criticism was roundly attacked by reader-response critics, who asserted that the meaning of the text is jointly produced by the reader and the text, and poststructuralists, who, following Jacques Derrida,

argued that texts are by definition self-contradictory. Yet, their approach remained text-oriented, disregarding the historical context within which literary works were read and written (Murfin and Ray 238-39).

It was in the 1980s that a form of historical criticism practiced by Louis Montrose and Stephen Greenblatt came into being, challenging the then reigning text-oriented approach. In this regard, new historicism emerged as “a much-needed corrective” to the legacy of New Criticism and its attempt “to understand literature purely as literature ... without reference to factors or forces outside a narrowly defined aesthetic domain” (Cantour). Generally speaking, new historicists are less fact- and event-oriented than traditional historical critics, primarily because they question whether the truth about what really happened can ever be objectively ascertained or not. They are also less inclined to see history as linear and progressive, and less likely to think of it in terms of specific historical eras, each with definite, well-constructed boundaries. The term “new historicism” received its current meaning when Greenblatt used it to describe recent works of himself and others on the Renaissance period, and when Montrose argued for the presence of power in pastoral genres, thereby following Michel Foucault in his assumption that “social relations are, intrinsically, relations of power” (qtd. in Bertens 178). New historicism is also indebted to Foucault and his view of how the so-called objective historical accounts are always products of a will to power enacted within specific social institutions<sup>2</sup>. His “histories” challenge the idea of an overarching narrative, and focus instead on the “other”, generally excluded by such accounts (Rice and Waugh 253).

New historicism also represents a form of “thick description”; a term used in anthropology to denote seemingly insignificant details in any cultural practice. By focusing on these details, one can discover larger contradictory forces at work within a culture. A thick description offers an explanation not only of human behaviour, but also of its context (Rice and Waugh 252). Its importance lies mainly in the way it “inspires interpretation and encourages the reader to look for meaningful exchanges” so that the text moves beyond its conventional context to receive new meanings (Hamilton 134). In his *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, Greenblatt also describes his critical practice as “a poetics of culture” (qtd. in Bertens 178). Contrary to other historical approaches and interpretive methods that tend to see historical texts as autonomous entities, poetics of culture seeks to examine the relationship

between texts and their sociopolitical contexts. The text not only documents the social forces that inform and constitute history and society, but “also features prominently in the social processes themselves which fashion both individual identity and sociohistorical situation” (Veenstra 174). New historicists also share the assumption that at a given historical moment, different modes of discourse intersect, contradict, destabilize, cancel or modify each other. They are also interested in recovering lost histories and in exploring mechanisms of repression and subjugation. In so doing, they seek to minimize the distortions that are innately found in historical perceptions and interpretations (Murfin and Ray 240-41; Wayne 793).

In “Resonance and Wonder” Greenblatt shows how new historicism sets itself out against the three definitions of historicism that *The American Heritage Dictionary* outlines: the belief that there are processes at work in history that man can hardly alter; the theory that the historian must avoid all value judgments in studying past periods and former cultures; and a veneration of the past and of tradition (308). In response to the first, he denigrates it as being based on “abstraction” and an obvious exclusion of “human agency”. The people who belong to particular contexts, in given circumstances, and at particular times, are transformed into something called “man”, which Greenblatt defines as “a colourless, nameless collective being [who] cannot significantly intervene in the processes at work in history”. These processes become “mysteriously alienated from all of those who enact them” (308). New historicism, by contrast, eschews the use of the term “man” since “interest lies not in the abstract universal but in particular, contingent cases”. Representatives of these “particular ... cases” act according to the rules and conflicts of a given culture; are fashioned and conditioned by the expectations of their class, gender, religion, race and national identity; and are constantly bringing about changes in the course of history. New historicism insists on agency, for even “inaction or extreme marginality is understood to possess meaning and therefore to imply intention” (308). In response to the second definition, Greenblatt argues that “[w]riting that was not engaged, that withheld judgments, that failed to connect the present with the past seemed worthless” (310). The past is to be linked to the present both analogically and causally, and this largely accounts for his fascination with Renaissance studies. As the third definition suggests, the eschewing of value judgments was accompanied by a veneration of the past that was presented in an

objective garb. According to Greenblatt, what was viewed as a flawed and unworthy work by one generation can be regarded as a “masterpiece” by another (311).

To hail Shaarawi’s memoirs as “a masterpiece” is thus to give them their due. Based on the new historicist assumption that works of literature both influence and are influenced by historical reality, *Harem Years* may be rightly credited with articulating many cultural, gender, political and social issues of the writer’s time. In this way, Shaarawi’s memoirs become one of the many “histories” of the time, exemplifying Greenblatt’s interest in “*petites histoires*”, in contradistinction to a unitary history that assimilates all otherness into sameness (qtd. in Veenstra 179). That the text impacts historical reality can be discerned in Shaarawi’s redefinition of a wide range of discourses: the rampant harem culture; women’s marginalized status; growing nationalist sentiments; women’s battle for liberation; gender inequality; patriarchal authority; fledgling feminist consciousness; societal norms and conventions; familial hierarchies; daily routines and events; marital laws and conventions, to name only some of the thematic issues around which her life revolves. Simultaneously, the text is informed by the plethora of transformations Egypt had already undergone by the time Shaarawi was born in 1879<sup>3</sup>. In short, studying history reveals more about the text; studying the text reveals more about history. The way in which power is deployed and manipulated in the patriarchal society of Shaarawi’s day acquires greater significance in the light of the new historicist assumption that power relations are the fundamental units for analysis and interpretation (Murfin and Ray 240-41).

