

Writing Sexuality in the Autobiographical Form A Reflection of Mona Prince's Novel *So You May See*

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Abstract This article explores the representation of the female body and sexuality in modern Arab women's writing in Egypt, focusing on the 1990s generation and the emergence of a new literary trend of explicit writing, or so-called *kitābath al-jasad*, which exposes bodily subjects using explicit sexual language, prohibited sensual themes, and erotic fantasies as tools of revolt against social and political taboos and as a means of challenging extremist Islamic religious rhetoric and the patriarchal authority. My representative example of this generation and this writing is Egyptian novelist Mona Prince. In her novel, *So You May See* (2011), experience connects to nakedness protest movements by using the body as a key vehicle to protest fundamentalist religious powers that oppose women's liberation. In both contexts of body protest (clothed or unclothed), female sexuality is the tool par excellence to combat religious extremist rhetoric that amplifies hostility towards women.

Keywords Female body. Women's writing. Sexual explicitness. Female sexuality. Mona Prince. Censorship. Taboos. Nakedness writing. Eroticism in Arab literature.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Egyptian 1990s Generation. Female Writings and Sexuality. – 3 Writing Sexuality in Autobiographical Form. – 4 Mona Prince's Writing and Sexuality. – 5 Mona Prince. Writing as a Self-Baring.



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1 Introduction

Female sexuality is a complex topic in modern Arab women's writing. Writing about the body does not only convey the gendered identity of these writings. It reflects the particularity of women's literary spaces, which are permeated by psychological, social, and cultural experiences that distinguish them from male experiences. Studying the female body and its numerous symbolic connotations within Arab cultures reveals a variety of literary depictions of the body in women's writings. Different generations, literary trends, and creative experiences have also portrayed it in a variety of ways. For this reason, the feminine body has constituted a rich topic, which has been narratively represented in diverse fashions.

Early modern women's writing, depicting female sexual desire in women's writing was taboo, perhaps only alluded to through thick layers of figurative language and repartee. With the exception of very few names in the history of Arab women novelists, revealing the inherent sensuality of the female self required gradual and cautious steps.

Several critics have observed two main approaches regarding the representation of female sexuality in modern Arab women's writing. First, there is a conservative approach, which Susan Naji labels as the "loss-of-self" phase. This characterises the era of early writing and derives from conventional and patriarchal attitudes towards women's sexuality (Naji 1989, 13; Booth 1991, 7-8; Zeidan 1995, 103).

In the second approach, women's writing tended to express female sexuality more explicitly and openly, and dared to deconstruct the classical image of women in society. A few examples include Nawal Al Saa'dawi (1931-2021), Ghada al-Samman (1942-), Alifa Rifaat (1930-1996), Layla Baalbaki (1936-), and Colette Khoury (1931-), among others. Some of them such as Layla Baalbaki and Colette Khoury, were subjected to social criticism, slander, lawsuits, and sequestration because they violated social taboos and dared to cross the red lines.

Regardless of the broad conclusions on the subject of the conservative attitude of early writings towards women's sexuality, the emergence of the awareness of the female body, or body consciousness, in modern Arab women's writings was not necessarily chronological. In fact, each generation embraced a number of bold voices, but the strength of body consciousness and the approach to the female body varied from one individual voice to another based on factors such as the writer's cultural background, personal experiences, and ability to resist the patriarchal assumptions of the established literary canon.

With the onset of the 1990s, critical exclusion of women's writings and the creative anxiety and apprehension towards body representation did not last long. This period witnessed a quantitative and qualitative transformation in Arab women's writing, particularly re-

garding women's sexuality. The body became a major focus of Arab women's writings, and titles which either contained the word 'body' (*al-jasad*) directly, or implied its connotations, became common. Examples of these include *Dhakirat al-jasad* (Memory of the Flesh) by Ahlam Mustaghanami (1993), *Inahu jassadi* (It Is My Body) by Nabila Zubayr (2000), *Khārij al-jasad* (Out of the Body) by Afaf Batayinah (2004), *Wahshat al-jasad* (The Body's Forlornness) by Ni'mah Khālid (1997), and others. This is in addition to titles suggestive of the body's erotic contents, such as Ahlam Mustaghanami's *Ābir sarīr* (Passerby in the Sheets) (2003) and Faḍīlah Fārūq's *Iktishāf al-shahwah* (Uncovering Lust) (2005), among other titles which celebrate the body. These titles drew critical attention to the emergence of a new literary approach in women's writing which focuses on the sensual aspects of the body. As a result, the body and its visualisations gained widespread critical attention (Nour 2004; Zahi 2003; El-Wakil 2007).

It was not only the explicit writing of women's bodies and their sexual and emotional desires that were labelled "writing of the body" in that new genre. Several women writers did not merely limit themselves to using the term 'body' or its sexual connotations in the titles of their works to affirm the sensuality of the texts. These authors were bold enough to represent women's bodies through a number of somewhat taboo topics relating to sexuality.¹ This writing genre eventually took centre stage in women's writing, particularly through the advent of online publishing. This enabled women writers from conservative regions such as the Arab Gulf to use pseudonyms to avoid book banning and censorship. The online world has fostered the spread of public and private forums, encouraging the creation of a parallel literary market and a parallel literary audience. This resulted in the production of literary works that surpassed their predecessors in their portrayal of taboos.²

The new literary trend of explicit writing, or so-called *kitābat al-jasad*, utilises prohibited sensual themes, explicit sexual language, pornographic elements, and erotic fantasies to demonstrate a new feminist discourse, and reframes representations of the female body and sexuality. Critics also noted that the new writing uses themes of

1 Some examples of these include sexual harassment and assault, same-sex relationships, and incest, among others. Writers who have broached these topics include Salwā Nu'aymī in her novel *Burhān al-'asal* (*The Proof of Honey*), Faḍīlah Fārūq in *Ta' al-Khajal* (*The Ta'a of Shame*), Samar Yazbek in her novel *Rā'iḥat al-qirfa* (*Cinnamon*), focusing on same-sex relationships, and Amal Jarrah in her narrative *al-Riwāyah al-mal'ūnah* (*The Cursed Novel*), which revolves around incest.

2 A few examples include Ṣabā al-Ḥirz's novel *al-Ākḥarūn* (*The Others*), which examines lesbian relationships in Saudi Arabia, and Wardah 'Abd al-Malik's novel *al-Awdah* (*The Return*), which is a sexual diary of the female protagonist. All of these women writers have hidden behind pseudonyms.

body and sexuality in explicit and sensual narratives to shock readers and subvert their expectations of this writing. According to the critics, this new genre broke down social barriers and crossed red lines of what can and cannot be said. The new women's writing declared insubordination against a lengthy history of fear, reluctance, conservatism, and self-censorship. It was able to confront rigid traditions, address delicate topics and intimate experiences, and express sexual content explicitly. Several female authors displayed erotic scenes in their texts and explicitly conveyed intimate sexual details. The new genre was able to portray feminine feelings connected to the body's sensual and sexual desire without metaphorical coding or stylistic tricks.³

In her novel *So You May See (Innī uḥaddithuka li-tarā)*, Mona Prince (2008) delivers a model for female writing in Egypt in the 1990s, and for *kitābat al-jasad*, par excellence. Prince provocatively mixes elements of individuality and sexuality and presents a model of how the sexualised body can revolt against the values of patriarchal Arab society and its imaginings of the female body. This has been achieved not merely in depictions of free sexual relationships, but also through her own personal experiences as a text narrator living in a society that remains characterised by its morally schizophrenic stereotyping of the female body and women's sexual freedom.

