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*Introduction to The Innocence of the  
Devil: From Theology to Rape*

*by Fedwa Malti-Douglas*

The Arab world's leading feminist and iconoclast: this is Nawal El Saadawi. Few Arab women inspire as much emotion or find themselves the subject of as much polemic. No Arab woman's pen has violated as many sacred enclosures. Her novel *The Innocence of the Devil* (the Arabic original is *ʿJannât wa-Iblîs*, the names of two of the central characters<sup>1</sup>), which addresses such diverse subjects as religion, sexuality, the body, and violation of the female by a male deity, is an important addition to her literary corpus.<sup>2</sup>

Nawal El Saadawi was born in 1931 in the village of Kafr Tahla in the Egyptian delta, attended public schools, and studied at the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Cairo. Her formal education, therefore, took place in native Egyptian Arabic-language schools. This is not insignificant as many Arab intellectuals have received a substantial proportion of their education either outside the region or in foreign (and generally foreign-language) schools in the Arab

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world. Nawal was not the only child in her family to attend college—all her siblings did as well. But El Saadawi did not choose to pursue medicine for its own sake; rather, the career chose her: as she puts it, “the Faculty of Medicine takes the best students, those with the highest grades.” At the Faculty of Medicine, she was one of approximately fifty women among hundreds of men. She graduated in 1955 and practiced in the areas of thoracic medicine and psychiatry. El Saadawi was appointed to the Ministry of Health in 1958 but was dismissed from the ministry and her post as Egypt’s national public health director in August 1972 due to her frank writings on sexuality, specifically in *Women and Sex*.<sup>3</sup>

The dangers that El Saadawi ran because of her uncompromising views became more dramatic in 1981, when she was imprisoned by the Egyptian president, Anwar Sadat, during his massive incarceration of Egyptian intellectuals. This period, though brief, had a powerful artistic impact on El Saadawi. She wrote *The Fall of the Imam*,<sup>4</sup> a novel which is heavily inspired by her experience under the Sadat regime and which helped place her name on the death lists circulated by conservative Islamist groups.

After her imprisonment Nawal El Saadawi founded the Arab Women’s Solidarity Association (AWSA) in 1982, an international organization dedi-

cated to “lifting the veil from the mind” of the Arab woman. In 1985, the association was granted “consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations as an Arab non-governmental organization.”<sup>5</sup> The AWSA organized conferences and weekly seminars and functioned as a locus for frank discussions of topics related to gender analysis or women’s status. On June 15, 1991, the Egyptian government closed down the Arab Women’s Solidarity Association and diverted its funds to a religious women’s organization. El Saadawi, with her customary energy and conviction, took the Egyptian government to court, but to no avail. The association’s magazine, *Nûn*, has also disappeared from public life.<sup>6</sup> El Saadawi chronicled this phase of the AWSA’s saga in the volume *A New Battle in Woman’s Cause*.<sup>7</sup>

These activities mark Nawal El Saadawi as perhaps the most visible woman intellectual in the Arab world. She has the dubious honor of supposedly being the only woman whose name has been placed on the Islamist death lists. Many Arab leftist intellectuals whose names appear on these lists have confidently declared to me that no Islamist group would ever kill a woman. After the 1992 assassination of the Egyptian secularist intellectual Faraj Fûda, however, El Saadawi began to take these threats against her life more seriously; she now divides her time between

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Europe and the United States and makes frequent but brief visits to her native Egypt.

If there is a single activity that has sustained this Egyptian feminist throughout the stages of her life, in medical school, government employ, imprisonment, that activity is writing. El Saadawi takes great pride in relating the story of how she disposed of her second husband, a lawyer. When his colleagues complimented him on a short story his wife had published, he presented her with an ultimatum: choose between him or her writing. Her answer: "Well, I choose my writing."<sup>8</sup> This is a dramatic step for an Arab woman, for whom marriage still fulfills a socially sacred and legitimizing function. But such a choice should not surprise anyone who knows Nawal El Saadawi; the demons of writing inhabited her even as a child. At age thirteen, in 1944, she had already penned the novel *Memoirs of a Female Child Named Su'ad*.<sup>9</sup>

In the fifty years since authoring that childhood story, El Saadawi has written continuously and imposed herself on the world literary scene. Her latest novel, *Love in the Time of Oil*,<sup>10</sup> is the most recent work in an enormous corpus of fictional and nonfictional texts: medical treatises, short stories, novels, plays, prison memoirs, travelogues, critical essays. No other Arab woman author (and few Arab men) approaches El Saadawi in the breadth of her writing, and her study *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the*

*Arab World* is by now a classic in the West.<sup>11</sup> Genres aside, the Egyptian feminist has also never shied away from subjects other authors might not even consider writing about. Her literary obsessions, ranging as they do from male-female relations to physical gender boundaries, identify her as a literary iconoclast.