An understanding of the way Shaarawi’s selfhood is forged may likewise be understood along the lines of Greenblatt’s view of the conditions under which the fashioning of the self takes place: Firstly, a self is formed in submission to an absolute power; then secondly, in relation to any category that is branded as marginal or subversive. Ultimately, “[s]elf-fashioning takes place in a double relationship to authority on the one hand and to alterity on the other” (Veenstra 181-82). As Shaarawi charts her life story, it becomes obvious how she goes through the two stages: Firstly, submission to the authoritative discourses of harem life, society, family, and patriarchal authority. Secondly, an alignment with deviant voices; one that establishes her as a potent voice of the “marginalia”, the term Greenblatt employs to denote marginalized groups, individuals and phenomena that

defy attempts at integration into a totalizing structure (qtd. in Veenstra 188). In this regard, new historicism may be said to validate Shaarawi's memoirs as an active participant in the formation of history, thus reinstating "the central significance of marginality" (Greenblatt qtd. in Veenstra 192). In so becoming, they transcend the status of a literary text or a personal chronicle to actively contribute to the historical processes at work. This serves as a specimen of how a literary text becomes directly involved in the formation of history. From a new historicist perspective,

[t]he literary text is a time- and place-bound verbal construction that is always in one way or another political .... As a consequence ... literature does not simply reflect relations of power, but actively participates in the consolidation and/or construction of discourses and ideologies ... not only at the individual level - that of the subject - but also on the level of the group or even that of the national state. (Bertens 177)

Though recounted in the first person and concerned with her own life, Shaarawi's account brings to light important anecdotes that actively contribute to "the consolidation and/or construction of discourses and ideologies". Based on the new historicist rejection of the separation of artistic works from their creators (Wayne 793), *Harem Years* becomes a mirror that reflects Shaarawi's own personal life, and how it is pitted against her milieu. This is apparent at the onset of the memoirs when Shaarawi, explaining her Turco-Circassian lineage, moves back in time to recall the visit of her maternal grandmother who came every year or two from Turkey. A unilateral historical account based primarily on recorded facts and precluding human agency, as well as the voice of the "marginalia", would refer to the fighting that broke out between the Caucasus and Czarist Russia in the 1860s as merely an invasion of the Caucasus by the Russian Empire, consisting of a series of military actions waged by Russia against territories and tribal groups in Caucasia, and eventually resulting in the annexation of the areas of the North Caucasus to Russia and the ethnic cleansing of Circassians. From this perspective, the Russian-Circassian War becomes an impersonal experience, bringing victory to one side at the expense of the suffering of another. On the other hand, recounting personal anecdotes broadens the contours of history, thereby offering a key to understanding the human experience of war, and therefore the war itself, which lies less in the details of the battles than in the realities of life of those who took



part in the conflict, or even heard about it through personal narratives. The valiance of the Circassians in defending Russia; the grandfather's captivity and the allegations about his treachery; the seizure of his son; the bravery of Huriyya, the grandfather's niece; the killing of the grandfather; the falsity of the alleged betrayal; his burial; the departure of the grandmother to Istanbul; the arduous journey they embarked upon; the abduction of the aunt; the sending of her mother to Egypt to be raised under the care of her maternal uncle; the refusal of his wife to receive her; her staying with a Ragheb Bey's family; her guardian's marrying her off to Sultan Pasha; the reunion of the family after investigations about their whereabouts - all these personal anecdotes exemplify the new historicist commitment to "the value of the single voice, the isolated scandal, the idiosyncratic vision, [and] the transient sketch" (Gallagher and Greenblatt 16). Reading Shaarawi's account of her mother's lineage from the lens of new historicism thus adds a new dimension to the Russian-Circassian War. Moreover, history here is no longer a linear chronicle of facts and events, nor is it a mere background for literature. Rather, it is a social science; a complex rendering of human reality, focusing on ideas of social organization, prejudices, ethnicity, inequities, among many others.

In as much as the same way, Shaarawi's stories about her father's public achievements serve the new historicist aim to foreground "the singular, the specific, and the individual" (Gallagher and Greenblatt 6). "My father played an important role in the political life of Egypt and rendered noble services during his long public career", she states (27). In so proclaiming, Shaarawi may be said to voice the new historicist rejection of the distinction between "literary foreground" and "political background" since her "literary" text unearths many aspects of the "political" background against which it is poised (Young 263). By the same token, her account is given credibility by being embedded in the political furor of her day. Her failure to find historical records to document his involvement in the political life of Egypt at the time, and her reliance instead on the stories narrated to her by one of her father's contemporaries, Qallini Pasha Fahmi, is validated by the new historicist assumption that history cannot be solely derived from monologically authoritative documents. The new historicist questioning of whether the truth can ever be objectively verified or not lends credence to the voice of her father's acquaintance since "the goal should never be to reduce the variety of human adaptations to a single triumphant form or to rank

the cultures of the earth as if they were all competing for the same prize” (Gallagher and Greenblatt 6).

As Shaarawi’s account unfolds, important historical figures, events, practices and anecdotes are highlighted, exemplifying the new historicist tendency to “reconceive history on the model of literature” (Cantour). It is to be noted that literature, from the standpoint of new historicism, is not confined to canonical works and classical texts, but rather have them contested, not only with works judged as minor, but also with those that are not literary in the first place. Texts that have hitherto been denigrated or ignored are accordingly treated as major achievements. Not only do the newly recovered works assume importance, but they also change the status of authors and texts long treated as canonical. The new importance accorded to non-canonical discourses, whether oral or written, is explained by Gallagher and Greenblatt as follows:

Major works of art remain centrally important but they are jostled now by an array of other texts and images. Some of these alternative objects of attention are literary works regarded as too minor to deserve sustained interest and hence marginalized or excluded entirely from the canon. Others are texts that have been regarded as altogether nonliterary, that is, lacking the aesthetic polish, the self-conscious use of rhetorical figures, the aura of distance from the everyday world, the marked status as fiction that separately or together characterize belles lettres. (9)

What ultimately results is a broader perception of history that resists a totalizing vision; one that allows catapulting Shaarawi’s once unheeded voice from the background to the foreground.