Mona Prince's novel represents in this sense a bold feminine text that stands on a par with other female writings in its confrontation of sexual taboos. Together they lay the foundation for a new vocabulary for nonconformist womanly writing that chooses to scandalise societal values rather than bend to them. Both, the FEMEN movement and Prince's discourses use the female body to channel this protest, and shock with its stark nakedness the conservatism of masculine society.

For the purpose of this study, I maintain that Prince's novel epitomises an extension of progressive techniques of protest in the discourse of new waves of writing, which in turn is a development in the techniques of women's protest writing as a whole. Through bodily and psychological self-baring, this confessional, individualistic writer mirrors the techniques used by the new feminist wave "to understand their own movement and to develop and deploy effective political strategies" (Borda 2009, 117).

The act of self-baring through writing, whether literal or figurative, was a technique used by Western women to rebel against social and/or political injustices such as the commodification of the female body or the economic abuse of women's rights, among others. The West's third-wave feminist activists have deployed the body as

3 See for example Najm 2004.

a sign for extreme protest. The technique was then used to the same effect by Eastern activists who found in it a strategy for confronting the violations to which women's bodies are subjected in their societies, especially following the Arab Spring revolutions (Pratt 2013).

Through an analysis of Prince's novel, this study attempts to prove how the female body is polarised between the woman - its owner - on the one hand, and religious and patriarchal powers that dictate its visibility, or otherwise, on the other. This historical struggle over the ownership of the female body has been reflected again and again in women's fictional writing in a variety of forms and techniques that sought to demand the alleviation of the injustices suffered by that body and to condemn society for enforcing them. In early feminist writers such as Nawal Al Saa'dawi, Ghada al-Samman, Alifa Rifaat, and Layla Baalbaki, this approach develops towards a stronger stage of rebelliousness. Women reclaimed ownership of their bodies; they discarded the masks of feigned righteousness and deliberately reached out to pick the forbidden fruit, a crime that history claims was their original sin in any case. In their stark nakedness, not only are the women's bodies laid bare, the whole society, the entire universe, is. The deliberate nakedness of the female body as a protest technique facilitates not just the exposure of deep-rooted societal double standards, but also their deconstruction. The shock of self-revelation in the literary work is the textual correlative of the act of baring the body in revolt against the social and political status quo.

2 Egyptian 1990s Generation. Female Writings and Sexuality

The discourse of sexuality in contemporary Egyptian literature flourished noticeably in the mid-nineties. Female writers from this generation chose the form of the novel to present a feminine body of fiction that was then generically labelled *kitābath al-banāt*, or 'girls' writing'. This new trend in writing was created with distinct features. It is lavish in its expression of the self and deeply occupied with the female body as a central theme for narration. It is a kind of writing that does not claim to endorse or subscribe to feminist principles or women's issues. As a literary trend, it maintains reservations about being labelled a 'new feminist writing', 'girl fiction', or *kitābat al-jasad*, 'body narrative'.⁴ The new body of writings has won

⁴ See Sabry Hafez's series of articles discussing women writers of the 1990s such as Nora Amin, May El Telmissany, and Miral al-Tahawy, *Majallat al-Muṣawwar* (al-Qāhirah, February-August 22, 1998). See also the following series by Ali al-Ra'ay, *al-Ahram* newspaper (al-Qāhirah, July 1996). See also Shoukri 'Ayyād, "Nisa'a'una al-saghirat yu'allimunana al-hubb" (Our Young Women Teach Us about Love). *Majallat al-Hilāl*

critical acclaim. The audacity of its content aroused the interest of translators, and foreign publishing houses. Many of these texts were translated and were savoured as a new addition to the tradition of 'Egyptian women's writing'. The new trend showed a new angle of artistic vision and aesthetic maturity and prompted a crucial inquiry into the relationship between this trend and preceding generations of literary writing: How it differs from, conforms to, or refines/redefines existing forms of women's writing? Alternatively, the emerging trend was viewed as a totally new experience in writing that completely severed connections with other literary forms. In his study of the nineties generation's creative writing, the critic Sabry Hafez described the generational experience of those women writers as "a radical departure from established traditions" (Hafez 2010) which, in its totality, represents a rebellion against previous writing traditions. For the writers who represent this new trend, their experience is an attitude that they vehemently communicate and desperately defend. Communicating their distinctive positions on occasion developed into verbal battles and declarations of the individuality of their experiences and the lack of any generational influence on them by older female writers. Many of these new women writers publicly announced that their writing is a form of self-generated and self-centred human creativity that does not reflect any interest in gender issues and consciously rejects being labelled 'feminist in nature'. In several interviews, many of these writers described the uniqueness and originality of their individual experiences and the irrelevance of their work to past writing. They publicly deplored the fact that critics tended to associate them with one literary category or another, whether generation or genre. Repeatedly, they denied any ideological connection between their writings and the ideas expressed by self-proclaimed feminist writers whose writing contexts and discourse showed ideological commitment to both social and political liberation movements, including feminist causes. The 1990s generation is eager to stress the lack of connection between their writings and any given feminist positioning and utterly rejects being categorised as proponents of the women's liberation movements. To the Arab mindset, the label of 'feminist literature' has come to be negatively associated with the connotations of contemptuous harem writing (al-Nağā 1998, 11). Add to this the influence of the conservative religious tide that swept over the region and branded all women's movements as destructive Westernised imports. In short, 'feminist' was a name held in disrepute.

al-Qāhirah, July-August, and September 1998). Cf. also a series of articles by Farouk Abdel El-Qader, "In the Scene of the New Egyptian Novel, Half the Novelists Are Women". *al-Safir Newspaper* (Beirut, July-August 2002).

The new women's writing trend formed out of rebellion against and rejection of this cultural reality. The new women writers denounced the history of receiving women's writing on such negative terms. Their deliberately rebellious writing came to be labelled as *kitābat al-jasad* or 'body writing'. This new trend of writing managed to cross all the red lines previously circumscribing female writing, thus challenging the traditional reader's taste with explicit, shocking texts that freely express female desires and sexual fantasies.

The new trend adopted by the young woman writers, labelled as an explicit and sensual narrative, challenge the reader's perceptions by violating many social taboos and crossing all the red lines that surround the expression of female sexuality. That audacious writing communicates a desire to lay bare what traditional Arab society previously deemed unspeakable. It seeks to touch upon sensitive topics and intimate experiences that expose otherwise hidden sexual content, depicting a variety of erotic scenes and detailing particulars of sexual encounters in explicit, unequivocal language. The new trend of Arab female writers disclosed their sexuality in a confessional technique, giving voice to feminine carnal needs and desires in their crudest forms - unlike the earlier approach, which tended to cover sexual feelings with language that figuratively or suggestively alluded to that desire.

Literary critics have been eager to define and document the features of this new, rebellious writing experience. 'Abd al-Raḥmān Abū 'Awf identified the centrality of the self, the female body, and female sexuality in this type of writing. Characterising this current of creative female writing as being absorbed in its own existential afflictions. Nonetheless, the self(ves) portrayed in these texts, as he explains, are in constant struggle with and mutiny against the worlds surrounding it/them. The defining feature of this new fiction lies in its keen interest in shocking and shaking into new consciousness societies that have long been ruled by the values of patriarchal traditions. It is also characterised by rejecting the male-dominated society through

the shining feminine presence of sensitively styled and individually patterned language forms, giving voice to the female body, feelings, emotions, and instincts. [...] The result has been a fiction that gives foundation for a female writing form that disregards the socially acceptable in favour of spreading a wholesome version of feminine wisdom, integral to which is the complementarity of the soul and the body. The aesthetic pattern of the form is thus built outside the boundaries of the patriarchal constraints which have long ruled over the fictional creativity of the Arab Egyptian women. ('Awf 1996)⁵

⁵ All Arabic quote has been translated by the Author.

