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Self-Knowledge in the Modern Egyptian Novel: An in-depth Reading of *Noon* by Sahar El-Mougy

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RESUMEN:

Este artículo corresponde con un análisis detallado de la novela *Noon* (2007) de la autora feminista Sahar El-Mougy. Además de la temática que la novela desarrolla, el estatus de la mujer en el ámbito social y político combulso de Egipto, el artículo trata de arrojar luz sobre las implicaciones que la técnica narrativa y el estilo de la novela aportan a esta cuestión.

El título de la novela corresponde con el antiguo dios egipcio del Océano, *Noon*, origen de toda creación. En la novela, Noon es símbolo de nuevos nacimientos. La autora escoge como contraste un narrador femenino personificado en la antigua deidad egipcia del cielo, la mujer, también símbolo de la fertilidad y el amor, *Hathour*. La voz de la deidad es multi-funcional; no sólo representa la narración, sino también interactúa con otros personajes, a través de la voz de sus alter egos en diálogos interiores. Aconseja a su vez a los cuatro personajes principales de la obra. Su principal objetivo pasa por ayudar a éstos en un proceso de autodescubrimiento personal y reconciliarlos con el mundo que les rodea.

Palabras clave: Modern Arabic Literature, Arabic feminist literature, ancient Egyptian mythology, oneness, Sahar El Mougy, ancient Egyptian deities

ABSTRACT:

The paper provides a detailed analysis of the novel *Noon* (2007) by Egyptian feminist author Sahar El-Mougy. Along with the thematic issues tackled in the novel, mainly women's status and concerns in present day politically and socially troubled Egypt, the paper sheds light as well on the novel's style and narrative technique.

The title of the novel is the name of ancient Egyptian primordial god of the ocean, Noon, the origin of all creation. In the novel Noon is the symbol of new births. The author chooses her narrator's voice to be that of the ancient Egyptian goddess of the sky, women, fertility and love, Hathour. The goddess' voice is multi-functional; not only does it present the narrative, but it also interacts with the characters as the voice of their alter egos in the form of inner dialogues. She also whispers her advice and concerns to the four main characters. Hathour's aim is to get them to understand themselves and ultimately reconcile with their problems and with the world.

Key words: Modern Arabic Literature, Arabic feminist literature, ancient Egyptian mythology, oneness, Sahar El Mougy, ancient Egyptian deities

"I sought to persuade every man among you that he must look to himself, and seek virtue and wisdom before he looks to his private interests." (Socrates- as written by Plato in *The Apology*)

"Know then thyself, presume not God to scan/ The Proper study of mankind is Man" (Alexander Pope, "Essay on Man")

"Because in thee resides/ The Spirit that lives in all" (Emerson, "Gnothi Seauton")

In 1571 Michel de Montaigne announced his retirement from the busy life of the French court and all public duties to spend the latter part of his life studying himself. Montaigne's essay "On Vanity," a product of a plan to draw "his portrait with a pen" (Kramer), is based on his belief in the theory promoting the understanding of oneself as the first step to wider knowledge. His notion goes back in time to the long held classical maxim found in the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, stressing the importance of insight as a way of reaching truth. "On Vanity" thus introduces the Greek commandment as divine, yet notes at the same time the difficulty of following it, "to struggle back towards our self against the current is a painful movement"(38), the essay states. By ending the essay quoting the Delphic maxim, "Look back into yourself; get to know yourself, hold on to yourself" (38), Montaigne seems to be stressing its divinity, a premise promoted by prominent authors in different time periods.

James Wood mentions, for instance, in his article "The Conundrumizer," the Romantic authors Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) and Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) as examples of proponents of the thought. In the article, Wood discusses Coleridge's belief in the sanctity of self knowledge. By quoting Juvenal's "From Heaven descended the 'Know Thyself,'" Wood claims, Coleridge was arguing that "'Know Thyself' was both the great demand of philosophy and the great demand of God." Likewise, Wood provides a second example in Emerson's poem "Know Thyself" ("Gnothi Seauton" 1831), in which Emerson echoes Coleridge's belief that the "greatest principle of philosophy is 'Know Thyself'" (Wood), and in "Self Reliance" (1841) he focuses on the "oneness of being" whereby "the ancient precept 'Know Thyself' and the modern precept, 'Study Nature,' became at last one maxim" (Scott).

A century and a half later, Egyptian novelist

Sahar El Mougy throws light on the themes tackled in her novel *Daria* (1996) [and later in her novel *Noun* (2007)], by quoting the Greek philosopher Plotinus¹ of Alexandria in the threshold of the novel. Plotinus' quotation gives a brief, yet comprehensive description of the process of experiencing absolute, divine, transcendental freedom through getting to know the self, uniting with it, with the world around it and ultimately, with God:

Occasionally, I get on my own, shed off my body to turn into an essence without a figure, within myself, going back to it and out of the realm of all else. I would become all in one: knowledge, the universe and the known. I would see in myself amazing beauty and goodness and, know then, that I am a small part of the sacred whole. Once I believe it, I rise in my thoughts to the divine and I see myself part of it. It is only then that indescribable light and beauty would shine to me. It is strange that I would feel my soul then full of light even though it never left the body. (7)²

The aim of this study is to provide a detailed analysis of the social and existential themes Sahar El-Mougy tackles in *Noon*, and which are based on the above mentioned classical and Romantic notions of self knowledge and transcendental freedom as well as the unity of creation. Set in contemporary Egypt and focusing on women's status at the present time in her homeland, El-Mougy traces the difficult-to-attain process of understanding the complications of the psyche through reaching the core of its fears and inhibitions, reconciling past with present as a means of reuniting the fragmented pieces of one's self. The novel concludes that through such reunification, motivated by the power of love for oneself and for the world at large, human sanctity is asserted within an inclusive universal unity.

El-Mougy thus chooses her narrator's voice to be that of the ancient Egyptian deity Hathour, goddess of the sky and Lady of the Moon, goddess of fertility, love, music and dance. Hathour's voice is multi-functional; besides narrating events, she interacts with the characters as the voice of their sub-conscious minds, whispering her advice and concerns to the readers as well as to the four main troubled characters in the form of inner dialogues. The goddess' aim is to get the readers and the main characters to understand their own value as humans by ultimately reconciling with

their respective problems and with the world in which they live. By so doing, *Noon's* goddess serves as an embodiment of Emerson's voice summing up human sanctity in "Thou art unto thyself a law" (Gnothi Seauton). Hathour's presence enforces the existential theme of divine universal unity in a world where humans are physical representations of "The law, the gospel, and the Providence/ Heaven, Hell, the Judgment, and the stores/ Immeasurable of Truth and Good/ All these thou must find/within thy single mind/Or never find" ("Gnothi Seauton").