An example of the new historicist rejection of an overarching totality can be discerned in the conflicting perceptions of the Urabi Revolt. “For the Europeans, the Egyptian revolution of 1882 and British intervention formed a starting-point for the controversy about economic imperialism .... For Egyptians, however, the Revolution has been a matter of continuing debate in the conception of their national evolution” (Cole 18-19). While an early nationalist movement viewed Urabi as having dictatorial tendencies, but praised the Revolution as having had some constitutionalist ideas, another socialist approach presents the Revolution as a nationwide revolt on the part of the intellectuals and landowners. Equally valid is a view that sees the revolt

as a movement dominated by the petty bourgeois officers, often in alliance with the peasantry while the agricultural bourgeoisie allied itself with the Khedive and the Europeans (19-20). As far as Shaarawi is concerned, the Revolution is laden with very personal recollections, which, in keeping with Greenblatt's refutation of "homogenization", are accountable contributors to the ongoing historical processes ("Resonance" 313). Not only does Shaarawi incorporate the personal with the national, but she even employs her memoirs as a vehicle for clearing her father's name of having collaborated with the British, thereby facilitating their entry into Egypt. An appendix to her memoirs is entirely devoted to her defense. From the standpoint of new historicism, Shaarawi's defensive voice, antithetical as it is to the voices that incriminate her father, becomes part of the process of negotiation and exchange that makes up history. Along the lines of Greenblatt's consensus that "cultural artifacts do not stay still, that they exist in time, and that they are bound up with personal and institutional conflict, negotiations and appropriations" (306), her father's alleged alliance with the British is likely to be contested and refuted. This also enables her to take issue with what she has read in Urabi's memoirs, which she dismisses in the appendix as "distorted" (148). By the same token, Shaarawi's memoirs themselves may be at some point disparaged as "distorted" or erroneous. To lend credence to her defense, she turns to the testimony of Qallini Fahmi Pasha who had first-hand experience with this furor. Quoting Fahmi's defense opens up new venues for multiple voices to chart the ongoing historical process.

In the second part of her memoirs, Shaarawi focuses on the timeframe between 1884 and 1892 which coincides with her childhood years in the harem, a hallmark of nineteenth-century Egypt which mandated the seclusion of upper- and middle-class women to certain areas of the household. It also necessitated veiling in the presence of all males except the father, brother, uncle, or grandfather; that is, men with whom marriage was not allowed. In *Feminists, Islam and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt*, Badran gives a succinct account of this system:

The Arabic word *harim* (from which the English-language loan word *harem* derives) applied both to women and to the women's quarters of the house. Neither domestic confinement nor veiling the face was ordained by Islam, although both had been imposed on women in the name of religion. These practices were also enforced because of

deeply held sexual and moral beliefs .... Domestic seclusion and veiling in Egypt were not practiced solely by Muslims but by Jews and Christians as well. (5)

Against this backdrop, women were perceived as essentially, or exclusively, sexual beings. Based on the supposition that women were endowed with a more potent sexual drive than men, they were viewed as posing a threat to society because of the *fitna* they could induce. Since women's sexual purity was linked to the family, restricting women to their homes was deemed necessary to the preservation of their purity and with it the honour of their men and families. A staple feature of the architecture of the time was the way it attended to the strict demarcation between men and women. Moreover, eunuchs, castrated male slaves, guarded women and children if they stepped outside the harem and took their orders only from the master of the house. In fact, eunuchs were allotted considerable authority over women, to the extent of exercising control over their expenditures (5). It was only when modernization and secularization gained momentum that this system began to loosen its grip on the Egyptian society. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, male tutors had been brought into upper-class Egyptian households to instruct women in Arabic, Persian and Turkish. Nineteenth-century Egypt saw the rise of the modern state, expanding capitalism, secularization, technological innovation, and urbanization. In 1925 the Egyptian government opened the first institution offering a secondary education for girls. These new educational opportunities challenged traditional gender relations and led to the emergence of a new libertarian consciousness. Women began to publish articles in national journals, and soon a feminist press emerged, taking up issues pertaining to feminism, religion, and nationalism. These factors, modifying the lives of Egyptians across lines of class and gender, chipped away at the harem culture. Gradually, the harem system and the face veil began to disappear until they became extinct (Badran, *Feminists* 6; Chatterjee et al. 280).

As far as Shaarawi's memoirs are concerned, the importance of this period lies not only in its being a formative stage in her own life, but also because of the way it demystifies the perceptions of women, family life, veiling, and harem seclusion, among many other practices of the time. Examining the harem system solely from the perspective of gender is likely to sever it from its cultural context. Such a unitary approach is what Greenblatt dismisses as being "monological"; that is, it

is concerned with discovering “a single vision, usually identical to that said to be held by the entire literate class or indeed the entire population” (“Power” 2253). On the other hand, as a mode of cultural poetics, new historicism would attend to the discursive beliefs, practices and social structures of the harem system, thus revealing its multidimensional nature. In its essence, this system is about “women and men, society, and politics in a particular culture, not women, sexualized life, and seclusion” (El Guindi 36). Much can be culled from Shaarawi’s account:

Her description of her life in the *harim* reveals an atmosphere of large household management, marital alliances, life and death events, and involvement in national politics, rather than a locus of sexual orgies .... Much useful information can be discerned from Sha’rawi’s description of the *harim* that was her home before and after marriage. (26)

When brought to bear on Shaarawi’s account of the harem system, new historicism becomes a means of redressing many misconceptions about it, as Gallagher and Greenblatt explain: “Against the determinism that attempts to insist that certain things in a given period were beyond conception and articulation, new historicism invokes the vastness of the textual archive, and with that vastness an aesthetic appreciation of the individual instance” (16).

The harem where Shaarawi was raised included her mother, alongside her father’s wife, Hasiba, or *Umm Kabira*, as it was common for upper-class Egyptian men to have both a wife and concubines, or second wives (Badran *Feminists* 32; “Introduction” 16-17). No sooner does Shaarawi begin her account of her childhood than she foregrounds issues pertaining to marriage laws and polygamy, thereby emphasizing the new historicist view of literature as playing a major role in the creation and consolidation of power relations, and accordingly contributing to the constitution of culture, and thus of history (Bertens 185). From an early age, Shaarawi gained awareness of gender inequities, both in her own household and in society at large. Despite her initial acquiescence to the patriarchal culture of her class, she was deeply distraught, even as a child, by the privileged status accorded to her brother and how he was doted on by their mother; a frustration that made her go as far as questioning her own identity as a daughter:

