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## **A Forgotten Woman Writer: Representations of Women in Faridah Ahmad's Creative Writings**

### **Cover Page Footnote**

Sylvia E. Azmy, Undergraduate Student, Arabic and Islamic Civilization, The American University in Cairo. The authors wish to thank Dr. Dina Heshamt, Osama Ibrahim, and Reem Mahmoud for their support and feedback.

## A Forgotten Woman Writer: Representations of Women in Faridah Ahmad's Creative Writings

Sylvia E. Azmy<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract:

In her creative writings Farida Ahmad (1939-2018), an Egyptian woman writer and journalist excluded from the Arabic literary canon, subtly presents a different narrative about the leftist movement in the seventies and eighties. This research argues that Ahmad's works, which present that women's liberation and nation's liberation are different, faced structural marginalization. She presents that in her novella, *Akhāfu 'alayka Minnī*, using the relationship dynamics between two intellectual leftist activists, Mustafa and Nadia. Mustafa marginalizes Nadia from the political sphere through his patronizing attitude. Moreover, he utilizes the sexual (nation) liberation rhetoric *and* conservative rhetoric to convince Nadia to be his concubine. This research examines Nadia's work in an attempt to create an inclusive vision of her work and life. This research speaks in dialogue with the feminist approach to the structural formation of the literary canon, especially in Arabic literature. It does not attempt to generalize how the Arabic canon is formed, but rather investigates the reasons why a leftist woman's fictional narrative exists in the periphery even in the leftist production of literature.

**Keywords:** Canon; Forgotten Writers; Arabic Literature; Gender Studies

It is not uncommon for women to question the dominant narratives. Women's writings have been marginalized in the literary canons, which are the "established standards of judgment and taste."<sup>2</sup> Feminists challenged this status by using several methods that Lillian S. Robinson recalls in her article "Treason Our Text: Feminist Challenges to the Literary Canon." Firstly, feminist scholars admit women's writings into canons using a case-by-case method, or in other words, tokenism. They choose a woman author, "prove" that her writings are worth exploring, and revive her. However, tokenism focuses on proving that women follow the standards of the canon, which is constructed by privileged male writers.<sup>3</sup> It does not shake the canon's standards. Feminists and postcolonial scholars started examining how the canon is constructed and why women's writings are marginalized. An intuitive explanation is how patriarchy is based on the exclusion of women from the public sphere and marginalizing their narratives.

Hoda El-Sadda argues in her book *Gender, Nation, and the Arabic Novel* that gender is not the only reason women's writings are on the periphery of the literary canon. She argues that women's writings do not follow the imagined community that the liberal nation elite drew; moreover, they do not "fit the ideological blueprint of the dominant cultural elite."<sup>4</sup> For her, and throughout this paper, the elites' dominant narratives are about the national struggle alone, the

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<sup>2</sup> Robinson, 83

<sup>3</sup> Robinson, 88

<sup>4</sup> El-Sadda, xiv

binary between tradition and modernity, women and men. In general, elite men “internalized many of the assumptions of colonial discourse.”<sup>5</sup> One of the women writers who challenged the male narratives and is thus forgotten is Faridah Ahmad.

In the brief introduction about Farida Ahmed (1939-2018) in the *Arab Women Writers* encyclopedia edited by Radwa Ashour, her date of birth is unknown, and her career as a journalist and a literary critic is not mentioned.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the only critique published about her creative writings is by Mustafa ‘Abd Al-Ghani and is only published towards the end of her short stories collection. He refers to her twice as Fathiya Ahmad,<sup>7</sup> instead of Faridah Ahmad. The main theme discussed in her creative writings is the relationship intellectual and militant men have with women. As can be seen in her novella *Akhāfu ‘alayka Minnī* and her short story, *Al-’Riz, wa Al-Barūd, wa Al-Zaytūn* (In English, and henceforth: *Rice, Gunpowder, and Olives*). The theme and how Ahmad addresses it is in line with El-Sadda’s description of marginalized writings which “[do] not fit the nationalist criteria”<sup>8</sup> and do not stick to the cultural elites’ “blueprint.”<sup>9</sup> Arwa Salih, from the same generation as Faridah Ahmad, presents the same theme in her book *The Stillborn: Notebooks of a Woman from the Student-Movement Generation in Egypt*, and repeatedly describe herself as a woman from the margin. Other themes related to women’s status appear in Ahmad’s creative writings: motherhood, patriarchy, and women as storytellers of folktales. Representations of women in Faridah Ahmad’s creative writings are against the dominant narratives about women and intellectual men of the leftist movement during the seventies and eighties.