Noon, as a title, is a multi-symbolic representation of the various thematic elements in the novel. First, it is a direct reference to the ancient Egyptian primordial god of the ocean, the source of all beginnings; hence, an assertion of the rebirths taking place in the work. The same connotation extends to the shape of the character representing the god "Noon" in hieroglyphics, a wavy zigzagging horizontal line indicating ocean waves, also used by the author to mark scene breaks, thus sustaining the spirit of fertility and new births throughout the work.

In Arabic, the letter N (ن) also pronounced noun, is crescent shaped, "a half moon with a dot in the middle" (323), as Hathour often refers to herself and to her female characters. It is a letter used grammatically as a suffix to indicate the Arabic plural form of feminine pronouns and adjectives. In this sense, phonetically and morphologically, the title functions as a reference to women's power.

Noon is divided into four parts, each chapter is preceded by a threshold in verse form, reflecting the essence of the chapter following. The novel's setting and plot take place in modern day Egypt in the early years of the second millennium, hence its focus on the current social and political concerns in the country. Simultaneously, the novel's world is immersed in the spirit of the ancient Egyptian culture with Hathour as the voice of narration and with the constant moving back and forth from the present time of the action to the world of ancient history, ritualistic practices and philosophies, as presented in the chapters' introductory verses and through the characters' dialogue. On the whole, Hathour's presence as narrator and participant in the action serves to underscore the thematic issues raised, especially human sanctity and the oneness of creation, as her presence merges history with the present moment, the godly with the secular, and the mythical with the real.

While El Mougy portrays her characters as personae interacting in everyday life situations, Hathour refers to them as priestesses in her temple. Thus, through her goddess as narrator and mother, the author infiltrates the message of "love" as an *elan vital* into the world of the plot. Hathour is therefore portrayed showing concern for and interacting with her characters, whispering her thoughts to them as to the readers and ultimately merging with their beings, especially that of Sarah, the main character.

Orchestrated by love as a driving force, this closeness between goddess and descendants is pinpointed from the opening moments of the narrative where Hathour addresses her readers, revealing the pride of a mother in her children who "have drained" her with the "bittersweet" task of solving their problems. The drive in her that carries such feelings, she declares, is "that of the mother who works daily wonders for her children, neither seeing the miracle in her deeds nor complaining when they fail" (12). The peak of her pride is thus represented in her celebration of the "miracle" accomplished as three of the four characters find their way to the right path of self knowledge and are consequently reborn, or about to be, as beings with stronger personalities. On the other hand, she expresses sorrow, mixed with hope for a late recovery, for the fourth character, Noura, who loses the sense of direction and falls victim to despair and drug and alcohol abuse.

Hathour thus reflects on the necessity of a mutual acceptance and willingness on the part of goddess and followers, to make efforts towards self realization bear fruit. "This is a moment of mystery," she declares, "I don't know whether it's I who give birth to you so you [humans] would experience new births of identities or is it you who open spaces inside yourselves that allow me to delve into your beings" (25).

The goddess/mother thus reveals a special relationship with Sarah, the closest to her heart and who, on a different level, embodies the author's "own personality and dilemma" (El-Hennawy). The narrator admits this special status at the very end of the novel, "Sarah, with whom I chose to begin and end the novel (does that reveal extra love for her in my heart that I had denied at the beginning of my narrative?)..." (372). Likewise, Sarah is the one member of the four friends who has always felt a strong affiliation to the goddess, with whom she has bonded ever

since she was seven, visiting Hathour's temple with her parents in Upper Egypt. In one of her inner monologues, Sarah notices a likeness between her inner voice and that of Hathour's. While wondering about the decision she made a few years earlier to break up with her ex-husband, Mahmoud, a reassuring voice addresses her, "Sarah, this is the moment that you started to break away from a world that was not yours" (23). At this point, a blurred image begins to replace that of Mahmoud in the eye of Sarah's mind as her attention is directed to the "voice" she has long been acquainted with, a "voice" that sounded like that of her grandmother, Isabella. In her uncertainty she ponders, "It might be the voice of Isabella," and.. "it's my voice as well. But,..." (23), as the image instantly turns to be that of Hathour. The narrator thus comments on the scene reflecting such union,

She wouldn't have missed that face which she has always loved and stood attracted to whenever she saw it. It was Hathour's face as she has always known it... It was not the usual face carved on the walls of the Temple of Dendara.... The face was neither made of stone nor carrying the golden sun disk encircled by two cow horns. It was the smiling face of a slender woman... it seemed to Sarah that it was moving towards her; her face lit up with a shadow of a smile. (24)

The face Sarah recognizes seems more of a description of her own features rather than those of the goddess of fertility carved in stone; from this moment onwards, the closeness between the two, which mounts up to complete merger on many occasions, is re-emphasized throughout the novel as Hathour occasionally sees herself personified in Sarah. Likewise, on another occasion Sarah sees the goddess' face as a reflection of her own face in the mirror. In fact, the whole first chapter of the novel is an initiation of such fusion of the two, culminating in Hathour's response to Sarah's repeated utterance as she senses the goddess' presence, "Is that you?" with her reply, "We stood there, one facing the other.. motionless" (25).

Such closeness, however, is subject to shakiness along the rise and fall of the plot's tension. In moments of weakness, Sekhmet, the Egyptian goddess of anger, takes control of Sarah's soul. Hathour reproachfully addresses Sarah who reacts angrily to her boyfriend's (Nadeem) sudden desertion of her, "Why Sarah? Out

of all people, you make me feel helpless by closing the door in my face!" (108). Hathour thus describes the pain she experiences for Sekhmet's control over her child,

I see these moments like daggers following you wherever you turn, your looks change from a Hathour priestess to a vengeful lioness whose thirst is only quenched with blood I cry with you, get closer to hold you in my arms in a dark womb to sleep in order not to feel the pain. (108)

Hathour shows concern for the dilemmas of all friends in *Noon*, especially the three young ladies through whom the author portrays "a widening class of women struggling to carve out a space for themselves" (El-Hennawy) within a conformist society and whose strength is often manifested in the circles of friendships they form. Such friendships, El-Mougy states in her interview with El-Hennawy, are the tools that empower those women as they give them the chance to "discover new horizons." Hence, El-Mougy's confidence in her characters' potential is reflected in Hathour's encouragement of the rebellious Dunia in her fight against her mother's demands to conform to societal expectations; in her willingness to extend her hands to Noura, who finally sells her soul to Sekhmet due to her failure to maintain the struggle; and in her support of Hossam, the one male character, in his failing marriage. Hathour's care is thus evident in her whispers of joy to Dunia and Sarah for following her path: "Why not? Aren't these my moments of pleasure when I hear your footsteps on the old deserted road [to the temple]?... I could hear the voice of my whisper in their ears" (82).