I used to imagine that I was not my mother's daughter- that my real mother was a slave girl who had died, and the truth was being withheld from me. Firmly convinced of this, I suffered all the more. I could keep everything suppressed until nightfall but as soon as I laid my head on the pillow, I was overcome by anxieties and frightening thoughts moved me to tears .... I dreamed often that huge beasts were pouncing on me, baring their fangs in my face, and that when I sought refuge with my mother I would find that she had taken my brother in her arms and turned her back on me. 'I am not your child!' I would scream, 'You have lied to me! Tell me the truth! I am not your child! I am not your child!'. (34-35)

In her attempt to find an explanation for the superiority of her brother, she came to realize the implications of being born a woman in a restrictively patriarchal society:

I once asked *Umm Kabirah* why everyone paid more attention to my brother than to me. 'Haven't you understood yet?' she asked gently. When I claimed that as the elder I should receive more attention she replied, 'But you are a girl and he is a boy. One day the support of the family will fall upon him. When you marry you will leave the house and honor your husband's name but he will perpetuate the name of his father and take over his house'. (36)

The binary opposition boy/girl came as a moment of epiphany for Shaarawy, opening her eyes to her disadvantaged position. As much as it has grieved and distressed her, her negligible position wielded a positive impact on her, providing her with the impetus to carve out a more rewarding place for herself in her household, and, by implication, in society. Moreover, she capitalized on having a male sibling by sharing his various lessons when his tutors came over to the harem. "I was devoted to my studies and became completely absorbed at lesson time", she states (39). Her precocious thirst for knowledge and her keenness on learning were satiated within the contours of the harem. She studied Quranic Arabic, Turkish and calligraphy, in addition to French, which was then replacing Turkish among the elites in Egypt. Her French teacher, who was originally Italian, also taught her to play the piano, a pastime then becoming fashionable for upper-class girls. Arts, languages, and knowledge in general infiltrated into the harem, thereby refuting the oft-recurring perception of it as "a locus of women's oppression and licentiousness" (El Guindi 34). Although the

system itself was predicated on female domestic seclusion and other stringent forms of patriarchal authority, there was scope for liberation and self-definition, provided that the secluded woman herself was invested with stamina and strength of will as was the case with Shaarawi. In “The Work of Gender in the Discourse of Discovery”, Montrose states how gender and its representations participate in “a multivalent ideological process that perpetually generates, contains and contests cultural meanings and values”, thereby preventing history from calcifying into a stagnant unitary whole (qtd. in Lennox 162). By the same token, Shaarawi’s awareness of those inequities came as an emancipatory force, engaging her in an ongoing “multivalent ideological process”. This is evident in her words: “I became depressed and began to neglect my studies, hating being a girl because it kept me from the education I sought” (34). In many ways, this feeling of “hating” may be viewed as the spark that ignited her lifelong battle to assert the equity of women, as can be discerned in her words: “I observed how women without learning would tremble with embarrassment and fright if called upon to speak a few words to a man from behind a screen ... [This] convinced me that, with learning, women could be the equals of men if not surpass them” (34-35). Her aim was primarily to “change, rather than replace, the old authoritative order into a system based on equity and independence” (Quawas). Imbued with a spirit of rebellion, she departed from prescribed models and indulged her lively curiosity and active mind by reading voraciously. She started buying books from the peddlers who came to the house, in addition to taking books from her late father’s bookcase.

While recognizing the importance of her education and self-development, Shaarawi also clearly stresses the broader cultural aspect of life by delineating many of the then prevalent routines, events, feasts and social customs. One fruitful approach to her memoirs is to view them in terms of Greenblatt’s view of “the work of art [as] the product of a negotiation between a creator or class of creators, equipped with a complex, communally shared repertoire of conventions, and the institutions and practices of society” (qtd. in Bertens 176). Chief among “the institutions and practices of society” that *Harem Years* abounds with are: venues of outings and excursions; the practice of exchanging visits and receiving family friends; the tradition of keeping slaves at the household; the phenomenon of women peddlers; celebrating different feasts, each with its own costumes, treats and ritual foods; the integrated

presence of foreign communities; the convention of having a legal guardian to run the affairs of the family after the master is deceased; the different social strata of society; social and familial hierarchies; and, above all, the harem culture itself. Shaarawi's memoirs also reveal the following: in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women, unlike their male counterparts, were prohibited from stepping into a wide range of public spaces; domesticity was the staple feature of women's lives; formal education and intellectual endeavours were discouraged; and domestic activities including cooking, cleaning, decorating, and childrearing, were deemed the only available undertakings for women. As the narrative unfolds, more phenomena of the time are brought to light. To name only a few of them are the following: women of Shaarawi's class were educated at home at the hands of tutors; the choice of a tutor was largely determined by his age since he had to be admitted into the harem; eunuchs played an active part in running the household; women's outings were strictly regimented and had to be monitored by one of the eunuchs and maids; restrictive societal conventions were enforced on women as if they were sacred laws; violating societal codes was met with punitive measures; and women's expenditures were under strict supervision. Though all these practices and phenomena are based on Shaarawi's own experience, they move beyond her personal life to achieve the new historicist aim of articulating a cultural identity. The shift from the personal to the wider cultural context unearths many aspects of life at the time, thus rendering Shaarawi "a chronicler of an epoch" (Quawas).

Of all Shaarawi's retrospective stories, her betrothal to her cousin shows how discourses on gender are "implicated in the construction and conception of power itself" (Montrose qtd. in Lennox 162). Though seemingly a personal anecdote, its larger implications may be best understood in terms of the new historicist aim to highlight the ways in which power is enforced, rendering literary texts a space where power relations are made visible (Bertens 179). This is clearly shown in her feelings about her marriage:

I was deeply troubled by the idea of marrying my cousin whom I had always regarded as a father or older brother deserving my fear and respect (as I had been previously made to understand). I grew more upset when I thought of his wife and three daughters who were all older than me, who used to tease me saying, 'Good-day, stepmother!' When my brother and I were small and our guardian-cousin called on us, I did



not find him gentle. He was especially abrupt and curt with me, but treated my brother better. All of this alienated me from him. (55)