This phenomenon of focusing on the body and sexuality, writing increasingly about its sexual needs, and condensing descriptions of intimate scenes verging sometimes on the pornographic – in other words, this tendency to articulate the body and to unequivocally expose its presence in a variety of ways – calls for an investigation into the motives prompting these choices. It has been confirmed again and again that women’s literature of this type revolves around glorifying the female body through celebrating its vicissitudes in spite of an overshadowing social culture that represses its freedom and demeans its integrity. It is difficult to theorise about a systematic frame of body depictions in such novels. Between instances of praising and glorification, on the one hand, and others of violation and degradation, on the other, lies a long chain of diverse images that have contributed to making the female body a fertile theme for a multitude of fictional works (Ibrāhīm 2011, 215).

According to ‘Abd Allāh Ibrāhīm, this new trend of writing is characterised by a celebration of the female body and its desires in a way that contradicts the reader’s habitual expectations as to what Arab women (should) write. It is a style that disregards traditions and shows brazen disloyalty to traditional Egyptian society as the reader knows it. In addition to its criticism of the pervading male-dominated culture and its delineation of an alternative feminine worldview, this development in female writing is intent on flouting the conventional tendencies to satisfy the receivers’ anticipations, gratify their needs, or conform to prevailing traditions (Ibrāhīm 2011, 7).

In an attempt to explain the growing interest in portraying body and sexuality in contemporary female writing, some critics have pointed to the financial profit involved in writing sensational fiction that is particularly tempting to a certain readership. Others have insinuated that these female writers are mainly looking for fame by attracting attention to their singing outside the flock, particularly if their novels were banned or confiscated by official or community censorship (Al-Abtah, Sharīf 2004).

Other critics maintain that the trend is part of a common phenomenon in Arabic writing that is not exclusive to female writers. They see it as symptomatic of the polarisation that results from the struggle between intellectual liberal discourse and extremist religious discourse. They also affirm that the exaggerated depiction of sexual scenes and explicit rhetoric is not a feature of the eroticism of the text as much as it is substantiation of the struggle between the author and an increasingly right-wing society (Allen, Kilpatrick, De Moor 1995, 129).

Writing the female body in contemporary Arab women’s fiction is particularly effectual as a method for deconstructing patriarchal structures, since its primary aims are to dismantle hierarchies, put an end to male tutelage in an inherently patriarchal society, and re-

gain a power that has been confiscated in the name of the sacred (al-Nağā 1998, 27).

3 Writing Sexuality in Autobiographical Form

Symbolically, bodily expression is multifaceted. For one, it affirms the writer's fearlessness in explicitly addressing and expressing the female self and conscience in a manner heedless of any imposed constraints. Simultaneously, it reveals a keen interest in protesting against a history of passive reception that framed the reader's expectations of female writings within a set of boundaries associating femininity with concepts of modesty and virtuousness. The new generation of female writers juxtaposes these known expectations with completely contradictory depictions of the undisclosed memory of the female body's experiences and desires, which have been historically repressed. Likewise, this is a writing style that rebels against oblique, stylistic choices, which the new writers see as being complicit with the expectations of a generally conservative readership. The voice(s) representing this current manifest themselves clearly in women's fiction and as a phenomenon call(s) for further investigation. Researcher Lanā 'Abd al-Raḥmān's doctoral dissertation, for instance, looks at the concomitance between manifestations of body writing and the autobiographical form in Lebanese women's fiction. She selects a number of texts to investigate instances of the relationship between autobiographical confessional writings and writing the body in fiction. She makes it clear that the connection is an affirmation of the writer's gendered identity, emphasising that the point of departure is that when women write about their bodies they tend to confide in their readers and expose their inner selves within the frame of the autobiographical structure in the narrated context (al-Raḥmān 2012).

It became evident that writing about the female body and its inherent sexuality is closely connected to the confessional and autobiographical forms. Female writers chose to make use of these forms to express their fictional experiments. Many reviewers of the new trend have been so amazed at the upsurge in autobiographical writings in women's fiction that they considered narrating the self a defining characteristic of these writings. Some went further, to encourage a critical evaluation of every woman-written text for latent biographical features.

Baring the self is the second characteristic distinguishing the feminine writing trend under study, as we explained above. It expresses the need to write the self within the framework of the joint apparatuses of giving voice to the body and its sexual impulses, on the one hand, and showcasing the self as it emerges in the process, on the other, all within the autobiographical narrative structure. The nov-

el thus promises to narrate the body in the form of diaries, personal anecdotes, and notations of its hidden sensual dimensions, hence the titles of some of these novels. The titles clearly express their confessional content of sensual sexuality through the fictional autobiographical structure that elaborates small details of childhood memories and private experiences.

The critic Khayrī Dūmah, who studies new autobiographical fiction in Egypt, chooses to focus on this personal dimension in this emerging trend and the extent to which it influences narrating the self in such texts. Dūmah refers to the choice made by several of the female writers in assigning their own full personal names to their heroines, a phenomenon that inextricably identifies the protagonist with the narrator. The implication here is that the text narrating the protagonist's life encompasses that of the narrator as well, who does not intend to hide behind the strict mask of the storyteller. According to Dūmah, there has always been an assumption on the part of the reader of fictional works written by women, especially in conservative societies such as Arabic societies, that the protagonist is but a fictional extension of the author; their interconnectedness is implicitly presupposed. As such, every feminine piece of writing intrigues the reader by virtue of presumably being a piece of personal writing. In fact, the new generation of female writers does not attempt to deny this direct projection of their own lives upon their art. On the contrary, they insist, instead, on including in their texts direct and explicit cues that help the reader identify them with their protagonists. Likewise, they are just as firm when they choose to signpost their novels with the body as a central theme that appeals to a readership long intrigued by the female body's invisibility (Dūmah 2003).

This use of the autobiographical form by female novelists aroused controversy regarding the originality of their literary experiences. Critics questioned their extensive use of self-narration, regarding it as a retreat centring on the self or as a personal desire for self-purging personal details from the author's life.

The autobiographical form became a typical fictional structure for most female-written texts. The novel usually revolves around a female character narrating her life story, which intersects with a given historical background, which in turn allows the reader enough guessing space to identify the author with her central character. Most of the time, the central character is an educated middle-class writer telling her personal experiences in one way or another. Even if the narrated autobiography does not precisely follow the author's own storyline, it remains a form of confessional revelation that goes beyond the received narrative conventions and allows the illusion of distancing the novelist from her protagonist (Tamārah, s.d.).

This trend in writing fiction confronts the world in a challenging and individualistic manner. Conceptualisations of received virtue

or moral balances that female writers have to maintain in order to conform to their societies mean very little to these female authors. Reconciling their literary taste with whatever is socially dominant or acceptable is characteristically irrelevant. Just the opposite, they systematically and consciously defy the historical notions of feminine compliance and abstinence by giving voice to unequivocal lust and sexualised characters who are ready to let out all their personal stories. Those characters are real women, contextualised within real social histories, not the ghost of some slave girl fleeing a harem to comfortably conform to what has socially been normalised as 'the obscenity of slave women'. There is no doubt that this openness in women's sexual self-expression has fiercely shocked the custodians of the patriarchal societies they live in as well as the upholders of the growing conservative religiosity with their male-dictated conceptualisations of womanhood and femininity.

The stylistic choice of the autobiographical form to deliver this trend in female-authored fiction is one of the principal questions researchers still need to address. Why are erotic depictions of the female body and sexuality best articulated within autobiographical or biographical patterns? And how suitable has this technical choice been in expressing the feminine identity it intends to divulge?