Likewise, the redeeming power of love, the "godly glue that attracts people to one another" (323), is emphasized along the course of events. Early on, Sarah explains to Nadeem the value of Hathour as representative of the sacred "power of love, forgiveness, space and freedom," (32) as she points to the goddess' figure on top of a column in the Upper Egyptian temple. Sarah thus asserts Hathour's influence on and presence within her with her remark, "I have known it existed inside me, not only when I am living a love story but in my life perspective.... When I was married it was dead in me... no, asleep, and suddenly I was freed from old problems by her energy which made me see life in colors instead of only black and white" (32). Complete fusion between Sarah and Hathour takes

place at the last moments of the novel as a summation of the power of love innate in Sarah, which encompasses and spills over the whole of creation. As Sarah lies distraught and shaking in her aunt's arms after Isabella's funeral, the narrator's voice poses an existential question reflecting on the driving force of love inherent in the feminine,

Could the trembling be out of fear? Love? Or a submission to the will of life's currents that would either comfort her, or blow her to the darkness of the ocean? Partly it is passion, not only for those she loves... but for the whole wide, frightening world, and for this dot in the middle of N [□]. (368-9)

Such union between goddess and children is best exemplified in the humorous scene of the mock burial Sarah and her friends hold for Nadeem's memory after his desertion of Sarah, whereby they gather on a boat to burn his effigy ritualistically and throw it into the Nile. Ironically, the scene is a farcical rendition of a funeral which comes closer to a joyous celebration filled with frenzied ritualistic dance and music rather than a burial scene. Taking place until midnight, under a shiny full moon, the scene is a celebration of the sacred union of love, as goddess and children participate in the event. Joyously, Hathour announces the merger as she proudly declares, "They danced and I danced along the night with them, running in their blood, encouraging them" (324). On the whole, Hathour perceives the evening as a display of the "miracle" of the god of gods, Atom Ra', raising it to the level of a "Hathouri night with distinction," in which "love... the first principle of creation," (323) is revealed.

Instead of serving as a death scene, the event ironically serves as an initiation of a stronger Sarah about to be born anew. Thus, in the midst of the loud celebration, moments of silence mark the divinity of a new birth as the narrator discloses, "Silence spread its soft cloak once more over all of them. It was only Sarah who heard my last words, 'it's the death from which you will be resurrected in your full virginity, the off-spring of the first witches'" (135). The scene represents as well one of the highest points of the spirit of divine universal unity in the novel; joyously, Hathour announces the sacred fusion of all in one as the dance floor on the boat gathers them all,

I will dance with you, around you, in you. The bending of your bodies is no more than the world

changing; Dunia's birds freed from their cages; Sarah's blue and violet butterflies waltzing in the air, kissing wild flowers. It is the wind flirting with tree branches, blowing above lakes, it is the circular formations of Aphrodite's white doves, the color of your souls, in a blue sky. Go on, dance, for dance is a golden power and a small flame around a godly glue that fuses you together and transcends with you towards *the soul of the Almighty that throbs within you*. (324) [Italics mine]

Earlier, Hathour expressed pride in the mutual love she shares with her followers "who carry her in their hearts" (51) wherever they go; she accompanies Sarah, for instance, on her various trips to Scotland to visit her grandmother Isabella as Hathour accompanies her on her trip with Nadeem to Upper Egypt. On another occasion, Sarah's interpretation of Dunia's recurrent dream of birds dying and others hatching meets Hathour's approval as Hathour joyously announces that she feels like "finishing up her sentences for her" (82). Dunia's dream is a symbolic implication of the ultimate realization of her dream to free her soul. Hathour reasserts that Sarah's reassuring words for Dunia reflect what Hathour wanted to inform Dunia, "that she belongs to those who have a bird's soul capable of flying even if they stay where they are... that inside her [after years of oppression] there is a miracle that has been brewing" (82-3).

Love of the self, on the other hand, what Hathour refers to as a ritual on the road to modern priesthood, is the motivation behind the quest for truth. Triggered by a "mysterious" moment of epiphany, we witness Sarah "start[ing] the rituals towards priesthood early" (28) as the goddess describes the moment and the steps leading to it,

a reader would return home after a long day at work through crowded noisy streets for a reason, open a page under a bed-side lamp's light so the *light spot* would fall on *my words*, the words turn to shiny letters and the sentences lead to remote lands so the reader would take the first steps which lead to the early thread of an idea. (28) [Italics mine]

Intuition, thus, plays an important role in guiding the various characters to the road of their/ Hathour's temple. We witness

Sarah advising Noura to listen to her "inner voice which never lies" (70) so as not to lose herself. And just as El-Mougy perceives "the kind of spirituality... [that] exists in every detail in life" as the "soul of the ritual" ("A Modern"), Sarah echoes El-Mougy's statement as she confronts Dunia early in the plot, "The soul is God's gift to us; you must know what the hidden Dunia in you likes and dislikes and what she really wants from life" (83). Hathour hence ends this encounter between the two young ladies by emphasizing the power of listening to one's inner voice, "it seemed luring [for Dunia] to see only herself" (83).

El-Mougy thus focuses on inner self search as the only path to happiness. She provides an example in Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*, elaborating, "You keep searching and searching for happiness and finally you find it within—in your heart" ("A Modern"). El-Mougy argues that happiness would not be realized until one puts an end to one's deeply hidden fears and inhibitions by confronting them, "You have to face your ghosts and every memory you were trying to escape from" ("A Modern"), she states in an interview with Sameh Ibrahim. Therefore, she allows Hathour to verbalize the same advice as she stresses the priceless value of self knowledge:

Just go about on the road that leads to mines of gold.... The gold I mean is that of the alchemists of the Middle Ages.... Those were the descendants of the ancient Egyptians who inherited "knowledge" from Thot.... That gold was their souls that melted with the heat of their search for the secrets of the unknown. The souls' residues burn under the heat of the experiment's flame which turn into ashes and what is left is the gold of truth in its purest form. (82)

Even though El-Mougy stresses the "difficulty of the road" ahead ("A Modern"), she sums up the experience and the joy derived from it and which leads to changing oneself to the better, "Admit that you have fears, befriend your fears and step towards knowing yourself.... Choosing that road means that you'll never get bored because you will be discovering new things about yourself and the world. Accept yourself in order to be able to change it" ("A Modern").