Faridah Ahmad’s political and intellectual context are essential to analyzing her marginalization. The lift was structurally exclusionary to women who did not follow its nationalist rhetoric, which was based on the inseparability between women’s rights and the nation’s liberation from colonization. In her visit to Egypt in the seventies, Angela Davis, a Black American Communist activist, observes the women’s meetings in Cairo and Egyptian women’s sexual rights and more specifically sexual relations in the leftist movement. Davis writes that in this meeting a wave of rage erupted because she included in one sentence women and sex.<sup>10</sup> Latifa Al-Zayat, a canonized woman writer in the seventies, responded to Davis, and her response exhibits the general leftist rhetoric. She said,

*“I would boycott any American who is doing research on Arab women because I know that we are being tested, we are being listed in catalogs, we are being defined in terms of sexuality for reasons which are not in our own interests.”*<sup>11</sup>

This rhetoric is further pointed out by another speaker who says that women want to be liberated from the economic burdens caused by the neoliberal system and not sexual liberation. She adds that researchers and activists in America should stop sexualizing the causes of the “Third World countries.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, the canonized, feminist, leftist demands in the seventies did not differ much from the general leftist rhetoric. Faridah Ahmad and Arwa Salih present in their work different demands for women in the leftist movement.

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<sup>5</sup> El-Sadda xiv

<sup>6</sup> (268)

<sup>7</sup> Ahmad, 1992, 118 and 119

<sup>8</sup> El-Sadda, xxiii

<sup>9</sup> El-Sadda, xiv

<sup>10</sup> Davis, 333-337

<sup>11</sup> Davis, 334

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

*Akhāfu ‘alayka Minnī*, published in 1982, portrays the relationship between intellectual men and women using two characters Mustafah Wagdy, a leftist intellectual, and Nadiah Sa’id, a woman intellectual, in which the former holds a patronizing attitude towards the latter. The novella has a simple plot: Nadiah, who returns from Paris, falls in love with Mustafah, who is married, and a dilemma starts for Nadiah, as she is a strong believer in equality in marriage. The novella takes place during the seventies, “after one year of October’s victory,”<sup>13</sup> and Nadiah remembers what happened 15 years before traveling to Paris,<sup>14</sup> in 1959. Nadiah recalls how Mustafah treated her before traveling, as “he embraced her limited and short experience in the political sphere.” He also “forgot that she is a young woman”<sup>15</sup> although she was in her twenties. When she returns, he tells her, “Nadiah, have you forgotten how I was responsible for your safety before traveling?”<sup>16</sup> He patronizes her, and his forced assistance exiles Nadiah from the political sphere.

When Nadiah describes her time in Paris, she calls it exile that located her in the “periphery of the political sphere and his [Mustafa’s] heart.”<sup>17</sup> There is a parallel between Mustafah and Egypt’s political sphere because when Mustafa expresses his love to Nadiah and hugs her, she feels that “Egypt is embracing her.”<sup>18</sup> Nadiah followed only two things from her exile in Paris: Egypt’s political events and Mustafa’s publications and writings, which establishes the parallel even more. Mustafa desires Nadiah as a lover, and he does not make his desires clear until later in the novella, which locates her in the periphery of his life. However, Nadiah refuses this position several times, but Mustafa, the intellectual man, insists. This implies that intellectual women in the Egyptian political sphere, and in their relationships with intellectual men, during the seventies were marginalized.

Arwa Salih, the leftist and Marxist intellectual/militant, discusses the relationship between intellectual/militant men and women in her collection of essays *The Stillborn* (1996). Ahmad and Salih are from the 1970s generation, who believed in committed writings and the ability to make a change. However, the two authors chose to present their disappointment from their generation, Salih producing analysis of the gender dynamics using her autobiography, and Ahmad using fiction. Salih, using a strong voice, builds her arguments based on sexual desires, yet she is not an activist for a sexual revolution.<sup>19</sup> Ahmad, however, uses elements of love from Nadiah’s side and attempts to use a neutral tone. I use Salih’s work in a further attempt to contextualize Ahmad’s novella because the former intellectualizes and describes the structural marginalization she witnessed in the leftist movement.