El Saadawi's imprisonment under Sadat inspired several works, which permitted the writer to enter fully into domains that she had previously only skirted. Thus *The Fall of the Imam*, with its patriarchal ruler (who is, among others, a stand-in for Sadat), weaves a tale that is an ambitious rewriting of patriarchy. In the Saadawian system, patriarchy is an all-inclusive system that informs social, political, and religious structures.

In *The Innocence of the Devil*, Nawal El Saadawi boldly continues the project begun with *The Fall of the Imam*. Here the religious intertext dominates, redefining the political and social structures with which it comes into contact. The setting is an insane asylum and Satan and God are confined side by side as patients. This novel is, like *The Fall of the Imam*, a narrative in which events repeat and characters intertwine with one another. Who is the Deity? Who is the Devil? This provocative Saadawian narrative redefines not only the relationship between God and the Devil (Eblis is one of the names of the Devil in Arabic) but that between Adam and Eve, between man and

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woman. Christianity and Islam are both guilty here, and the Devil, like woman, becomes but a victim of the patriarchal order. The body is a central player, with the physical rape of a woman only one of its articulations. Just as one cannot hope to comprehend the literary danger of *The Fall of the Imam* without understanding Islam (a devout Muslim called the book blasphemy in my presence), one cannot comprehend *The Innocence of the Devil*, a text based on close readings of the Islamic tradition, without understanding fundamental aspects of the three Abrahamic religions.

*The Innocence of the Devil* might seem to represent a departure from the author's previous texts. In her first mature work, *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, El Saadawi attempted to venture into the domain of religion but had her hand slapped by the censors, who excised what they perceived to be the offensive sections from the novel.<sup>12</sup> Gradually, she began probing this sensitive cultural area, testing the waters before fully jumping in with *The Innocence of the Devil*. Her task has been facilitated by political and civilizational factors outside her control. Her exploration of religion has been facilitated by the Islamist movement in the Middle East, a movement that has planted itself firmly in the region, with roots that go deeper than Western critics perceive. More secularized Arab writers and

intellectuals, like El Saadawi, are aware of the cultural impact of this religious movement. El Saadawi responded with her own feminist interpretation of the centuries-old Arabo-Islamic textual corpus, and she did not enter the verbal battle unarmed: she read deeply and widely among the religious normative texts, such as the Koran and the Hadith, commentaries, and lives of the Prophets, as well as less religiously oriented textual materials.<sup>13</sup> The result, *The Innocence of the Devil*, is El Saadawi's tour-de-force novelistic foray into theology.

The novel includes one third-person narrator who remains cautiously outside the text. The third-person narration is perhaps the least difficult of the text's literary properties. Events move dizzyingly between past and present, fantasy and reality. Different levels of the language add to this ambiguity: the dialogue sometimes takes place in literary Arabic, at other times in Egyptian dialect, and in certain cases both levels of the language are involved at once.

A highly complex postmodern work, *The Innocence of the Devil* also relies on sophisticated intertextual games with some of the most sacred writings of the Islamic tradition. The remainder of this introduction sketches paths through these literary and cultural thickets. Those readers who prefer their suspense untinged by foreknowledge may wish to turn directly to

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the novel—they will certainly find it gripping and powerful—and this discussion will be waiting for them patiently if their curiosity has been whetted.

*The Innocence of the Devil* is set in a mental hospital. The character Ganat enters the enclosure on the first page of the text. The reader traverses the portal with her and, in the process, meets the cast of characters: Eblis (the Devil), an older man addressed as the Lord, a female patient named Nefissa, and the individuals in charge of the institution, including the male Director and female Head Nurse. The Director prescribes Ganat's treatment: residence in a solitary room under observation and three sessions of electroshock therapy a week.

For the reader, meeting the characters involves learning about their past lives, including interaction with family, schoolteachers, the religiopolitical system, and so on. The chapters center on different characters, and though there is a clear progression in the novel from beginning to end, this is not a linear progression.

For the majority of characters in *The Innocence of the Devil*, the asylum is not a locus that allows forward vision. Rather, it is a place where the past assumes center stage, governing and delimiting the actions of the individuals. Ganat thinks back to her grandfather, a Muslim, and her grandmother, a Christian who

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converted to Islam but retained her Christian beliefs. We hear about her school days and her more informal education at home, where the grandmother's popular religiosity and superstitions come to the surface.