Hathour's clairvoyance predicts the prospects of her priestesses' future--whether each will manage or fail to "accept" their selves as a first step towards

"change." Just as George Bernard Shaw divides people into three categories in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891), Hathour divides them in the same manner into two: 1) those who kill their individuality by choosing to conform, what she refers to as "dwellers of sardine cans," or the living dead, and 2) those following their own instincts in life, breaking away from the "safety" of the crowd to what the former category refers to as the adventurous "roads of regret." She thus urges them to continue the journey, "either you go back into the sardine cans, which is a form of death, or proceed in spite of the bleeding, which is also a form of death leading to new forms of life" (92). She then reveals that in her capacity as the "golden cow... responsible for death that leads to real life" (92), she has the right to drive the novel's characters forward. It is "through the pain," El Mougy asserts, that one "is born again. It's like a fire that purifies and cleanses you. It's all about this moment of transformation; when the sophists, mystics, spirituals or whatever you may call them reach it" ("A Modern").

Thus, Hathour explains, as she reflects on the sad end of Sarah's love story, that in spite of the sadness resulting from unhappy endings, such points of finality might also lead to new beginnings only if one delves into the "dim" hidden recesses of the self, of "truth" which has always been lying quietly at the "bottom" since the birth of humanity and since "God blew of his soul in humans" (101). This truth, she reiterates, "Lies in the heart of darkness, far away except for those who stride towards it, resisting their seven-headed spit-fire-dragon-like fears" (101). Yet, she asserts that such dragons are just the creation of one's fears that exist "exactly as the Ancient Egyptian goddess and protector of wisdom exists, protecting wisdom from those who would tamper with it" (101).

Wisdom, a characteristic of Sarah since her childhood, is asserted early on in the novel in her questioning mind, always trying to understand, to reach the truth, "As if Ma'at³, the mother of wisdom and Lady of truth is always in control of her" (29). Hathour's comments reassure the reader that in spite of her agony after the loss of her love, Sarah has in her Ma'at's wisdom that would lead her to the right path of "truth." Isabella as well assures her grand-daughter that harsh experiences are necessary for such new births, that "priesthood in us is initiated by crises; we have to go through rough experiences that shake our beings to the point that we imagine that it is the end; however,

the priestess would awaken to pump new blood into us" (142). Earlier as well, Sarah declares that moments of epiphany are the points in which the hidden seed of ancient "priesthood" returns to us humans and that the main issue is "whether we are capable of taking care of it by watering it from our hearts or neglect it and thus kill it" (141-2).

Sarah recalls the agony of the divorce she experienced six years earlier, and which she had mistakenly thought was "a moment of the fall of the imaginary wall of security which she herself wanted to make believe; a home, a husband and a safe place to live in... even if such existence was not as beautiful as it looked on the outside" (171). As she makes the choice to end it, she takes refuge from her fears of the hidden "snakes" and "spit-fire dragons" in the textbooks she teaches at the university, which "sparked new knowledge that lit the inner darkness and threw some light on the heart's paths" (172).

Sarah reviews her ideas four years into her research on witch-hunts and concludes that, "to know is one thing, to understand is an entirely different thing" (172), a realization echoing Coleridge's analysis of understanding and reasoning in *Biographia Literaria*. As she reflects on her epiphany, the voice of narration traces the direction she is taking and commends its righteousness, "All along those few years, Sarah was heading slowly towards the east, towards the temple gates. On her arrival, she lowered her head in awe, raised her eyes to the sky, asking her first question: 'who am I?'" (172). At the moment, Sarah deletes the old title "Diaries," which she had chosen earlier for her research and replaces it with the symbolic, "Towards the East," "east" being a Pharoanic indicator of new beginnings, while "west" connotes ends.

Sarah thus starts anew on an unfinished chapter, typing her thoughts on reasons and meanings of human existence, emphasizing the deeper nature of human existence,

When we think that we do exist by mere chance, we turn into drops of rain sliding over on smooth marble leaving no traces behind nor falling on a soil that might blossom to tulips in the spring or wheat for children. However, if we replace "sight" with "insight," the eyes of Hathour, we would see a thousand small miracles taking place every minute, have been happening while we were blind. (173)

Consequently, Sarah opens up to her inner self in the novel's third chapter of part 2, entitled "The Recesses of Darkness." Determined to delve deeper into the mystery of herself, she continues writing her journey "Towards the East." As ideas race in her head, she suddenly starts to enjoy, "crystal clearness of mind; a clearness that made her see various details in her inner depths" (213), noticing the therapeutic effect of "releas[ing] the anger lying in black precipitations on the bottom of her being" (213).

As she replaces "sight" with "insight," Sarah manages to cross through the opacity of her life-long fears. It was not until she confronts "areas I have never got close to" (33) that she "put[s] her finger on the point of pain, feeling the old fear, drawing its features" (220). In a moment of epiphany, whereby her hidden "demons" are exorcised, she realizes that the betrayal of her parents at her clitorrectomy scene, where they left her "in the hands of strangers to exercise their will on her, burn her, slaughter her moved only by their good will of getting rid of the old witch in her" (220), has always been the source of all future fears of loss and insecurity. She realizes as well, that "the early departure of her mother still hurts, it took her years of fear before she decided to leave Mahmoud to start anew and she never wished Nadeem to leave her all of a sudden, the way he did as her father would one day, also unexpectedly" (220). By confronting her fears, Sarah crosses the threshold to the temple as Hathour stands approvingly "smil[ing] at her with Sarah return[ing] a tired smile" (220).

Hathour, the "golden cow" thus trusts Sarah, who has covered the longest distance on the road to the temple, with "keep[ing] an eye" (119) on her friends, making sure they all follow the right path at a tough time when the Egyptian society is socially and politically at a crossroads. Hathour predicts success, declaring that Dunia "has started on the right track these days" (119). Hence, her advice for Sarah to "embrace her warmly," to give her the support she misses in the absence of her mother who dwells in "sardine cans."