Her reaction to her betrothal becomes more meaningful when viewed in terms of Greenblatt's assertion that "[e]very form of behavior ... is a strategy: taking up arms or taking flight is a significant social action, but so is staying put, minding one's business, turning one's face to the wall" ("Resonance" 308). In this regard, Shaarawi's acquiescence to the marriage, and her utter helplessness before her mother's arrangements as can be evinced in her words "Do as you please" (55), are not to be misconstrued as acts of passiveness; rather, her attitude may be viewed as a cultural expression that lays the groundwork for her lifelong concern to transform women from silent objects to speaking subjects. Her endeavour to forge her identity evolves into an attempt at creating a new Egyptian national identity that counters the invisibility of women. In examining this historical era, new historicism would shift the traditional focus on political and social determinants towards an examination of the effacement of women's experiences by the then prevalent hegemonic discourses. The act of covering her face on the wedding day is symbolic of this effacement:

A woman came and lowered a veil of silver thread over my head like a mask concealing the face of a condemned person approaching execution. At that moment, the bridegroom entered the room. After praying two *rakaas* ... he came to me, lifting the veil from my face, kissed me on the forehead. He led me by the hand to the bridal throne and took his place beside me. All the while, I was trembling like a branch in a storm. The groom addressed a few words to me but I understood nothing. When the customary goblets of red sorbet were offered, I was unable to taste the ritual drink. Finally, my new husband took me by the hand. In my daze I knew not where I was being led. (57)

From Shaarawi's account of her wedding rituals, it is obvious how reluctant she was to be coerced into such a union. In terms of new historicism, viewing history in conjunction with such mundane practices becomes a way of "de-idealizing it", thus bringing to the fore what has been thought of as marginal and insignificant (Leitch et al. 2250). As presented in her memoirs, marriage becomes one of the channels through which power operates, which include "not just direct coercion and governmental action but also, crucially, daily routines and language" – all of which are areas of interest to new historicists (2250).

The way she leaves every gesture to be decided by others echoes Greenblatt's postulation that "inaction or extreme marginality is understood to possess meaning" ("Resonance" 308). In this context, her "inaction" may be said to reflect her constrictively gendered world and the way it seeks to suppress her voice. The new historicist attempt to rewrite history in order to champion the marginal and the outcast becomes a most empowering conduit.

Along similar lines, the new historicist postulation that reading about personal anecdotes enables minor cultural acts to widen out into larger contexts (Gallagher and Greenblatt 26), is nowhere more fully expressed than in the way Shaarawi's experience with marriage addresses many contested issues of the 1920s; notably, women's restricted spheres of activity, authority, polygamy, and divorce, to name only a few. Power is also shown to be deployed on different levels: the familial, the social, the legislative, the religious and the cultural. Shaarawi's predicament is thus revelatory of not only her life within the harem system, but also of the public political realm. The new historicist emphasis on the inseparability of texts from the world in which they are produced is revealed in the way the memoirs abound with references to the social customs of the time. In no way is the text an autonomous aesthetic form sealed off from other kinds of cultural practices; rather, it is a social construct that "informs and sometimes even conditions the historical process" (Veenstra 180).

A seemingly personal episode in Shaarawi's life that yielded far-reaching consequences was discovering that her husband had returned to his former wife when she became pregnant. This came as a means of salvation to her, enabling her to be separated from him for seven years, having formerly written a paper committing himself to a monogamous union. Accordingly, she moved back to her paternal house and stayed there for seven years. In fact, she was right in her description of this period as putting an end to her "misery" (60), for this seven-year separation was a most decisive time that altered the course of her life, enabling her to resume her studies, enlarge her circle of friends and acquaintances, and develop a selfhood that would inspire others for generations to come. The course of life she undertook during her period of separation sheds light on her burgeoning feminist consciousness. During her separation, she exercised more control over her day-to-day life; resumed studying Arabic and French; indulged her love for music by attending concerts at the Khedival Opera House; and sojourned in

Alexandria wherein she enjoyed the sea, called on friends and made excursions to the newly founded modern department store. The importance of the personal nuances recounted by Shaarawi is once again revealed in the light of the new historicist emphasis on “the singular, the specific, and the individual”, shifting attention to aspects of daily life, long unheeded by traditional historical accounts, though indispensable in charting history (Gallagher and Greenblatt 6). The rebuke she received from Zuhair Pasha, one of her late father’s friends, reveals the inherent double standards underlying marriage. Deeming her behavior “not fitting for a daughter of Sultan Pasha”, he reminded her that her husband had “the right to force [her] to return to him” and that her refusal was a “disgrace” (Shaarawi 64). While society condemned her for her behaviour, it legalized the right of the husband to live with his former slave who bore him a child every year. The new approach to culture adopted by new historicists is empowering in this regard, broadening the field of cultural interpretation to include groups that had hitherto been “marginalized, half hidden or even entirely excluded from the professional study of literature”: “Women’s studies, and the feminism that motivated its formation, has served as an important ... model for new historicism in that it has inspired its adherents to identify new objects for study, bring those objects into the light of critical attention, and insist upon their legitimate place in the curriculum” (Gallagher and Greenblatt 11). By recourse to new historicism, the cultural significance of women’s voices becomes more pronounced.

The camaraderie that was forged between Shaarawi and a host of women mentors may be viewed as one specimen of the “new objects” to which “critical attention” has been shifted. Mme. Richards, Adila Nabarawi, and Atiyah Saqqaf are among those who played an important role in her life, each influencing her life in a different way<sup>4</sup>. Most important of all, an instant affection developed between Shaarawi and Eugénie Le Brun, a Frenchwoman many years her senior, who was married to Husayn Rushdi Pasha, a wealthy landowner and future prime minister. “Nourishing her mind and spirit”, she took it upon herself to direct her reading in French and expand her learning (Shaarawi 78). In the 1890s, Le Brun hosted the first women’s salon in Cairo to become a venue for debating issues pertaining to women, on top of which was veiling, in addition to child bearing and immorality. Providing a forum for other collective intellectual activities, including women’s lectures and political discussions, women began to realize that while Islam

guaranteed women certain rights, they were denied to them by societal codes. For instance, they discovered that many so-called Islamic practices such as face-veiling, segregation and seclusion were not ordained by Islam, as they had been made to believe (Sheri 73-74). The books Le Brun authored were also of paramount importance in calling attention to many rampant inequities of the time<sup>5</sup>. While attending sessions at the Shariah Courts, Le Brun discovered how wives were victimized by their husbands and became intent on ameliorating their living conditions. “Such friendships, through shared intellectual interests, had become the light in Shaarawi’s life” (Quawas).