When Ganat sets eyes on the Head Nurse, she asks, "Narguiss?" No, the Head Nurse shakes her head. But Ganat's intuition that the nurse is someone other than who she pretends to be is correct. Her identity? Narguiss, the daughter of a civil servant. She received the Medal of Nationalism and Honor, which she proudly wears on her person, even in the asylum. On her wedding night, she shed no blood. To erase this shame, her father committed suicide. The Director of the facility uses her body and when she tells him that though she was a virgin, she shed no blood, he reassures her that her hymen was elastic.

The reader discovers as the narrative progresses that Ganat's recognition of Narguiss was more than serendipity. The two once had a friendship that bordered on lesbianism. When a schoolteacher asked Narguiss whom she loved most in the world, she replied, "I love Ganat." Rumors began to fly about this sinful love caused by Eblis. Just as this hidden past is coming alive for Narguiss, however, Ganat forgets it and she is declared cured. Narguiss/the Head Nurse challenges the Director and reveals to him that she no longer wishes to have anything to do with men. When he confronts her with her lesbianism and curses her,

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she runs away and is transformed into a white butterfly. Another white butterfly joins her and the two are shot, ending their saga in drops of blood.

Nefissa, the third woman whose past unfolds before us in the asylum, is said to be Eblis's sister. After all, had she not as a child heard the male teacher, Sheikh Masoud, call her brother Eblis? Nefissa's past is intimately tied to her mother, who lost her son in a religiopolitical movement. He, along with other young men, was recruited to fight, only to die. The mother is told that her son is in Heaven with his Lord, in the Garden of Eden with prophets and martyrs. As Nefissa thinks about these events, and about her own journey to Cairo to look for her lost brother, she repeatedly utters the invocation, "O God." She is looking out the window of the women's ward, and who should hear her but the Deity in the hospital who commands her to "come down." The Deity questions her about her virtue and then asks her to declare herself his servant. This she does, provoking yet more questions about his being the only man in her life, without consort. Satisfied with her answers, he proceeds to rape her. Her scream rouses the medical staff of the asylum, who then escort the culprit to the "electricity room," one assumes for electroshock therapy.

This Deity creates this relationship not only with Nefissa. He had earlier demonstrated that he was

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inextricably tied to Eblis as well. He wakes Eblis in the middle of the night and urges him to go out and do his duty—whispering to people and tempting them. Eblis, wishing to sleep, tries to dissuade the Deity, but without success; he finally decides to kiss the Deity's head out of respect. He jumps out of bed, knocking the turban from the master's head and provoking what looks to the other inmates like a fistfight between Eblis and the Lord. An individual with a book under his arm appears to set up a tribunal. He is a judge, whose activities come to an end only when the asylum siren sounds, bringing with it the medical staff.

The intimate relationship between the Lord and his antithesis, Eblis, reaches a climax at the novel's end. Eblis is now deceased and the Deity's remorse is beyond compare, to the point that the Deity himself is discovered dead at the close of the text. Before his demise, however, he has in vain declared Eblis's innocence: "Forgive me, my son. You are innocent." The last words he utters are "Innocent! Innocent!"

Why an insane asylum? Placing patients in such a setting and subjecting them to electroshock therapy is not unusual in fiction, especially among women writers. Here the asylum permits the unfolding of complicated literary games, not the least important of which is the game of fantasy and reality. Once Ganat has crossed the portal of the hospital, bringing the reader

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with her, the rules of the reality game change. The reader knows that characters who inhabit this peculiar world may not be subject to the same regulations and dynamics under which the world outside the institution operates. The incarceration of this Deity and his cohorts in the asylum permits innovative transgressions and violations, the most subversive of which involve theology. Since the reader enters the enclosed literary space on the first page of the novel, all subsequent narrative acts, whether inside or outside the asylum, are colored by the confinement.

Theology is by far the most consistent undercurrent in both the pre-asylum and the post-asylum lives of the characters, providing the subtext for the entirety of *The Innocence of the Devil*. It governs the names, the relationships, the gender dynamics, the linguistic system. By virtue of this enormous textual power, it also permits the creation of irony, wordplay, and the like.

For example, when the newcomer is first asked her name, she replies, “Ganat.” She is fond of her name, the plural of *Paradise*. When she was asked what this name meant, her grandfather (or her father) opened “the book” and read:

—The *Gana* of Eden in which flow rivers of honey and milk.

She did not like the taste of honey, nor that of milk, and preferred salted cheese or pickles. (19)

The dynamics have been presented. Ganat's name, her onomastic identity, has been defined in terms of the Muslim Holy Book.