Dunia and Hossam thus follow suit; while Dunia requests that all four of them get together regularly for "group therapy... to keep up with what goes on inside us" (230), Hossam admits the double life he lives, hoping that "at least I would like to get to know him [Hossam]" (348). As a social victim who "lives for others... his mother, younger siblings and a wife, whose

demands and complaints never end" (43), Hossam's quest begins with the realization that he has long neglected himself, and he thus wonders, "When am I going to live for myself?" (43). His only hope for true love and mutual understanding, which he ironically believed he found in his ex-colleague Lyla, is doomed to failure, however. Hathour shows sympathy for Hossam's discovery of Lyla's desertion as she stands "watching him at the moment fall like a heavy rock from the heights of a gigantic mountain under the influence of gravity" (46). The goddess' divine ability at prediction does not save her the pain of his defeat; her "heart still aches for [her children's] downfalls," (46) she admits, reasserting a mother's concern for their misfortunes.

Hossam's confused state of mind shows signs of clarity amidst nature during his visit to the oasis. It is only in the peace of the oasis that he starts scanning his lifelong suffering, dedication, failures and disappointments, shedding tears for finally finding comfort in Hathour's embrace. She advises him, contrary to his father's instructions when a child, to give free expression of his emotions: "Let your tears flow, my son. Allow tears of your meeting with yourself clean up years of absence" (337). Through her words, "the currents of life have kept you away from yourself" (337), he finally realizes the cause of his problem.

As Hathour shares with Sarah the latter's moment of relief with a smile, she does the same with Hossam, explaining to him the healing consequences of understanding the paralyzing influence of one's fears and inhibitions, "Now you feel the lightness of your body because your soul returned to you safe and sound after you took steps into the dimness and realized that the "ghoul" on the gate is no more than a scarecrow" (337). She thus encourages him to accept and revive the softer side of his soul that has long been repressed by societal taboos whereby a boy is taught that "No man ever cries" (48). "The female in you ...this soft light that comes from the womb of darkness" (337) she points out, is the best road to "the silent corridors of the temple"(337).

On the other hand, Dunia's first step on the road to freedom is the decision she makes to break away from her ten-year commitment to the Palestinian Women's Forum. Ironically, her search for security in belonging turns out to be one more form of "oppression." The moment of her decision to reject oppression is highlighted

as a breaking point of a wider scope,

What she has done today was a triumph of the fear that dug its roots deep in her being. A kind of fear that her mother sowed in her and watered through the years with a different kind of fear. The fear of her paternal uncles who might come and take her and her siblings away, a fear that she would be rejected by the only country that she knew yet never had official papers that refer to her belonging to it, her mother's constant fear of people criticizing the way she brought them up. She has always looked for a place without fear and in the forum, she only found oppression in place of fear. (162)

Dunia's fears thus spring from her sense of insecurity in a world where her Palestinian father deserts the family at an early age and where she is the victim of a traditional society that blames women for whatever goes wrong and, hence, is the target of her mother's nagging for being "almost thirty and unmarried" (77). Hathour criticizes such an image of the mother's person, who "push[es] people to the extreme" (78). This leads Dunia to desert the sardine-can lifestyle, a decision the goddess has been "waiting for Dunia to reach" (78).

As she walks out into the open air after her resignation, her sigh of relief allows "her concerns to retreat giving space to a domain where she would not have to explain herself, a place that would not reject her if she says 'No,' she even disregarded her mother's welcoming reaction to her decision" (162), a new attitude reminiscent of Egyptian poet Amal Dunkol's verse in his poem "Spartacus," "He who says 'No' doesn't die/ yet remains a soul in eternal pain" (Daria 79).

Dunia's insecurity is reflected in the nightmare symbolizing her metaphorical crucifixion in a society that burns the "witch" at the stake: in this nightmare she is being raped by one of "the two giants pulling her to the crucifix" (76). Ironically, as she wakes up, she repeats what her mother, or any of the sardine-can dwellers, would say in interpreting her nightmares, "I am sure these nightmares are God's punishment for me as I do not pray at dawn anymore" (77).

Dunia shares with Noura the resistance of a conformist mother scolding her for failing to be "like normal girls" (163). Sarcastically she wonders, "I can't understand what fun

there is in being like other girls" (163). Thus she rejects her feminine side as a reaction to all the taboos her mother instilled in her subconscious-mind as she was growing up, when she heard what is expected of a girl her age: "cover your legs, you are grown up now" (166); "stop wearing those shorts, you are twelve"; or "don't wear that tight blouse that reveals your bosom" (166). Dunia recalls the strong Palestinian women she met years earlier in the Forum who gave her a completely different image of a woman. She found an ideal model in "Aunt Haniah" who joined a freedom fighter group resisting the Zionist gangs before 1948 and "was the first woman to wear trousers in Java, wore the Palestinian scarf and held a weapon.... She talked about freedom fighting as if it happened yesterday, as if the moment was still alive within her" (164).

Dunia views her mother's constant nagging as a sign that she is being punished for "refusing to cover her hair," while her sister did and thus was treated more gently by their mother. Such emphasis on the female body, Dunia realizes, was behind her rejecting thinking of herself in terms of any feminine aspects and explains her treatment of Ahmed, whom she loved "with her mind only, as for her body, she had disowned a long time ago, threw it away in the midst of demonstrations, lessons of illiteracy, and the noises of the streets she participated in" (166).

In line with Sarah's and Hossam's experiences, Dunia's near re-birth begins with an epiphany revealing the futility of wasting her life fighting against her mother's conformism; an attitude the mother expects of and tries to impose on her daughter. Dunia finally realizes that such counter efforts have always distracted her from her own self, her personal needs and desires. Hathour thus shares her priestess the joy of a moment of enlightenment very reminiscent in essence of Kate Chopin's heroine in "The Story of an Hour" (1894). The goddess views Dunia's epiphany as "the crack in the solid wall" (84) that would lead to a new birth, and just as Mrs. Mallard in Chopin's tale surprises herself a hundred years earlier with an unexpected embrace of new feelings, so does Dunia, who is "just starting to taste the first thread of a realization" (84) without resistance. In a sense, Hathour expects and reassures Sarah of Dunia's and Hossam's imminent success, "If Dunia is two steps short of her aim, he is four steps away, but Noura...." (119).

An early sign of relief for Dunia is

symbolically indicated as raindrops, increasing in intensity, flow from the balcony into the living room where she and Sarah sit discussing her decision to quit her job in the Forum. Even though she knows the importance of the Forum for Dunia, Sarah smiles as she sees her making her own decision; Sarah advises her that "public service, no matter how important, should not come at the cost of our primary needs" (164). Like Hossam before her, Dunia finally realizes that she is in need of herself and like him as well, she sees the light of freedom amidst nature in the serenity of the monastery she visits with her school team at a later stage in the novel.