In the third chapter titled *The Intellectual in Love* from *The Stillborn*, Arwa Salih describes in a harsh tone how intellectual men are conservative, yet they make use of their “freedom” to “whore” with, or rather to “conquer,” intellectual women. They are champions of monogamous marriages because they want to be sure about their heirs.<sup>20</sup> In *Akhāfu ‘alayka Minnī*, Mustafah wants Nadiah to be his lover, keeping his first wife, and he is not clear about his desires with Nadiah. He is “the man of principles,”<sup>21</sup> yet when it comes to women’s rights, he is deceptive.

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<sup>13</sup> Ahmad (1982), 11

<sup>14</sup> Ahmad (1982), 9

<sup>15</sup> Ahmad (1982), 20

<sup>16</sup> Ahmad (1982), 24

<sup>17</sup> Ahmad (1982), 15

<sup>18</sup> Ahmad (1982), 60

<sup>19</sup> Selim, xx and xxi

<sup>20</sup> Salih, 100

<sup>21</sup> Ahmad (1982), 60

Salih's work can be utilized to offer analysis to all the man-woman relationship dynamics, not only Mustafa and Nadiah's. Salih shows that intellectual men follow the bourgeois and petty - bourgeois morals combined- although they are contradictory.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, Ahmad, through her characters, shows the similarities between intellectuals and the bourgeoisie. Nadiah remembers the stories of her comrades, as most of the intellectual men married for a second time and cheated on their wives when they got out of jail.<sup>23</sup> She wonders if the problem is with them as individuals or with their affiliations, and why only those progressive colleagues have this gap between their beliefs and their actions.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Nadiah's friends, who are also intellectual men and scholars, harass her. They justify their actions by explaining that Nadiah is a liberated woman who lived in Paris, so she must be sexually active. Intellectual men use their privileges, governed by law,<sup>25</sup> to marry a second wife or have a lover. Salih adds that intellectual men do not have the money and capital to gain this power in market-based relationships, so they depend on cunning. The remaining relationships are examples of bourgeois relationships that intellectuals take as models. Nadiah suffered from living a "fancy life,"<sup>26</sup> where her mother controls her father using sex, and her father controls her mother with money.<sup>27</sup> This is what Arwa Salih presents as "a dependable relation that takes a variety of complex and well-established forms. He [a bourgeois] provides financial support and she [his wife] provides pleasure."<sup>28</sup> The second model for bourgeois relationships is Nawal's. Nawal encourages her friend, Nadiah, to follow her style of dealing with the bourgeoisie when the latter asks for advice about Mustafah. First, Nawal justifies Mustafah's actions by saying that he wants something in return, "everybody gives and expects something in return, especially if one is a man and the other one is a woman."<sup>29</sup> Salih calls this a "capitalism" relationship, where the man will always take without giving unless the woman is resisting.<sup>30</sup> Nawal advises Nadiah to "lure" Mustafah into marrying her as a second wife because he has money and love,<sup>31</sup> and Salih labels those actions prostitution.<sup>32</sup> Thus the two authors follow the same description of the intellectual men, but unlike Salih, Ahmad gives her main character an active role.

Contrary to Salih's observations about women of her generation, Ahmad gives the protagonist a strong voice. Nadiah loves Mustafah; she rarely questions his actions, and when she does, she believes whatever he says. However, Nadiah is not naive; after all, she sees the whole picture of Mustafah's personal life because she knows he is married. She is an active player in his game. She fantasizes about him, goes out on dates with him, and calls him just to calm down; she is playful in the game of exploitation.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, Salih presents intellectual women as victims and objects men play with, not active players. Women follow society's expectations of them: fall for con men, see men as prey, conceive themselves as despicable and immoral, etc.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Salih, 99

<sup>23</sup> These individuals were communist militants who got arrested in 1959 and released in 1964.

<sup>24</sup> Ahmad (1982), 14

<sup>25</sup> Salih, 108

<sup>26</sup> Ahmad (1982), 16

<sup>27</sup> Ahmad (1982), 16

<sup>28</sup> Salih, 101

<sup>29</sup> Ahmad (1982), 29

<sup>30</sup> Salih, 102

<sup>31</sup> Ahmad (1982), 73

<sup>32</sup> Salih, 102

<sup>33</sup> Exploitation is the name of the game that Salih gives for men's cunning, p108

<sup>34</sup> Salih, 111-113

Ahmad attempts to use an unbiased narrator's voice. The hesitation of the main character about her relationship with Mustafah, and the reasons Nadiah uses to reject him are the tools that establish this objectivity of the narrator. Because the theme of the novella is not the national struggle, Ahmad "inhibited" her voice.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, women were subjects of accusations of being biased towards women, and to show otherwise, Faridah Ahmad chose to be "objective" about her narrative. However, Salih uses a strong and harsh voice because she declares in the introduction to her book that her aim is not to be objective because this is her personal experience.<sup>36</sup>