Formative as these influences were in Shaarawi’s life, a traditional historical approach would gloss over them, deeming them too insignificant a subject matter for historical analysis; a stance that Greenblatt would denigrate as an “exclusion of human agency” (“Resonance” 308). Furthermore, “[w]hen modern historians write about individual lives or small events, they usually stress their broad historical significance or generalizable typicality. Such people and events usually come into view historically only at a distance from the trivialities and intricacies of daily life” (Gallagher and Greenblatt 49). In Shaarawi’s case, the ties she had forged with her female companions would be sidestepped, focusing instead on broader societal and political issues. New historicists, on the other hand, would invoke history through anecdotes of the like, counterpoising them against “more ambitiously comprehensive historical narratives” (Greaney 123). Focusing on grand narratives, “those big words that say everything and nothing about the changes being wrought in the world”, fails to make sense of history (123)<sup>6</sup>. Along the lines of new historicism, “the more one concentrates on the ordinary and hence average practices of a time period, the more one is free to move around within the period and generalize about things like ... the mode of thought or way of life” (Cantor). Thus, it is only when the personal anecdotes are taken into account that an impartial rendition of history becomes attainable. The new historicist focus on the anecdote and the way it “offer[s] access to the everyday, the place where things are actually done, the sphere of practice that even in its most awkward and inept articulations make a claim on the truth”, offers new insights into Shaarawi’s personal details (Gallagher and Greenblatt 48). Reconciling with her husband in 1900; giving birth to a daughter, then to a son; devoting herself to maternal duties in the ensuing years; travelling to France with her husband, then

to Turkey with her mother; the loss of her mother then her brother - all these personal details become laden with a cultural valence, or more accurately a “social energy” (Greenblatt qtd. in Veenstra 187). From a new historicist stance, virtually all details, even those seemingly idiosyncratic or marginal ones, can be made to represent larger wholes. As Shaarawi “develops a feminist social critique from her own experience and then generalizes from her own experience to a public statement of feminism”, clues to broader historical contexts are made available (Quawas).

An even more decisive personal episode in Shaarawi’s life that had far-reaching consequences on her, her contemporaries and even on posterity is her meeting with Marguerite Clement who had come from France on a tour of several eastern countries sponsored by the Carnegie Endowment. A seemingly minor episode like her being Shaarawi’s guest at the Opera House during her visit may be rightly acclaimed as the spark that ignited the women’s movement in Egypt, for it was during this outing that Mlle. Clement inquired if Egyptian women were in the habit of giving and attending public lectures. “We were not”, was Shaarawi’s reply, “but [she] invited her to give one”, thereby heralding a series of public lectures for women (Shaarawi 93). Taking to organizing such lectures became Shaarawi’s prime concern; a groundbreaking enterprise that revolutionized Egyptian women’s lives. Proving to be a great success, a host of Egyptian women, who had acquired a measure of education, exhibited interest in giving more lectures, in addition to their tireless contribution to the women’s section created at the Egyptian University. The importance of similar undertakings becomes more pronounced in terms of the new historicist endeavour to “effect a social rebellion in the study of culture”, the result of which is that “figures hitherto kept outside the proper circles of interest ... have now forced their way” (Gallagher and Greenblatt 9-10). Shaarawi’s proclamation that “Egyptian women began to speak” may be said to capture the kernel of this “social rebellion” (93).

This act of “speaking” is rendered more significant along the lines of new historicism and the way it attends to the marginalized, the occluded and the peripheral, as succinctly summed up in Greenblatt’s emphasis on “the central significance of marginality” (qtd. in Veenstra 192). As Shaarawi made headway onto her lifelong devotion to the rights and claims of women in Egypt, as well as to social and political reform, she rallied more voluble “speaking” women whose

contributions heightened the role of “marginality” in the construction of history. In this respect, Shaarawi’s refusal to attend the reception held in memory of the late Lady Cromer transcends being a personal rebuff on patriotic grounds, to become an eye-opener to the political and social backdrop against which her life is pitted. The pervasive presence of the British in Egypt; the establishment of the Foundling Home in memory of the late Lady Cromer; the formation of the Lady Cromer Society by British and European women as a dispensary for poor mothers and children; women’s burgeoning but discreet public activism; the germs of an organized feminist movement; the gradual infiltration of women into the public arena; the launching of Mubarrat Muhammad Ali, a women’s social service organization and dispensary - are all indispensable phenomena that, by recourse to a new historicist approach, become invested with a broader cultural significance.

Shaarawi’s foundation of The Intellectual Association of Egyptian Women in 1914, which worked to improve women’s intellectual and social lives, was another manifestation of a visible change in gender consciousness. In terms of Greenblatt’s model, this single episode reflects a dense web of changes since any change is connected with a host of others, progressive or regressive (Murfin and Ray 243). Travelling to Europe with her son for treatment on the eve of the First World War was another momentous experience that later had its bearing on ameliorating the then marginalized status of Egyptian women, and also on paving the way for the role they played in Egypt’s fight for political independence. Attending public speeches in general and meetings for women agitating for peace and the right to vote in particular; being exposed to the western turn of mind; having first-hand experience with the tumultuous state of affairs in Europe right before the outbreak of the war- all these seemingly personal episodes proved to be the catalyst for Shaarawi’s ensuing involvement in the Nationalist Movement in Egypt, as well as for her commitment to the women’s cause. Even her bereavement over shattering personal events, such as the passing away of her mother, subsequently her sister, and, most devastatingly, her brother, becomes laden with historical value, contextualized as it is in a time of political and social upheavals. By the same token, her account of the rupture between her and her husband, which was about to lead to their separation, is suffused with her delineation of the Egyptian Nationalist Movement, as is palpable in her

words: “The Egyptian Nationalist Movement brought my husband and me closer to one another” (111).