As she takes quick steps to freedom in the quiet of the monastery, Dunia could not understand how to receive it as "the shackles were broken, but the heaviness was still there" (277). It's in the yoga she practices in the monastery, under the tutelage of Guru Singh, that she learns harmony of body, mind and soul, which in a more advanced stage, the guru explains, "leads to the union with the soul of the universe, with God" (277). Through yoga meditation she feels free for the first time as she "exhales and inhales more smoothly, feeling her lungs expanding as if thirsty for more air, an air she never tasted the like before" (280).

Noura, likewise, faces society's contradictory expectations of her, "at one point [she is] the family bread winner... At another she's the helpless woman awaiting a man's protection" (61). Her "pride and love" for her body is a defiant declaration against a societal sense of "shame" of the female body, most exemplified in her mother's "disowning [of] her body under loose cloaks that hide fats and lack of tenderness" (65).

Noura's resistance to a "sardine can" life-style has been evident since she was scolded in her childhood for playing with boys. Noura wonders about the disrespect she had always held for her mother's opinions and recalls the tender love and proud encouragement of her paternal grandmother, who had faith in "this little imp [who] will become 'better than a hundred men'" (153). The grandmother's faith had proved true all along, starting from the days when she "would run to the playground and fight with the boys" (153) to save her younger brother from the bullying of his friends. Yet, she admits at the present moment that "she has no energy to fight anymore" (153). Like Sarah before her, Noura's constant

struggle, especially with a failing marriage, results in a shakiness of grounds, a sense that she is losing herself, "losing the Noura that I have known" (69). She looks at her estranged husband, asking herself, "Who is that man?" (67), an echo of Hossam's same question regarding his wife.

As the only member among Hathour's priestesses who succumbs to hardships, Noura eventually loses her battle to anger, despair, drugs and alcohol. El-Mougy lays blame for loss of direction on general misconceptions, "The biggest thing that can affect one's sense of peace is if she/he doesn't know where the keys of her/his happiness are. Media, society and religious [TV] programs suggest that the key to happiness is outside, but it's all about within" ("A Modern"), a statement Hossam repeats in his final confrontation with Noura, whom he judges to be "the victim of her own mind.... Always seeing the other while failing to see her role in all that is taking place" (348-9).

Hathour, however, understands that Noura's failing sense of resistance is just a passing phase characteristic of present day confused society. She reassures Noura that "at this time period, the priestess has not disappeared; you only allowed her to retreat and thus you forgot her" (68). She thus reflects on Noura's free soul, likening her to priestesses of ancient Pharaonic temples, an embodiment of "Hathour's virgin priestess who would not be owned by any man, as she only owns herself" (70). Sarah's faith lies in Noura making her own choices, "as long as you listen to your inner voice that doesn't lie," she informs her, "you will never lose yourself" (70).

Contrary to Sarah, by allowing Sekhmet⁴ to take hold of her, Noura leaves no space in her world for peace represented in Hathour's serenity or for the wisdom of the goddess Ma'at. Noura is first seen in the novel in the middle of an angry outburst at her husband. Later on in the chapter, Hathour whispers her comforting advice to the sleeping Noura, urging her to listen to her voice and warns her of Sekhmet who is "getting closer" to her. Hathour graphically displays the negative consequences of allowing the spirit of anger to take hold of her, "Are you aware that that demon lies in the dark behind all the doors of the temple? As you approach, it will dig its teeth in you? Listen to my voice; it might relieve some of your pain" (155).

However, a replay of Sarah's earlier metamorphosis scene announces Sekhmet's triumph over Hathour as she

manages to reach Noura, "I saw her looks alter slowly," the goddess declares,

with knit eye brows and bulging eyes, changing to the red color of Sekhmet, her mouth sticking out revealing the teeth of a ferocious lioness. Noura lay on the floor pounding it strongly with her fists. I retreated as I saw the vengeful lioness invade the tall dark figure looking triumphantly at me as if saying, "this is not your territory." I kept on going back as I witnessed loud Noura's cries open closed doors with her tears flowing and the sound of angry sobs heard in the empty house. (238)

Calm only befalls Noura with the first strokes of her brush as she begins to work on one of the paintings that have long been neglected in the midst of her problems. The act of painting, a form of self expression likened to an act of prayer, brings about a counter metamorphosis as "The voices of the outside world evaporate, leaving behind the silence of the house and Noura's silence as if she were in deep prayer" (241). With Sekhmet's retreat, Hathour begins to delve into and merge with Noura. Her features thus start turning into those of the goddess, with "her hair parting in the middle brushed behind her ears, her eyes taking on the roundedness of Hathour's below two thin eye brows, the thick mouth beginning to reveal a calm smile like mine; a smile carved by some ancient sculptor at Temple of Dendara" (242).

Likewise, the healing power of art is reasserted as Sarah's aunt Sophie recounts to her niece how her mother's painting helped her overcome a nervous breakdown early on in her life, "She [her mother, Isabella] brought the easel to my bedroom, telling me stories as she painted.... I never heard what she said, but the strong smell of the oil colors reached me; maybe that's what brought me back to life" (141). Similarly, Dunia's transformation begins with her taking up the art of photography as Hossam's begins with his act of "writing for [him]self" (246). And just as Sekhmet recedes within Noura with the first brush strokes on canvas, so does Sarah witness the change in Dunia as her face starts "peeling off an old mask to be replaced by another face" (260), while Dunia is proudly showing the group a photo she took earlier. Flute music accompanying Sarah's meditation and yoga, dance and songs are further examples of the healing power of self expression in artistic form.

As in her earlier novel *Daria* (1996), El-Mougy points a finger in *Noon* at the mostly blurred definition of manliness in an eastern context. "An eastern man does not see anything wrong with himself and that he is in no need to revisit his beliefs" (91), Sarah informs Noura. Sarah, however, recalls her ex-boy friend, Jihad, whom she would not marry yet respects as "he didn't lie and didn't hide his beliefs behind a mask of modernity" (136). Jihad is a contrary representation to those who hold double standards, such as Nadeem and Ahmed, who both desert the educated, independent Sarah and Dunia for girls they view as "stupid ... cannot form a couple of words that make sense" (223). Re-echoing *Daria's* exact words to the same effect, Dunia admits that Ahmed's slippery ways are evident even in the manner he deserted her. Like many others, Sarah assures her friend that Ahmed is the type that lacks self-confidence and "needs people to remind him all the time how wonderful he is" (226). Around independent women such men cannot function, "it's a tit for tat, a proof against a proof," she explains. They therefore need "a slave who keeps on inflating their egos.... We are a type of women who stifle this type of men" (226) who need to "know the A B Cs of self-knowledge to stop hurting people unawares" (227).