Autobiographical narration is certainly not a new technique in Arabic fiction. Styles of narration have generally drifted between traditional and modern techniques, on the one hand, and the experimental forms typical of contemporary literature, on the other. However, it is noteworthy that in this context autobiographical narration is loaded with connotations that extend beyond variation of style/genere towards a more symbolic function, aiming to place the focus on the central narrating Self the purposeful Self of the narrator within as well as the author without. The stylistic choice reflects the author's keen desire to disclose this self in the most radically non-compliant manner.

It was typical of the female novelists of the 1960s, for instance, to stress the separation between the fictional characters they wrote and their own identities by delineating a clearly drawn space between the two. Some stylistic tricks of the trade, such as using third-person pronouns and objective narrative techniques, are employed to encourage the reader to distinguish between the character and the author, even in cases where the personal background experience of the author is of genuine relevance to the text. However, the sixties' works used realistic techniques to examine many social issues facing women through the depiction of fictional characters representing the various social classes. That is to say, employing the techniques of the omniscient and neutral narrators, which established a gap between the female author and the fictional female character, has been in line with an aesthetic preference that helped those

writers to delve deeper into women's issues and to allow the reader to see beyond the individuality of the author's identity. As a technical tool, distancing author from character allowed for a more accurate depiction of women's realities and eliminated the possibility of the readers' projection of fictional texts onto the authors' private lives. However, it is fair to admit that voyeurism around female writers' personal lives is a habit of the Arab reader. This may be due to what Fatima Al Muhsin describes as the inclination of the Arab reader who "has dealt, and still very much does deal, with women writers' texts as their own diaries that they choose to share" (Muhsin 2003). This concern pushed some pioneering authors to preface their literary works with disclaimers denying any connection between their fictional worlds and their personal lives.

To cite an example, the Egyptian writer Su'ād Zuhayr introduced her collection of short stories, *Diaries of a Tomboy (I'tirāfāt imra'ah mustarjilah*, 1960), with a denial of this very connection:

These stories do not represent my life story [...] nor are they my personal experiences [...]. They are no more than the diaries of an anonymous woman that I received one day by mail with a short note written by their author allowing me to rewrite them for publication. (Zuhayr 2003)

Despite the clearly anticipated functionality of the text, the writer sensed the need to justify herself and to hide behind the identity of this unknown woman, a choice that a later generation of female writers of the same decade did not make. This marked the starting point for discussing the distinction between a fictional text and the character of its author: "fear prevents the female writer from showing herself as an entity with an articulate, self-reflecting conscience" (Ostriker 1983, 1).

This tendency on the reader's part to confuse the author's personality with that of her characters is picked up by the critic Yūsuf Shārūnī, who traces the phenomenon back to the reader's unwillingness to make the distinction, particularly when the writer is a female.

They [the readers] refuse to believe they are reading a work of literature [...]. They don't get to enjoy what's being read unless they see it as personal secrets being told by a woman. It's that sly kick they derive from being voyeurs watching a woman through a keyhole stripped down naked and dropping her social masks in a manner they especially covet. (Shārūnī 1975, 14-15)

Shārūnī explains the readers' reception or urge for voyeurism in relation to the author's own desire, or lack thereof, for self-baring (an act of *ta'riyat*, 'revealing; exposing; scandalising'). In addition to his

account of the reader's reception preferences, he points out that female writing techniques can in their own right contribute to consolidating the reader's reception habits:

most of our novelists make use of the confessional form, the first-person pronoun, to write down their stories, thus implying that they are retelling their own. The reader is not willing to accept otherwise. (Shārūnī 1975, 15)

Therefore, we can say that the use of the first-person pronoun, in addition to being a variation of a technical style in writing, imparts the intentional connotation that women writers wish to declare an identity bold enough to express the writer's own self, moving away from the omniscient narrator towards autobiographical techniques to tell their own experiences. Roger Allen sees this choice as a shock for an Arab reader, who remains influenced by the female writers of the sixties such as Layla Ba'labaki and Ghada al-Samman.

[T]hose women writers who wish to assert their individuality through a new kind of fictional voice have clearly had to seek different narrative modes of expression [...] shifts to direct first-person experiential montage. (Allen, Kilpatrick, De Moor 1995, 86)

The move to autobiographical writing has clearly been motivated by the writers' need to challenge the restraints of traditional reception habits and social censorship. The answer has been too loudly declaring this SELF to counteract insinuations of identification on the reader's part. The SELF, a defining feature of women's creative discourse, shows the new self-assuredness that women novelists have come to enjoy.

The monologic nature characteristic of these writings has come to indicate the end of dialogue with men as the other. It reveals an eagerness to expose and reclaim a world that continues to marginalize women's suffering and aspirations. (Najm 2004)

Focusing on the centrality of the self in new women's fiction prompted the accusation that this type of writing is self-interested, sentimental, inward-looking, and oblivious to reality.

The focus on narrating the self in new women's fiction developed from an inner monologue towards the autobiographical confessional writing that stresses the total correspondence between author and narrator. This phenomenon has expanded to the point that in some cases, the female novelist goes beyond using the first person to giving her own name to her main character, a turning point in the way women writers are willing to use their names freely even in works

that tackle socially taboo issues such as their relationships with their bodies and with men (Najm 2004). Stressing self-narration through the form of writing autobiographies, or assigning recognisable names to fictional characters, or writing suggestive dedications of the literary work, or even making a direct reference to the writing process itself, serves to create the impression of sameness between the author and her characters in a way that bewilders both reader and critic, leading them to question whether to classify the work as fiction or autobiography.

This self-baring technique has been employed by Mona Prince in *So You May See*, as well as by other female writers who showed no interest in creating the illusion that they were writing a fictional story, thus granting their readers the old gratification of prying through this open window onto their worlds. This intentional self-exposure constituted an essential part in the new trend, which insisted on confronting taboo topics and addressing the subject of the author's individuality at the same time. The female writer is no longer a superior narrator observing the lives of her characters. Instead, she is part of those lives, a part that is ready to reveal and purge itself. It is difficult to make sense of this transformation without acknowledging its dynamics as a radical protest against a long history of imposed invisibility suffered by female writers, as a symbolic equivalent to women's own nascent unveiling, bodily and spiritually, which has been historically denied, or as a counter-move that allows the female author's voice to take control over the text instead of being marginalised within it. It has also contributed to reframing the image of the exemplary model of femininity that the male-dominated society has established.

This confession discourse has developed into a full-blown phenomenon that can be seen in *So You May See*, as well as in other female-written fictional texts during the 1990s. Added to this are all the individualising elements and explicit signals that reveal beyond any doubt the writer's own involvement in the making of her text. We are faced by texts that challenge voyeurism by loudly declaring the absolute identicalness of the writer and her characters, thus allowing the readers the joy of nosiness into the novelist's personal life - or, more aptly, depriving them of this joy. The novelist chooses to strip herself bare of the restraints of illusion that the fictional mold allows her with explicit, careless signs, which confuse social values and erode long-held traditions of virtuousness. The style is graphic and uninhibited by the rhetoric of symbolism or projection; it is as undisguised as the naked female body it seeks to represent. The feminine being portrayed is so well defined that it can shock censors, social as well as official, and challenge ready-made accusations with even more impudence.