The Epilogue of *Harem Years* is particularly notable in this regard since it charts the time frame from 1919 to 1924, when Egyptians, men and women alike, battled for national liberation. In 1919 the Egyptians founded the Wafd Party, aiming at gaining independence, with Shaarawi’s husband becoming a leader. As far as the status of Egyptian women was concerned, this was also the decisive time that heralded women’s organized struggle for their liberation. In this context, Shaarawi’s memoirs rightly establish her as a chronicler of both the Egyptian Nationalist Movement and the women’s movement, thereby attesting to the way gender issues are reciprocally integrated with multiple and shifting social, political and economic changes. Not only do her memoirs become a valid conduit for revealing the configurations of power, society and ideology of her time, but they also contest the value of established canonical works that are often antithetical to the inclusion of hitherto “marginalized, half hidden or even entirely excluded” groups (Gallagher and Greenblatt 11). While a traditional historical approach would primarily focus on issues appertaining to colonialism, nationalism, identity and sovereignty, and would touch on women’s militancy only during the time when nationalist men welcomed their support in the nationalist struggle, a new historicist “practice”, the term preferred by Greenblatt, will view the rhetoric of women’s liberation as being caught up in a web of changing and contesting values. The effacement of women’s experiences by hegemonic discourses is accordingly redressed by the way new historicists make a strong plea for the textuality of history. Moreover, since the new historicist paradigm rejects separating texts into canonical and non-canonical categories, and seeks instead to explore the connection between artistic and non-artistic texts, *Harem Years* may be rightly read as a reliable document of historical discourse, inexorably related to both its author and its context.

More thoroughgoing insights into this significant moment are reflected in Shaarawi’s memoirs as she recounts her contribution to the fight for national liberation. In 1919, she organized one of the largest protests of the revolution, “The March of Veiled Women”, to denounce the repressive acts and intimidation practiced by the British. Blatantly defying the constrictive codes of the harem culture, she urged the women of Cairo to take to the streets. Her detailed account of the course

they undertook not only testifies to their militancy, but also sheds light on this decisive moment in the history of Egypt. By 1920 the first political organization for Egyptian women, the Wafdist Women's Central Committee (WWCC) was formed, of which Shaarawi was made president. The championing of women's previously unheeded voices resonates in Shaarawi's words: "My husband kept me informed of events so that I could fill the vacuum if he were imprisoned or exiled" (116). The new historicist consensus of how "[t]exts ... shed their singular categorical identities, their division into 'literary' and 'historical'" (Gallagher and Greenblatt 52), is palpable in the way Shaarawi's memoirs act as an eye-opener to the changing power relations of the time. In 1922, Shaarawi held a mass meeting for women at her house, eventually resolving to launch a boycott against the British. After independence was achieved in Egypt, nationalist men blatantly disregarded women's liberation. Much to their dismay, the new constitution turned out to be inimical to women's libertarian agenda since they were not granted suffrage. Feeling betrayed by the Wafd, which had agreed to grant women the vote, Shaarawi retaliated by forming the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU) in 1923, primarily concerned with attaining political, social, and legal equality for women. Raising marriage age, women's suffrage, the restriction of polygamy, stricter divorce laws for men, expanding the access of girls and women to education, running a dispensary for women and children were also among the EFU's priorities (Badran 96). In May 1923, Shaarawi travelled to Rome to attend a conference of the International Alliance of Women. It was upon her return that she removed her face veil in public for the first time, a symbolic act of liberation that "signalled the end of the harem system in Egypt" (Sullivan and Abed-Kotob 103). After Egypt gained nominal independence from Britain in 1922, she proceeded with her fight for women's rights. Not only did she lead Egyptian women protests at the opening of Parliament in January 1924, but she also submitted a list of nationalist and feminist grievances. Ignored as they were by the Wafdist government, she resigned from the WWCC, but continued to lead the Egyptian Feminist Union until her death, publishing the feminist magazine *l'Égyptienne (al-Misriyya)*, and representing Egypt at international women's conferences. She played a leading role in 1944 in convening the first Arab Feminist Conference, and in 1945 in forming the Arab Feminist Union. She also proposed internationalizing the Suez Canal and abolishing nuclear weapons. In



1945, two years before her death at the age of sixty-eight, she received the highest decoration from the Egyptian state, the *Nishan al Kamal*, for services rendered to the country (Goldschmidt 191; Shaarawi 117-34; Sullivan and Abed-Kotob 103-105)

To conclude, more than merely being an autobiographical document that charts Shaarawi's life story and delineates her progress towards an articulation of a feminist consciousness, *Harem Years* becomes a pulpit that "exposes" an instrumental period in the history of Egypt and the feminist movement (Gallagher and Greenblatt 49). Enmeshing the personal with the political, the historical with the literary, the peripheral with the central, and the past with the present, Shaarawi's memoirs may be said to enact the new historicist aim to simultaneously grasp "the historicity of texts and the textuality of history".

When brought to bear on Shaarawi's account, the new historicist endeavour to recover lost histories and explore mechanisms of repression and subjugation adds new insights into the character of both the author and her milieu. Concerned as it is with both the margins and the center, a new historicist approach would catapult Shaarawi's voice to the foreground to examine "not only what stories were occluded, but also how they have been concealed from view in order to facilitate the elaboration of a closed system" (Gallagher and Greenblatt 49). Shaarawi, in this context, becomes a specimen of the new historicist emphasis on human agency; one who acts according to the rules and conflicts of a given culture; is fashioned and conditioned by the expectations of his/her class, gender, religion, race and national identity; and is constantly bringing about changes in the course of history. While a traditional historical approach would examine the "closed system" as the one and only viable source of authority, showing how the text objectively reflected its underlying beliefs and value judgments, a new historicist reading, by contrast, subjectively filters interpretation of the very same system from Shaarawi's own set of historically conditioned viewpoints. Rather than reflecting the system, Shaarawi's memoirs resist many of its assumptions, to become only one of many histories that constitute the social and political makeup of Egypt. If one is to describe the text-history dyad and how they mutually influence one another, one can find no better way than in the new historicist thrust towards referentiality; how literature both refers and is referred to by other historical determinants outside its own aesthetic boundaries.

Finally, if Shaarawi's autobiographical narrative brings to light an amalgam of disparate episodes, it is further imbued with new dimensions when examined along the lines of the new historicist attempt to change the ways in which we approach literary texts and their meanings by probing into the relationship between literature and social, cultural, political and sexual powers. As a result, in addition to its being *The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist, Harem Years* aptly becomes a chronicle of an Egyptian history.