On the other hand, Sophie gives a counter example of strong and confident men represented in her husband Henry and in Baha'a, Sarah's father. Sophie describes a man, such as these, as "a kind of 'womb' capable always of looking at life with a kind heart, capable of embracing everybody with his heart and providing happiness to all those who love him" (143). She thus assures Sarah that Nadeem is a "loser" for deserting her, "because you are a real woman, you are not only a body ... you are a strong mind and soul; your ancient Egyptian Pharaohs appreciated these qualities in women" (139). Jokingly, in one of their gatherings, Hossam refers to his three female friends' strength of personalities, "whoever knows you, would never believe that women suffer in a patriarchal society" (136).

In her interview with Noha El-Hennawy, El-Mougy clarifies her point on male/female relationships in the Arab world; she declares that each and every one of her characters in the novel is "a mixture of people [she knows] in reality" merged with "other fictional components." El-Mougy is thus aware of the reasons behind the many challenges facing such independent

women who would always have difficulty finding a partner,

These women have reached a level of consciousness that no men have reached.... In our society men are schizophrenic; they want to establish themselves and succeed but want women to be inferior and weaker. They usually get attracted to this model of independent women but they are not willing to pay the price of this independence. (El-Hennawy)

El-Mougy thus employs witch-hunts, a recurrent motif in the novel, to serve as metaphorical references to different forms of victimization be it individual or collective. Not only do witch-hunts refer to difficulties facing women in patriarchies, they also throw light on other social and political forms of hunter and hunted, a "chase" of sorts as Hossam, the journalistic reporter, defines such occurrences. For instance, Dunia's final confrontation with her mother is metaphorically linked to witch-hunt victims in historical Europe. Dunia's thoughts following the fight draw a picture of a Joan of Arc about to be burned at the stake,

Such images of the moment they were about to burn you came back to you. I wonder whether this was the part in you that believed that you are a wicked witch that had to be burned to exorcise her demons. As you lay there with open eyes, such images of the loud crowd and the two giants came back to you. Now you realize that those images were nothing but *you allowing your mother and the crowd into your world*. Now that you have decided to give some space for Dunia to come in, I hear you wondering whether your birds are fighting death alone in the dark! Or whether you can provide them with seed and water! (168) [italics mine].

The theme of witch-hunt as related to women's status in a patriarchy is triggered early on in the novel through Manal, Sarah's university student. Her entanglement in a hidden marital relationship with a colleague leaves her no choice but either to succumb to his desires or face the shame he is threatening her with in case she leaves him. Manal's story does not surprise Sarah, who is fully aware of how a man's mind, similar to that of Nader (Manal's secret husband), "who

feels he owns the woman in his life" (18), functions. Sarah knows that his pride "would prevent him from understanding why she is deserting him," (18) as she had lived a similar experience with "a man not very different from Nader" (18). Sarah wishes if she could approach him to make him understand that "a free soul would always refuse to follow previously made rules" (20), that it would always be building a better world for itself, free from such "prescriptions," and wonders if he would ever realize that "all those who changed the history of humanity had had a nature rebelling against dominant norms" (20).

By studying and analyzing the roots of witch-hunt in her research, Sarah comes to the conclusion that what had been happening a few centuries earlier in Europe bears a "disturbing similarity" to what is happening nowadays in her homeland in terms of causes and consequences. She draws a link between such practices which sprang up in Europe due to a "collective social and psychological malaise" motivated by feelings of "hatred and vengeance," and the problems suffered by Manal and many others in modern times. The quintessence of such a chase, as she sums it up, is "an unannounced societal decision to exile all those who deviate from the law of the herd" (18), orchestrated by those who play the role of "informants" with "everyone keep[ing] an eye on the other"(19) then -- and now.

However, hope is provided for present day witches as Hathour analyzes the past to build on the present: "Yes, they were witches but not as ugly as Macbeth's" (93), and she goes on to explain, "There was no place for half truths; they were only themselves or struggled to be so. Each one of them was a priestess or would be. A priestess is someone whose heart foresees the future as much as she knows the past and holds it as a secret" (93).

With growing alarm, images of broader forms of victimization, particularly in Egypt, cross Sarah's mind, "thinkers shot at, or exiled from home" (19), and wives or daughters killed for the simplest reasons. Sarah, however, doesn't exclude women from the responsibility of their status quo as she points fingers at them for re-echoing "calls for the return of women to their homes" (20) and participating in witch-hunts the same way women did centuries back in Europe. She ponders on the likeness of some of her female students, who are "killing" Manal with their gossip and innuendos, to those women in the medieval ages who "informed on one

of them knowing that such allegation was a death sentence" (16).

At a later point in the novel, Sarah informs her aunt Sophie that her research on witch-hunts has taken her on a voyage throughout history which traces the deterioration of women's status from that of a "priestess," who "was a physical impersonation of the goddesses of the ancient world as well as of all feminine, maternal giving and life preserving values," (141) to "the opposite image of a wicked witch" (141) associated with devil worship. Sarah, however, has not lost confidence in the survival powers of the female that possesses the strength and the will. "The seed in women still exists," she informs Sophie, "and it all depends on whether they are capable of nourishing it "with the water of [their] hearts or let it die" (142).

The recurrent motif of victimization is stressed along the course of action both through dark humor and seriously. For instance, as the three girlfriends laugh at the similarity between one of their gatherings and that of Macbeth's witches, Hathour declares, "I remembered how Shakespeare portrayed the ugly, ominous witches; he must have been playing on the public image at his time and over a period of three centuries, burning them in the millions" (93). While in a moment of anger, Sarah brings to mind the image of a vengeful witch as she promises herself never to forgive Nadeem for his desertion, "I will not forgive him until I die and my soul will keep on torturing him to his death. I'll be a real witch, will burn him and will send my anger after him everywhere to disturb his sleep" (108).

In a broader context, the novel portrays witch-hunts in the form of political victimization in Egypt and worldwide, a "one-sided chase" (263) according to Hossam's definition. This ranges from the security apparatus intervening in the affairs of the university and chasing professors and students to the emergency law in Egypt and the hideousness taking place in its prisons; the chase relates to Saddam Hussein's practices and use of chemical weapons against the Kurds in Iraq in 1988, the torture in Abu Ghraib prison, the Jenin massacre and the razing of Palestinian lands by the Israeli army, and finally the chases America has engaged in to catch Saddam Hussein, Bin Laden and "other Muslims" (263), which Hossam understands is "a political game both sides play under the pretext of faith" (263).