4 Mona Prince's Writing and Sexuality

Mona Prince embodies a unique experience in the 1990s generation.⁶ She is a writer who could single-handedly paddle against the current, clashing repeatedly with the conservatism of Egyptian society in social, political, and literary battles. She has been accused of holding religions, including Islam, in contempt, and she lost her job as a lecturer in English literature at Suez University due to her political stands. Her most recent controversial decision was to run for the presidency of Egypt. She participated in the protests that ousted the Muslim Brotherhood's rule (in 2013), and she was also part of the January 25 revolution (which ended Mubarak's 30-years rule of the country). Prince documented her eyewitness account of the 18-days sit-in at the illustrious Tahrir Square; the book was published under the title *Revolution Is My Name (Ismī thawrah, 2012)*. But Prince's history with revolution and social and political insurgency dates much further back. Her first novel, *So You May See*, is a model in contemporary Egyptian writing, not merely for its rebellious undertones and bold challenge of many taboos in Egyptian society, but also for its ability to revolutionise the female body and utilise it as a spearhead that shocks habitual reception tendencies. The novel *So You May See* was received by many critics as an example of newfangled female-written fiction where the novelist overtly expresses her body and its sexual needs and uses explicit language to do so. No figurative language or rhetorical embellishment has been used to euphemise the sexual details in the text. This is why the text is deservedly considered a nineties model. Despite the fact that the text's language is 'ordinary', showing none of the embellishment of expression traditionally found in fictional creativity, Prince's text still embodies features typical of, if not adding to, women's writings of the nineties (Farghali 2011).

From the first pages, Prince's novel champions the new current by proclaiming the identification between author and character. The novelist declares that her text is a personal experience and writing itself is a personal choice through which the protagonist/narrator/author tries to reclaim her lover. In the prologue, the narrator says, "I will write about you and me, about our love story" (Prince 2011, 5). Positioned from the outset as the writer of the text, she explains the reason behind her choice of narrative form: "Initially I wanted to write about this love affair, but found the subject to be inconsequential. A novel about love! Could I add anything fresh to a subject already treated by great writers and philosophers?" (Prince 2011, 6). She adds, addressing her reader,

⁶ She published her first novel in 1998: *Three Suitcases for Travelling (Thalāth ḥaqā'ib lil-safar)*.

So I decided to subsume it [love] in a travel narrative. In the end, the journey will be internal, a voyage of discovery or quest for some form of salvation through my physical transition from place to place; an exploration of the self and the other. Plus a fair amount of politics, sociology, psychology, and erotica, all of which are exciting features: a tried-and-tested recipe for fame and translation. (Prince 2011, 6)

Again, she discusses with the reader her wish to create a new form of writing that does not follow any established conventions: “After I had settled on the form, I had second thoughts. I found myself rejecting all the conventional forms I was familiar with” (Prince 2011, 6). This imaginary dialogue with which the writer prefaces her text tackles the writing process *per se* and the relevant objectives and techniques she considers using. She anticipates that, as a writer confronting all kinds of taboos, she is bound to provoke controversy. Some erotic writing in its own right can stir up controversy. But this controversy can bring her fame, which could lead to the book being translated. This authorial declaration breaks the image of the old, neutral, conservative narrator. Instead, the reader here is invited to be part of the writing process. The writer is eager to alert the reader to her personality and her presence, albeit behind the heroine mask. In the middle of the novel, she stops to say “I’m stuck! I don’t know how to continue the narrative without falling into the trap of boredom. Because this novel is in essence a novel about feelings, not about characters” (Prince 2011, 26).

The writer is not satisfied with simply alluding to her identity within the narrative stream. She goes further to overturn any complicity that fiction writing might imply and declares that narrative structure and genre rules do not concern her any longer: “What concerns me now is to gamble at writing as I gambled at love: with even greater audacity, I will go wild with writing as I went wild with love” (Prince 2011, 26).

The writer confides in us, the readers, that she intends to tell her story in a fictional form and that she anticipates shock and confusion. In a journalistic interview, Prince responded to the claim that she feigned audacity for the sake of fame: “My intention has been to write something different, without pretending to be bold. The novel succeeded in injuring the male ego” (Atta 2012). Prince’s text, therefore, challenges male authority and social censorship and does not fear their heavy hands. The boldness here is not merely in the depiction of explicit sexual content or the main character’s multiple relationships, but in the method of narration that renders the narrative real, rather than imagined, with no need for self-censoring or fictional masks.

In addition to this declaration, the novel’s protagonist, Ayn, is portrayed as being identical to the author in education and in the degree

to which both are open to foreign cultures. Prince, as Ayn, quotes from internationally famous authors such as Roland Barthes, Paulo Coelho, and Milan Kundera. Through her work as a sociologist, she travels to desert sites and works independently. She lives in Cairo with her grandmother, who is over eighty and does not exert any authority over her. Ayn is free to go in and out, drink alcohol, sleep over at her foreign friends' houses, and frequent classy restaurants. She and her friends inhabit a bubble secluded from Egyptian society. The liberated heroine moves freely, without social restraints. She spends her nights out and sleeps at the house of a man she does not know, simply because she is a free woman who owns her body.

Ayn meets a Moroccan diplomat who is in Cairo on a work trip. An educated, free woman from a generation that sees no fault in having a love affair or a sexual relationship, she has sex with her new lover with no scruples, no introductions, no conditions, and no strings attached. She is the one who asks him for the first kiss and decides to spend the night at his place. "I ask him to kiss me. It's three in the morning, in his car, in the Marriott Hotel parking lot. It is too late to go home, and I ask Ali if it's okay to stay with him" (Prince 2011, 17).

In contradiction to all traditional images of womanhood in Arab culture, which prescribe that men are the initiators of relationships while women remain at the receiving end, our heroine belongs to a different cohort. She consciously initiates the relationship and all she asks her lover is for their affair to remain free, truthful, and full.

Scenes of the sexual relationship between Ayn and Ali are depicted in all their details: "[he] touches my womb from the beginning and my longing slips away in spite of me. [...] I tremble the tremendum of a soul united with the Holy Spirit" (Prince 2011, 39). At other times she describes the scene erotically in a manner that leaves very little to the reader's imagination.

Their love affair goes on for a period of time and takes a turn when Ayn considers marrying Ali and awaits the moment he proposes to make her his wife. At the outset of their relationship, Ali asserts: "I don't like being tied down. But if it happened, I'll marry someone from my own country" (Prince 2011, 20). Ayn does not seem to be shocked at Ali's attitude, and she justifies his decision by citing the terms on which she chose to establish the relationship in the first place: "I make it clear to him that our sexual encounters are transient" (Prince 2011, 20). She accepts that the only alternatives are to maintain a free relationship or to end it, something that she frequently attempts but fails.

Ali, the male protagonist, is the traditional model of the male depicted in modern women's writing. Despite being cultured and well educated, Ali holds on to male double standards and superiority complexes over a liberated woman who gives him her body without conditions. While he enjoys their sexual affair, he evades any commit-

ment to her; he lets her live with him and treats her like a lover but hesitates to trust her conduct.

Their relationship gets more complicated when Ali starts suspecting Ayn is cheating on him. They go out to a bar together. He leaves for a few moments. When he returns, she is having a conversation with a stranger. Ali insults her for what he takes to be a flirtatious chat. Ayn questions his behaviour and asks if he is jealous. He angrily answers: "I'm not jealous, but I do have my self-respect. If you want to go off with him, be my guest" (Prince 2011, 63).

The narrative reveals a level of confusion that the male character feels towards his lover. As her lover, he celebrates her sexual liberation but distrusts it at the same time. It seems that loss of trust is what every liberated woman must pay for her liberation. For him, the implication of her giving him her body is that she can likewise give it to any passerby.

Their complicated relationship ends after they go through other similar situations. Ayn finds out by chance and after a long time that Ali has a fiancée in his hometown and that he has been hiding this information from her: "He hasn't been honest with me. I came to know from a mutual friend from his country. The news hit me like a hammer blow. But I didn't scream with pain" (Prince 2011, 68).