Rivers of milk and honey are some of the pleasures awaiting the believer in the Muslim Paradise. The Koran speaks in many places of rivers flowing in Paradise.<sup>14</sup> These liquids of Muslim Paradise are discussed in detail by later Koranic commentators and are considered different from the same-name products existing in this world, whose nature changes. The paradisiacal liquids will have been created *ex nihilo* in the rivers. The milk, for example, does not come from animals and the purified honey differs from the honey of this world, mixed as it is with beeswax.<sup>15</sup> More interesting, the Holy Book in the context of rivers also speaks of *jannât* (gardens or paradises), identical to the character's name in the novel.<sup>16</sup>

The narrator denudes this religious intertext of any of its possible metaphorical connotations with the statement that the young woman did not like the taste of honey and milk. Opposed to these two sweet and particularly significant fluids are solid foods, both of which are distinguished by the strength of their taste—salted cheese and pickles. The name *Ganat* recasts the entire concept of Paradise.

It is not simply the plurality of the gardens inherent in Ganat's name that links her directly to the religious domain. Lying in the coffin, Ganat sees her official

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name: Ganat Abd Allah Abdil Illah. She asks herself whether Abd Allah is her father's name and Abdil Illah that of her grandfather. Her memory awakens gradually. She hears her grandmother calling out to her grandfather: "*Abdil Illat.*" He jumped up and corrected her: "*Abdil Illah not Abdillat.*" Her grandmother consistently changed the *h* to a *t*, and her grandfather just as consistently tried to correct her. "*Illah not Illat.*" He grabbed his wife's hand and tried to make her write the two letters, the *h* and the *t*, which look identical but for the two dots over the *t*. "The feminine has two dots on it." Ganat, while asleep, heard her grandmother repeating the mistake. Her grandfather's voice rang out in the night: "The two dots, you she-ass!" Her grandmother's response? "Making a history out of two dots. Turning the world upside down just because of two dots. God take you from this world" (200–201).

The two dots on which this entire discussion hinges are not so innocuous. True, if one remains merely in the domain of Arabic grammar and lexicography, the two dots signal the feminine gender. When the grandfather declares that the "feminine has two dots on it," he is correct, but only on one level. Lest the reader miss the other connotations of this discussion, the narrator continues. The ever-curious Ganat asks her grandmother whether Allah is different from Al Illah. "I don't know," replies the old woman. "Ask

your father and your grandfather.” Ganat does, upsetting her grandfather: “I take refuge in thee, o God, from the sinful Devil.” We next see Ganat being made to write three times: “*I take refuge in thee, o God, . . . I take refuge in. . .*” When she finally gets out the third *h*, two ink drops fall on the page, turning the *h* into a *t*. It is again as if the world were overturned. The schoolteacher Sheikh Bassiouni looks at her notebook and loses control, shouting, “*I take refuge in Al Illah! I take refuge in Al Illah!*” He raps Ganat on the knuckles and erases the dots so hard that he rips the paper. When his eyes spotted the two dots, it was “as though he were seeing Eblis in person, and not two dots of ink.” He made the school girls recite after him a Koranic verse: “*And didst’t thou witness Illat and El Ouza and Manat who is their third. And shalt thou have the male, and he the female. That is indeed an unjust way to apportion them out.*” He stared at the girls and continued: “*Those who do not believe in the forever after do call the angels by female names.*” (202–4).

Ganat has indeed opened up a can of worms. Her inquiries that innocently began in the domain of language end up in that of theology. The Arabic language itself has done nothing but facilitate her task. The word *Allâh*, as is well known, is composed of two elements: the definite article *al* (the), and the word for “deity,” *ilâh*, the entirety elided into *al-Lâh* or *Allâh*, the Deity par excellence. To complicate matters, the

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pronunciation of this word varies according to the vowel that precedes it. If it is preceded by the *i*, as in *a'ûdhu bil-Lâh* (I seek God's protection)—the phrase we hear repeated over and over again by the male characters in this segment of the text—then the pronunciation is with an open *a*, bringing it close to the *al-Lâh* that Ganat inquires about. From there, it is an easy jump to *al-Lât*, a word in which the *h*, when written, picks up those two infamous dots, transforming *al-Lâh* into *al-Lât*. Grammar has transported the reader into the domain of theology.

On a most rudimentary level, Ganat and her grandmother have transformed a grammatically male deity into a grammatically female one. (It should be remembered that though the word *Allâh* is grammatically masculine, Muslim theologians have always argued that human categories such as gender do not apply to God.) Furthermore, these are not just any two deities. The female, *al-Lât*, is one of the pre-Islamic goddesses, who, along with her female cohorts, surfaces in the Koranic verse recited by Sheikh Bassiouni.<sup>17</sup> It was the elimination of these pagan deities that the Prophet Mohammed set out to accomplish in the seventh century. Islam is a monotheistic religion, one of whose central precepts is the notion of *tawhîd*, the unity and transcendence of *Allâh*. How sacrilegious it is then that the women play these gender games with male and female deities! Not only is doubt