## Works Cited

### Primary Sources:

Shaarawi, Huda. *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist (1879-1924)*. Trans. Margot Badran. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1998. Print.

### Secondary Sources:

Badran, Margot. *Feminists, Islam and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995. Print.

---. Introduction. *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist (1879-1924)*. By Huda Shaarawi. Trans. Margot Badran. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1998. 7-22. Print.

---. Preface. *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist (1879-1924)*. By Huda Shaarawi. Trans. Margot Badran. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1998. 1-6. Print.

Bertens, Hans. *Literary Theory: The Basics*. London: Routledge, 200. Print.

Cantor, Paul A. "Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicist Vision." *Academic Questions* 6.4 (1993): 21+. *Questia*. Web. 17 Oct. 2012.

Chatterjee et al. *The 20th Century: A Retrospective*. Boulder: Westview Press, 2002. Print.

Cole, Juan R. I. *Colonialism and Revolution in the Middle East: Social and Cultural Origins of Egypt's 'Urabi Movement*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1993. Print.

Coyle, Martin, et al., eds. *Encyclopedia of Literature and Criticism*. London: Routledge, 1990. Print.

El Guindi, Fadwa. *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance*. New York: Berg, 1999. Print.

Gallagher, Catherine, and Stephen Greenblatt. *Practicing New Historicism*. Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 2000. Print.

Greaney, Michael. *Conrad, Language, and Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. Print.

Greenblatt, Stephen. "The Power of Forms in the English

Renaissance”. Eds. Vincent B. Leitch et al. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: Norton, 2001. 2251-54. Print.

“Resonance and Wonder.” *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*. Eds. Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. London: Arnold, 2001. 305-24. Print.

Goldschmidt, Arthur. *Biographical Dictionary of Modern Egypt*. Boulder: L. Reinner, 1999. Print.

Hamilton, Paul. *Historicism*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Routledge, 2003. Print.

Leitch, Vincent B. et al., eds. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: Norton, 2001. Print.

Lennox, Sara. “Feminism and New Historicism”. *New Historicism*. 84.2 (1992): 159-70. *Monatshefte*. Web. 5 Aug. 2013.

Murfin, Ross, and Suparia M. Ray. *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*. Boston: Bedford, 1997. Print.

Quawas , Rula B. “ ‘A Sea Captain in Her Own Right’: Navigating the Feminist Thought of Huda Shaarawi.” *Journal of International Women's Studies*. 8.1 (2006): 219 + *Questia*. Web. 12 Dec. 2012.

Rice, Philip, and Patricia Waugh, eds. *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. London: Arnold, 2001. Print.

Sheri, Bahira. “Multiple Perspectives on Women’s Rights.” *Women's Rights: A Global View*. Ed. Lynn Walter. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2000. 71-85. Print.

Sullivan, Denis J., and Sana Abed-Kotob. *Islam in Contemporary Egypt: Civil Society vs. the State*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1999. Print.

Veenstra, Jan R. “The New Historicism of Stephen Greenblatt: On Poetics of Culture and the Interpretation of Shakespeare.” *History and Theory*. 34.3 (1995): 174-98. *Questia*. Web. 16 Oct. 2012.

Walter, Lynn, ed. *Women’s Rights: A Global View*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2000. Print.

Wayne, Don E. "New Historicism." *Encyclopedia of Literature and Criticism*. Eds. Martin Coyle et al. London: Routledge, 1990. 791-805. Print.

Young, R. V. "Stephen Greenblatt: The Critic As Anecdotalist." *Modern Age* 51.3/4 (2009): 262-271. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 30 Aug. 2012.

## Notes:

---

<sup>1</sup> In her Preface to the book, Margot Badran tells how she came to find Huda Shaarawi's memoirs twenty years after her death. While studying in Egypt and doing research on the feminist movement and its leader, she met Hawa Idris, Huda Shaarawi's cousin, who spent long hours with her discussing the life of such an iconic figure, eventually introducing her to the memoirs, written as they were in Arabic under the title *Mudhakirradi*.

<sup>2</sup> Generally speaking, new historicism is influenced by Michel Bakhtin, Louis Althusser, Hayden White, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Raymond Williams, Clifford Geertz and Michel Foucault.

<sup>3</sup> By the time Huda Shaarawi was born in 1879, Egypt had already undergone a series of transformations. Early in the century, Egypt won de facto independence from the Ottoman Empire when Muhammad Ali implemented a plan to modernize Egypt. By the 1860s and 1870s, modern transformation accelerated under the rule of Khedive Ismâil, culminating in the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. Architectural forms catering to female isolation also began to disappear. The Opera House built to celebrate the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 provided new entertainment for upper-class women. Screened loges reached by a private staircase were installed for women. A pioneer in the 1880s was Princess Nazli Fazil, niece of the deposed Khedive Ismâil, who broke ground as the first woman to open a salon frequented by men (Badran, *Feminists* 6-7).

<sup>4</sup> A penchant for European music and French literature aligned Shaarawi and Adilah Nabarawi, her "new and strong-willed friend [who] was well educated" (Shaarawi 62-63). Together they frequented the opera house and shared one of its private boxes. Possessing many "fine qualities" and defending her when attempts were made to reconcile her with her husband, Mme. Richard fostered Shaarawi's artistic sensibilities. While Adilah shared her outings, Atiyah Saqqaf, a distant relative of her mother's who had come from Arabia following her divorce, stayed at their household for five years. Domineering and possessive of Shaarawi's attention as she was, "all the while [they] remained like two sisters" (76).

---

<sup>5</sup> While *Harem et les Musulmanes* (The Harem and Muslim Women) was meant to enlighten Europeans about the life of Egyptian women and to clear up any false misconceptions, *Les Reépudiées* (The Divorcees), was intended to reveal that it was not Islam but “social customs” which oppressed women (Shaarawi 81).

<sup>6</sup> Grand narrative or “master narrative” is a term introduced by Jean-François Lyotard in his classic 1979 work *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, in which Lyotard summed up a range of views which were being developed at the time, as a critique of the institutional and ideological forms of knowledge.