Ayn tries to restore her self-confidence by alleging that she never intended to marry him anyway. She allows herself a chance to recuperate from the psychological trauma by going on a wilderness trip to the oases (*wahat*) with a group of foreigners. During the trip, she makes up her mind to let go of all the painful memories of Ali and to use her body towards this end. Ayn has sex with almost all the men in the group, even those who are married, as if she is trying to fill the gap in her soul with sex. She describes her sexual encounters in detailed erotic scenes. In one such scene, where she has sex with a man on the road under a tree,

Michael embraced Ayn from behind and used his tongue to nuzzle her ear. "Don't you think it's an amazing sunset?". Before she could think of anything to say back, he had pulled her to his chest and started to strip off her clothes. He leaned her up against a tree and started to kiss her body from the tips of her toes to her ears. (Prince 2011, 106)

Ayn has sex with Michael several more times. She asks him if he has ever been in love. He answers that "he only needed a bottle of wine to seduce any woman" (Prince 2011, 111). Ayn feels disgusted; she falls silent. But she goes on with her sexual adventures, targeting another man as if she is taking revenge on her own body or on those men circling her orbit.

She had finished with Michael, which only left Georg. She hoped he would live up to her expectations, but she knew looks were deceiving. How many times had she come across a muscled hulk who couldn't keep up with her when it came to the crunch. (Prince 2011, 112)

The protagonist goes on to ask Georg if she can spend the night with him in his car, complaining of the cold. She is the one who seduces him: "Her expectations weren't disappointed. In fact, Georg got right into the role of the hunter, as personified by Hans, and ravished her mercilessly" (Prince 2011, 112).

The desert trip ends, but after all her sexual encounters, the protagonist is not sated. She returns to Cairo even hungrier for her lover, who seems to have dismissed her existence altogether. He receives her neutrally, even though she keeps provoking him by telling about her sexual escapades. He does not seem to be bothered; he tells her she is a free woman. The lover suddenly officially announces his engagement to another woman from his own country, in what may be a reiteration of the traditional, repeatedly told story of the Eastern man with double moral standards who would prefer a virgin over a woman who yielded herself to him. In a dramatic scene, Ayn dances with pride, ignoring, or at least pretending to ignore, what happened. The relationship sums up the dilemma of the Eastern male intellectual who stands paralysed on the rift that separates his belief in a woman's sexual freedom from his own sexual prejudices against that same belief.

In the second part of the novel, the protagonist again desires to run away from this failed love story in which she surrendered her body with no regret and with no social guarantees. Again, she decides to register her protest against this male-dominated social context by entering into more sexual relationships with no feeling of sin or disgrace. The transient encounters that Ayn indulges in seem to be devoid of aim or pleasure; they are just her way of rebelling against moral constraints imposed on her by the masculine world. She rebels by using her body, and goes on sex sprees that she describes in their tiniest particulars. After she finds out that Ali has left to go back to his wife-to-be, Ayn decides to travel to a small oasis, called Siwa, in Egypt's Western Desert. She makes up her mind to forget him and she engages in sexual adventures with every man she sets eyes on, up to and including a Bedouin adolescent.

Until she reached Siwa. There, she would let a Bedouin she has known since he was a prepubescent boy take her to Cleopatra's pool in the middle of a desert whose moon was full. She would undress bit by bit in front of him and enter the water. The Bedouin would strip, all in one go, and join her. At first she would gasp at

the size of his penis, but in the end she would savage him with the ferocity of a fatally injured animal. Then she would cry. (Prince 2011, 102)

Certainly, the novel confuses conservative reader, who finds him/herself face to face with a female character who does not shy away from discussing the size of men's male members and freely tells the details of her sexual encounters. A female character who seeks men out and savages them constitutes a bold flight of imagination in the context of Arab literary expression. In Arab culture in general, a female is expected to possess the 'virtue' of shyness; she is to be chased, not a chaser; a prey of men's savagery, not the predator.

Following each sex adventure, Ayn fails to be satiated. She expresses this by falling into deep crying fits and a sense of spiritual vacuity that deepens inside of her. She describes this state:

She was experiencing intense loneliness, profound emptiness, and a sadness exacerbated by having sex without any emotional involvement. Perhaps she should stop doing it. But surely anything was better than nothing at all. She asked herself whether a few minutes of pleasure was worth the spiritual hollowness that came after. The idea made her pause and ask whether everyone felt like her, whether everyone experienced what she called "the spiritual hollowness" when coming down from the pinnacle of pleasure in the absence of love. (Prince 2011, 115)

In her attempts to discard her painful memories of her relationship with Ali, Ayn engages in brief sexual relationships with total strangers. She does this with the utmost stubbornness a wounded woman can muster. She uses her body as a vehicle for revenge against a culture that sees that body as guilt-ridden, or perhaps to reassure herself that she owns this body. She recounts her escapades exhaustively and stresses that she is doing all of this willingly. When she tells about all her sex partners, that adolescent in the *wahat* and those foreigners she travelled with, she seems almost determined to abuse this body of hers in retaliation for her lover's rejection or for society's repression, or in search of an absolute state of freedom that can eventually unleash all her inhibitions. Whenever she stops to question her behaviour and the pain of hollowness reverberating through her being, she only senses her melancholic loneliness as if the body in this context is not as much a medium of pleasure as it is an instrument for that bitter revenge.

In the third part of the novel, the protagonist meets a bohemian young man named Apollo, a Corsican traveller who is obsessed with all forms of adventure. Ayn does not hesitate to throw herself again into the midst of a strange, complicated relationship with this man,

whom she meets by chance on a trip to the Sinai Peninsula. Despite a lack of social or intellectual parity between the two, Ayn develops a fascination with Apollo. She finds in their sex a release for the savage side of her. She is responsive to all his violent and deviant conduct; with him, she learns how to “recognize internal pain” (Prince 2011, 233). The author portrays the details of this sadomasochistic relationship, but it is striking that she does so with the utmost detachment, as if the body suffering the pain is no longer her own. In one of their scenes, while engaged in anal sex, Apollo ties a dildo around Ayn’s hips and guides her to use it on him and to follow on by fisting him (Prince 2011, 194-5). In another scene, they have a threesome with their Korean friend and then joke around at the size of his genitals (Prince 2011, 195). The author’s daring depiction of the sadism in these sex scenes can be said to be unprecedented in any Arab novel written by a woman.

Throughout these encounters, in spite of everything, the protagonist holds on to the memory of her lover. Her recollections of him after each incident of sex makes him the target of all her angry tirades. She tries hard to prove to herself that she owns her body and that this is her only way to get over her pain. Yet each time

She cried in spite of herself and cursed him privately. She hated him for getting married to her opposite in every respect. [...] She wished evil upon him. She decided to exact her revenge. She would hurt him as he had hurt her. She would give him a big plastic penis as a present and recommend he use it with his wife. She knew how Ali would feel then. She knew what a traditional Eastern man he was. (Prince 2011, 202)

In the end, she admits to him that the free life she has been leading since they parted did not grant her happiness, that her senseless behaviour has been her revenge on him and on society all at once: “I wanted to hurt you, Ali. I wanted to take revenge. I wanted to wound you like you wounded me” (Prince 2011, 216).

Although Ayn reaps with Apollo the fruits of the forbidden pleasure she hopes to find in a free, gratifying relationship, the hole in her heart remains and her search for internal peace is far from over. The dramatic end to their relationship seems to be divine punishment for seizing the forbidden fruit. On one of their trips through the desert, Ayn and Apollo have a car accident, which kills him, leaving her behind to ponder the concepts of love, sensuality, gratification, and also death.