Ahmad and Salih are writers from the margin who knew their writings would not change anything. They made their main characters choose for themselves "*nonbelonging*." For Nadiah in Faridah Ahmad's novella, "the solution was nonbelonging" because although she has found safety and protection from traditions in her commitment to political ideologies, the men in those parties are "scandalous and cheaters to their wives."<sup>37</sup> Moreover, those men, communist militants, perceive her as "an object, a commodity, or a tool for pleasure."<sup>38</sup> Arwa Salih chooses a stronger stance in the same direction as Nadiah, "disconnecting (altogether) from the national struggle,"<sup>39</sup> not only political affiliations. This was against the dominant leftist rhetoric in the 1970s and 1980s, where the main rhetoric was the nation's struggle, and "the freedom of individuals goes hand in hand with the society's freedom, and does not conflict with it."<sup>40</sup> And according to El-Sadda, any personal experience is a betrayal of the writer to the nation,<sup>41</sup> and Salih's and Ahmad's writings are about women sharing their experiences with intellectual men using different genres and different narrating tones.

*Rice, Powder, and Olives*, written in 1982 and published in 1992, deals with the same theme of the relationship between militant men and women. Unlike the novella, women follow militant men's rhetoric and transfer it. The story takes place in a hospital on a battlefield where the protagonist, Fatimah, a doctor and militant, stays with her wounded husband, who is also a militant. The narrator makes it clear that Fatimah is a brave militant and a smart doctor, "she takes her gun out, and is ready to shoot [herself]," but she thinks to herself, "how can I leave him alone with his sadness over losing me?"<sup>42</sup> She refuses to kill herself because she believes brave soldiers do not leave each other on the battlefield.

When Khalid is about to die, he asks Fatimah "not to be only a militant and a doctor, but also a mother for the men and women militants who will fight with her."<sup>43</sup> This advice is repeated two times by Khalid, and Fatimah remembers his words once after his death. Fatimah has a flashback about her father explaining that Fatimah "means the woman who glorifies her children, *wallūd* (literal translation: a woman who bears a lot of children)."<sup>44</sup> She replies to her father: "I am a fighter and a doctor, and Muhammad (her son) is enough."<sup>45</sup> In return, her father replies with an illogical justification, as for him nations need not only guns but women and men. When Khalid

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<sup>35</sup> El-Sadda xxiii

<sup>36</sup> Salih, 20 and 21

<sup>37</sup> Ahmad (1982), 16

<sup>38</sup> Ahmad (1982), 16

<sup>39</sup> Salih, 1

<sup>40</sup> Al-Zayyat, 4, in her introduction to the *Owner of the House* she analyzes all her work, and this comment is about her *Open Door*

<sup>41</sup> El-Sadda, xxii

<sup>42</sup> Ahmad 1992, 6

<sup>43</sup> Ahmad 1992, 5

<sup>44</sup> Ahmad 1992, 11

<sup>45</sup> Ahmad 1992, 11

dies, Fatimah returns to the camp, looking exhausted, repeats her husband's advice, and asks the militant to make her pregnant "with every sunrise."<sup>46</sup> However, when she started to convince the leader of the camp -tears in her eyes- she used "her father's and Khalid's arguments."<sup>47</sup> This implicitly shows that those arguments are not Fatimah's. Moreover, the ending does not show (whether) Fatimah followed the patriarchal advice or just repeated it. Ahmad uses an unbiased tone to present that the idea of women giving birth to be qualified further as militants is based on patriarchal concepts. And women repeat patriarchal values with "tears in their eyes." In conclusion, militant women are not similar to men, as they are expected to mainly bear children and participate in creating more soldiers.

*Rice, Powder, and Olives* deals with motherhood as the most important part for women fighters bearing children, but in *Al-Ghul, Al-'Anqa' wa Al-Khil Al-Wafi*, mothers and grandmothers transfer the Arabic oral tradition to encourage their grandchildren to hate colonialism. Nour, the grandmother of all, whom everybody calls her "mother," despite not being anyone's mother,<sup>48</sup> tells folktales to Mundhīr, the protagonist. Nour chooses three characters from folk Arabic tales: Al-Ghul, Al-'Anqa' wa Al-Khil Al-Wafi. When Mother Nour tells the story to Mundhīr, she uses al-ghilan (plural of al-ghul) and al-'Anqa' as metaphors for Israeli soldiers. These are the fittest metaphors because in many of the classical Arabic literary works it is an irony to fear something never seen and probably not real.<sup>49</sup> Israel.