In general, however, witches and witchcraft carry paradoxical connotations in the novel. As there is no differentiation between "witch" and "magician" in Arabic vocabulary, the term "sahira" (witch/magician) and "sihr" (witchcraft/magic) carry positive connotations as well. In this sense, magicians replace witches and magic replaces witchcraft according to context. Sarah and Hathour, for instance, refer to those capable of doing far-reaching good deeds, as magicians; Sarah's family members are representative of this category of people who have special abilities; she thus raises them to the level of "magicians with distinction" as she ponders on their ability to "read secrets on everyday life's tablets," (100) with an eye that "polishes matters so their gold would shine" (100).

Sarah's commendation extends from praising her father while he is "talking about a book" to admiring her mother Kathy "conversing with flowers in the garden of their home" (100) and her aunt Sophie "capturing a look in a child's eyes by the beach" (100) in a painting. Later on she reminisces on her grandparents as well, "Her grandfather Nou'maan ... had taught Isabella matters that she kept and allowed to grow with the eucalyptus tree in the house's court yard ... and like olden magicians, Isabella knew how to transmit secrets to those who deserve it" (118).

Along the course of the novel we witness Hathour performing "miracles" as she "transmit[s] secrets to those who deserve it." Hence she is interrelated with everything on Egypt's soil be it the water of the Nile, the sand in the desert, a tree in a monastery or the four friends. For instance, the connection between tidal changes and the changing phases of the moon is exemplified in the goddess' association with the flood of the Nile. The verse threshold to the first chapter of part IV celebrates July 19th, the Day of the Flood, also known as Hathour's Day, as a day in which "You would witness the miracle of the Nile flowing with water to submerge the thirsty soil/ whose pores would open up/ ...to receive tenderly the water of love into its darkness" (270). Even on a hilltop amidst the silence of the oasis, Hossam enjoys a magical moment watching the moon as its light "spreads over the desert sand turning it into silvery waves on the evening sea" (334) and in the monastery Dunia enjoys the shade of a eucalyptus tree whose "bosom is full of milk" (283) in the monastery, all reflecting Friedrich Nietzsche's "Everything is One"

as he refers to such wide scope universal unity in *The Greeks* (qtd. in "Philosophy of Socrates" 4).

A Similar interaction between Heaven and earth echoes in Sarah's earlier conversation with her father, Baha'a, during which she links trees to the metaphysical world and to God. She argues about the significance of the upright posture of trees that "dig their roots in the depths of the soil, forever looking upwards, connecting heaven and earth" (100) and describes her feelings as a child when she imagined "God conversing with trees, only in a language she didn't understand" (100). Her statements come in response to Baha'a's discussion of the theory of the Swiss metaphysic, Frithjof Schuon, also known as Shaykh Isa Nur el-Din, that associates man's upright posture, "pointing to the sky," with human superiority.

The interplay of light and darkness poses significant paradoxical roles in *Noon*. Whereas the dominant light is that of the "magical" silvery moon, inspiring imagination and reflection and giving a light of hope, on the other hand, the blinding light of the hot sun, against which the eucalyptus tree protects Dunia "from Ra's vicious eyes," is reminiscent of the heat of flames at the stake awaiting "independent Egyptian women navigating a nation rooted in traditional customs and a growing strand of conservative Islam" (El-Hennawy).

Likewise, the connotation of darkness is double-fold: the one meaning indicative of a loss of direction, as in the case of Noura who experiences "a feeling of emptiness slowly creeping towards her like a snake in the middle of the night, as if she were heavily treading through a dark cloud where she cannot see farther than her foot," (148) versus the other meaning signifying the comforting "darkness of the womb," represented in Hathour, the mother, promising new births for those ready to venture the "dark" corridors of their temples. Thus, in the open-ending sequel to the novel, Hathour reflects on the distance Hossam is willing to go into the temple, "Would his search for a priestess lead him to the real depth of the dark temple?" (373). She is aware that Hossam's demons lie in his unresolved complex feelings towards his father and predicts that it is an "issue worth going back into the temple to search for" (373). Likewise, as she whispers her thoughts to Noura regarding her reticence to "delve into the darkness" (155) of the temple ahead of her, she declares, as she does to

Hossam, that her life problems are rooted in her upbringing, "Can't you guess what the first corridors [in the temple] hide? Does your intuition inform you that you will find your parents there?"(155).

As Hathour reviews and sums up her philosophy as to directing people towards the right path of self-knowledge, she is aware that complete freedom of choice is hard to guarantee in existence. With varying life experiences, people's reactions would differ, with "one growing once it's thrown into the soil while the other refuses to" (374). She thus wonders on the sharpness of epiphany, asking, "When does this magical moment come from?" reflecting on the mystery of its source that "springs from the Spirit of the Unknown! He sends you a lot every second, yet, who or what determines who would take the chance and who would let it go?" (374). Hence, one finds the scary or comforting mystery of the dimness of the "ocean's depth" (372) that seems to be awaiting Sarah, as indicated in the sequel.

El-Mougy involves her readers by ending the plot at a point where "every end ... is a new beginning" (377). Hathour thus requests the reader's contribution in imagining what is to take place next as she leaves Sarah on the precipice of a mountain looking down at the mystery of a "scary yet luring" sea below. She requests the readers' help in imagining what might happen to all four friends in case of new beginnings. And as plots are no more than "circles within other wider and narrower" (377) intertwining vague circles, the novel ends exactly where it starts; "from some point" that promises a new story about to begin. When asked if such new beginning would dwell once more on self knowledge and transcendental freedom through a feminist plot, the author affirmed that themes raised in her previous works would be further explored while laying special emphasis on how and when moments of "transformation" happen "when the self comes to see itself anew, when it is reborn, reinvented" (interview, Said), bringing us, humans, "closer to who we really are and what we are supposed to do on this earth" (interview, Said). El-Mougy also did not forget to assert her pursuit of women's ensuing "clash with the social/the patriarchal/ the oppressive forces" and the "ultimate victory in reinventing ourselves and the world" (interview, Said).

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Plotinus belongs to the Hellenistic philosophy cultivated in Alexandria during the 3rd century BC-7th century AD.
- ² All translations from the Arabic are mine
- ³ Ma'at is the goddess of wisdom and truth in ancient Egypt.
- ⁴ Sekhmet is the goddess of war and anger in ancient Egyptian mythology.