In the entirety of the text, creating these parallels and implications between author and narrator as the protagonist is a form of autobiographical fiction that was celebrated by women’s writing during the 1990s as I pointed out above

The narration presents several rich undertones to create similarity, symmetry, and intended congruity between the narrator's voice and the voice of the heroine/author, and moreover creates congruity between novelistic (fictional) characters and real characters. The author dedicates the text to Ali who is also her male protagonist.

However, Mona Prince did not leave room for speculation as did other women writers. She extensively employs confessional autobiographical techniques which covertly challenge the values of conservative society, its expectations of women's writing, and its imaginings for females' roles in sexual relationships. Prince achieves this not only by depicting the liberated sexual relationship that the female protagonist craves but also by directly projecting this on her subjective experiences as the teller of the story.

The author/narrator/protagonist displays her free sexual life and explicitly shares intimate details of her sex life in a society that is still generally conservative towards the female body and her sexual freedom. But to what extent can we consider it an erotic novel? In the third part of the novel, we witness the main love story between Ali and Ayn with all its intimate details. Then, the novel explores a number of the protagonist's experiences and her free sexual exploits in detail while using candid language that the author does not attempt to camouflage with figurative language or repartee. However, and despite these sensual signs, we must ask to what extent we may consider this novel a sensual text which celebrates the body and glorifies pleasure.

In reality, those who observe the nature of the sexual scenes which flood the text and her casual flings with the boy at the oasis or other characters with whom Ayn the protagonist has her casual sexual flings, mostly appear to be Ayn's attempts to get revenge on her lover Ali who abandoned her to become engaged to a conservative woman who does not give her body without marriage. She did that by having multiple sexual affairs to make up for this loss.

Despite its sensitivity and boldness in narrating intimate sexual details, the intimate scenes do not reflect sexual pleasure or gratification as much as they reflect the protagonist's psychological trauma. These sexual adventures represent the protagonist's attempt to heal from her failure and disappointment with her lover Ali. These sexual exploits, even the one with Apollo, can be explained as her attempt to rid herself of her pain.

The sexual act carries within it a form of social rebellion against the values advocated by the lover: old-fashioned, archaic values on the concept of honour. The sexual affair with Apollo for example is accompanied with pain, as though it is sometimes an act of purgation, self-flagellation, rendering the body sinful, or to fill the void she feels. Therefore, the sexual exploits of the protagonist do not provide her with sexual fulfilment, peace, transcendence, or forgetting her lover; they rather heighten the protagonist's anxiety with herself.

We may claim that these sexual exploits represent the zenith of protest. The extremism and excess of expressing the body, its whims, desires, and sexual and emotional fulfilment within the novel are forms of rebellion and disobedience against conservative moulds and the values of the lover Ali and his society. They also rebel against readers' expectations. The novel assiduously challenges these values and violates patriarchal society. Through baring the self, it challenges common taste and ban laws. Within the text, the act of psychological baring creates symbolic connotations which convey a sense of challenge, rebellion, and estrangement together. It also intentionally shocks conservative readers and assiduously disrupts values related to women's sexual proclivities and sensuous experiences in the imagination of these receivers of the text.

In this framework, we can explicate the excessiveness of sex scenes, nudity, and writing about intimate relations with great detail, directly, with no repartee, and often with no textual aesthetic necessity. The excessiveness represents mere rebellion which uses the body to create shock. It can be considered a form of disobedience and challenge which echoes social eruption and a desire to rebel against historical taboos in expressing the female body. But this rebellion is carried out through the written and disclosed body in its physical and symbolic manifestations in the political and literary fields.

Finally, the novel raises many questions about to what extent can we classify this novel as a 1990s' text? How does this form of writing represent discontinuation from its predecessors and their feminist inclinations as the 1990s generation claimed? Did presenting the body in texts significantly represent a step in the evolution of feminist writing towards a feminine consciousness of the self and the body together?

In reality, although Mona Prince does belong to the 1990s generation, her experience remained remote from critical works penned on this generation, although her experience intersects with women writers of the 1990s in a number of general features of this writing which include personal and intimate style of writing, autobiographical narration, elevating personal experience, the absence of ideological dimensions, great causes, and celebrating emotional and bodily experiences, or the female body. These were the common features of the 1990s generation as I had pointed out previously, but in this novel, Mona Prince particularly stood out in terms of her boldness and ability for baring, exposure, and employing the body and all its powers to create the act of rebellion and protest.

The representation of the female body in Mona Prince's novel differs from other women writers of her generation. It also differs from the previous generation in the employment of the body. The body in the writings of Nawal al-Saa'dawi, Alifa Rifaat, and others which we discuss in the introduction, the 1960s generation to be exact, the

body in their writings was the subject of protest. The body was often presented as a victim of masculine practices and a tool of social dispossession. Whether or not gendered and feminist discourse are primary or secondary referents in these texts, this writing struggled to liberate the body from the dominance of masculine society subjectively and socially. This writing mainly focused on forms of repression and masculine oppression which women suffer in Arab society and social restrictions on the body practiced by masculine authority such as forced marriages, early marriages, honour crimes, virginity and its role in vilifying women's bodies and regulating the freedom of the body, polygamy, marriage of minors, marital chastity, and sexual harassment of young women's bodies by adult males. We can generally claim that the body and intimate relations in this context are not sources of pleasure or for sexual and emotional fulfilment, but oppressive and painful spaces. The body was written as a site of oppression as this writing portrayed intimate relationships as a tool to oppress and dominate the female body. Therefore, the association of the body with oppression, misery, and social devastation was a recurrent theme with many women writers of successive generations.

In Mona Prince's novel, the body is no longer the source of temptation in a lustful sense or the subject of pain or site of oppression but rather a source of disobedience within political and social meanings and a tool to disrupt patriarchal values. The novel not only expresses the oppressed female body, but it challenges society through the body which has become a tool to rebel against the values of patriarchal society. This is achieved either through baring sexual feelings, or by using explicit and graphic terms to express its existence as a sexual entity with its own innate desires and instincts which do not require concealing since they are part of its existence.

Prince's novel aroused great controversy because of the boldness of both the writer and the main character. Nonetheless, the novel was not officially confiscated in spite of its pornographic content. However, the reaction of the general public seems to represent a moral trial, rather than technical criticism, of the text. "I have never come across a novel this dirty in my entire life",⁷ one reader states.

Critical reviews of the novel were negligible. Their small number was the result of male astonishment at the writer's crossing of boundaries. The novel is considered entertaining because it gives the male reader the chance to enjoy the female act of self-baring. For example, Abd al-Ilāh Sālhī of Radio France 24 maintains in his review that Prince "discards all social and intellectual prohibitions" (Sālhī 2011). Another critic explains that the novel is entertaining inasmuch as it caters to the masculine society's lust for observing fe-

⁷ *Arabic Goodreads*: <http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/6082370>.

male bodily and spiritual nakedness. The novel's worth, according to some reviewers, is reduced to its ability to provide "a pleasure that we are not used to. Female writers have typically portrayed women as being coy, adored rather than adoring, immune to immorality and to committing the sin of falling in love with a man" (Al-Shāfī 2018).