The protagonist, Mundhīr, comes back from the militant men's camp and finds Israeli soldiers have killed all the women and children in his family. He has a conversation with Mother Nour: "What happened, mother Nour? - Al-ghul wa al-'anqa' have met, my dear. - Mother Nour, when will we meet al-Khil al-wafi (literally, loyal friend)? - Soon my dear, very soon."<sup>50</sup> In this conversation, women are not part of the battlefield, but they bear the folktales and utilize it to encourage fighters. Two of the three impossibilities (Al-ghul wa al-'anqa' wa al-Khil al-wafi) have happened, and the last one, the loyal friend, is the remaining one.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, women are the martyrs of the Israeli soldiers, and not the men fighting in the militant's camp, as presented in the story the casualties are the women. Although women are "...the mothers of the nations and the bearer of traditional values and heritage, they have limited national agency."<sup>52</sup>

Faridah Ahmad presents children, the coming generations, as capable of noticing how military men perceive women as inferior to themselves. Mundhīr, a ten-year-old child, thinks to himself that the leader of the camp is "naive and foolish,"<sup>53</sup> and "stupid and naive"<sup>54</sup> because the leader sends guidelines to the women in the camp that women have already done. Faridah Ahmad is not a committed writer, but she is optimistic about the coming generations. Unlike Salih, who believes that for the youth to be free of all ideologies, they will follow- unwillingly- the bourgeois values.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ahmad 1992, 12

<sup>47</sup> Ahmad 1992, 12

<sup>48</sup> Ahmad 1992, 29

<sup>49</sup> Ron-Gilboa, 75

<sup>50</sup> Ahmad 1992, 33

<sup>51</sup> This is based on folktales that Egyptians still transfer

<sup>52</sup> El-Sadda, xxiii.

<sup>53</sup> Ahmad 1992, 27

<sup>54</sup> Ahmad 1992, 28

<sup>55</sup> Salih, 141



Motherhood is also portrayed as a tool to transfer or repeat patriarchal values, as in the short story titled *Al-Jarima Al-ḥora* (in English, *The Free Crime*). The title implies that husbands cheating on their wives and divorcing them for no specific reason is a crime that is not punishable by law or society. The irony in the short story is that the protagonist's mother-in-law is the one defending her son's actions. The protagonist visits her mother-in-law where her husband lives, and once her husband opens the door, he calls her mother and runs away.<sup>56</sup> Flashbacks remind her that her husband's mother defended him saying that "a man never looks for another woman unless he cannot find his peace in his own home,"<sup>57</sup> which is a justification used by patriarchal men for polygamy or cheating on their wives. And when the protagonist asked the mother for intervention to solve the problems her son keeps doing, the mother did not do anything.<sup>58</sup> The conversation between the mother-in-law and the protagonist proceeds after the flashbacks, and the protagonist refuses to dive into an "illogical and infuriating conversation."<sup>59</sup> Ahmad represents women as participants in the patriarchy.

Mustafa 'bd Al-Ghani, who wrote a literary critique about Farida Ahmad's collection, argued that her short stories are more about the national struggle rather than the feminist struggle.<sup>60</sup> This paper argues that Ahmad combined both because she did not see both struggles conflicting: women are half the nation. In an attempt to revive her writings, this research paper analyzes her writings and compares her novella *Akhāfu 'alayka Minnī* to Arwa Salih's *The Stillborn*. They both discussed the same theme: the relationship between intellectual men and women, which did not follow nor fit the dominant narratives during the eighties and nineties. A story about a woman struggling in the intellectual community because of men is a story that is on the margin of the national struggle. Faridah Ahmad represents other women, such as working women and women as the nation that this paper did not analyze. Faridah Ahmad was indeed a woman from the periphery whose father refused to enroll in higher education, so her mother funded her, which made Ahmad work while having her higher education degree.<sup>61</sup> And despite her positionality in the margin of the literary scene, she chose to write about a topic that challenged the intellectual and elite male narratives about women.

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<sup>56</sup> Ahmad 1992, 51

<sup>57</sup> Ahmad 1992, 53

<sup>58</sup> Ahmad 1992, 55

<sup>59</sup> Ahmad 1992, 57

<sup>60</sup> 'bd Al-Ghani, 1992, 109-127

<sup>61</sup> Personal conversation with Dr. Sawsan Issa, Faridah Ahmad's Daughter in 2021.

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