Certainly, the novelist's frankness in portraying the female body, sexual relationships, and emotional disappointments cannot be reduced to her desire to cater to the pleasure of the Eastern male readership. Instead, the nakedness portrayed is to be read as the novelist's vehement need to rebel, to shatter taboos, and ultimately to shock her reader. The novel's translator writes:

When I first read the Arabic, I certainly got a shock when I read some of the sex scenes. This was out of surprise for such a radical effort in an Arabic novel – these scenes would be strong in any novel. There is nothing pornographic, which is not what is intended. The sex acts described have a strong symbolic purpose in the work. (Cohen 2011)

The novel manages to achieve what the author calls "injuring the male ego" (Atta 2012) and to debunk habitual reception forms. The shock that it engenders is part of the declared revolt of this generation against the old traditions of literary reception. The extreme reaction mirrors the social and political divisions that society is now experiencing and comes as a fitting response to a long tradition of criminalising the female body and considering it an object of seduction and moral depravity.

5 **Mona Prince. Writing as a Self-Baring**

Readers of the new female fiction are confronted with a style that uses elements of autobiographical narration to express protest, mixing in exhaustive depictions of the female body's impulses and caring very little about inviting projections onto the author's own life. This revealing style aims mainly to expose the unspoken and, in so doing, intersects with the literal act of laying the body bare. Arab female fiction authors writing in this style have moved from exposing the paradoxes of their societies to exposing their own bodies towards the same end: protesting injustices. The context and objectives make the new style in feminine writing an act of rebellion that makes use of the body to deliver its protest, rather than a choice for erotic writing *per se*.

In this writing, the body is the first and foremost personification of the self, its physical and mental representation. The body is portrayed as a vessel full of injustices perpetrated against it, imposed

in the first place by the authority invested in social institutions. It is oppressed, repressed, hidden, and historically marginalised, but it is also brimming with desires of its own, desires that can no longer be contained. The act of writing within this context is an act of boldness and revelation as well as a shock to receiver and society alike. This shockwave presented in written form parallels in intensity the shockwave engendered by women protesting naked. This has been the main aim of this type of writing: to convey that shudder which challenges social norms and preconceived perceptions of how women should be. The new writers show a lack of interest in investing in the erotic, Scheherazade-inspired fiction that would resonate positively with a male readership. Instead, they deploy erotica as a vehicle for their collective protest. Writing the body in women's new fiction announces that, unlike the old Arab erotic traditions – whether written by males or females – where the body is a tool for sensual pleasure, the body in its new form gives a perspective for human suffering created by the oppression of a social system that denigrates bodily expression and sets obstacles in the way of even the most innocent portrayals of sex, that beast, under the guise of slogans of modesty and propriety (Ramadān 1996, 112).

This explicit writing, the so-called *kitābath al-jasid*, as a new trend in female writing, can be viewed as part of an extended tradition and a genuine technique in the power struggle between Arab society and women's writing, a struggle that has been intensified in the nineties by the rise of conservative, fanatic religious discourse. As such, body writing has been an extreme reaction to the negation of the female self that is inherent to the conservative discourse. With the widespread donning of veils across social strata, women writers have resorted to investing in the body to voice protest, intentionally baring it to expose the debauchery of the patriarchal society that seeks to appropriate its presence.

In fact, it is difficult to account for using the body as a vehicle of protest in isolation from the history of feminist movements as a whole. To be able to read its implications, we have to consider the stages through which body baring has become a sign of staging opposition. Since their inception, women's liberation movements, especially in the Arab world, have focused their efforts on promoting social and political demands. Calls for sexual liberation have hardly surfaced, despite the extensive struggles that female writers endured to secure women's basic freedoms. Negotiations relevant to the female body remained focused solely on resisting oppressive practices such as female circumcision, rape, harassment, or sexual suppression within the bounds of marital relationships. Pioneering female authors in Egypt, such as Nawal al-Saa'dawi, Alifa Rifaat, and others, reflect in their early writings a realistic critique that addresses the body's social issues and exposes male exploitation of women, with

the body frequently cropping up as victim. In so doing, they share the concerns of feminist movements such as female genital mutilation, child marriages, and virginity. These are all socially sanctioned male forms of oppressive authority: an oppressive father, a cheating husband, a pedophile decriminalised by marriage, a male exercising power over his wife's body by circumcising it to ensure her decency or imposing the condition of virginity (the male conceptualisation of an unused body), or a man who cares nothing about gratifying his wife's body. These issues are just a few of the topics that female writers of the 1990s addressed, fixing their gaze on the female body as their site of oppression.

Mona Prince's writings encounter this early generation of female writings within the frame of deploying images of bodily oppression to reflect on the topic of expressing the sexual aspirations of their characters. Body portrayals for these writers exemplify the soul and essence of the female character and the means of achieving their unification into the whole that is the female entity.

Contrasting the experiences of early female writing and the new generation in Egypt in fictionalising the female body points to the transformation that women's writing has experienced, with the goal of ridding women of patriarchal structures of oppression, i.e., body-baring. Body-baring has likewise been the mechanism of choice for feminist activists in the post-Arab Spring era to protest against the violations of women's rights during the revolutions (Salime 2014). Both in fiction and in reality, it bears clear social and political implications.

Nakedness carries gendered connotations that are embedded in the history and cultural baggage of different societies and are intertwined with the ideologies of racism, sexism, classism, colonialism, homophobia, and other systems of oppression. (Sutton 2007, 142)

The emergence of that tendency in women's writing took place in the shadow of a parallel social and political background. The close-knit relationship between the rise of women's writing and the emergence of women's protest (by undressing) inspires contemplation of the three-way dynamic relationship between female writing that shocks the reader, protesting in the nude as a female political statement, and the rise of the conservative religious discourse that reviles women's bodies. This dynamic points to a belief that this literary phenomenon did not rise out of a vacuum, but is essentially a phenomenon of protest fuelled by political and social causes.

The rise of a new wave of the feminist movement, the so-called nude protest movement FEMEN, established the use of women's nakedness as a tool of protest. The international and Arab women's

protest movement witnessed previously unheard-of manifestations of protest, such as resorting to nudity to protest social or political conditions. This movement spread to the Arab world through a number of Arab women who undressed to protest political conditions, whether in the streets and public squares or on their personal social media pages.

Like nude protesting, this new trend of Arab women's writing and its rhetoric are not separate from the social and political context, just as they are not far removed from the cultural context in which women's bodies are exposed. Therefore, it is impossible to read this new tendency called 'body writing' and women's narratives as if they were an erotic trend, despite the sometimes extreme use of pornographic language and sensual and licentious imagery, because the written texts still contain a significant potential to challenge and rebel against the male world.

Furthermore, the emergence of this writing exposes the way in which the carnal body has actually and symbolically been presented and represented, not only as a motif for exposing and stripping bare (reveal/expose/scandalise/*fadeh*) the self and society's obsolete social mores, but also as an act of protest and challenge to extremist religious rhetoric, and employs the body as a metaphorical vehicle of revolt against social, political, and patriarchal authority. It is also an act of resistance against extremist religious rhetoric about the female body.

Prince's work reveals the unspoken-of life of the Arab female and her relationship with the desires of her body. It is a metaphorical body protest whose nakedness runs parallel to physical nakedness protest, or to protest at more than one level. The first level is that both explicit writing and nakedness protest dare to tread on taboos and forbidden areas, so as to shock and shake up the values imposed by society on women's bodies. The second level is that both of them use the body as a symbol to free the female identity from fear - fear of the dictator, fear of traditions, and fear of social shame.

This kind of protest uses the body not only as a natural biological component, but also as a cultural one, laden with symbolism within political, cultural, and social contexts. That body is no longer merely a source of lust, but a source of rebellion in the political and social sense. No longer are women's bodies only a means of satisfying the lust of the paternal society; they have become a means by which to disobey and rebel.

Prince's novel uses the body as a key vehicle of protest to stand up against fundamentalist religious powers that target women's liberation. In this context, the body (clothed or unclothed) is the tool of protest *par excellence* to protest against religious extremist rhetoric that exaggerates hostility against women.

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