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## ETIDAL OSMAN: EGYPTIAN WOMEN'S WRITING AND CREATIVITY

CAROLINE SEYMOUR-JORN



It seems to me that the only way of facing all the crises in social, political and economic life, all the fragmentation, all the tearing apart of things, all the fear of losing identity, is the concept that if we can reproduce our tradition in a modern context, that may provide the solid base, the integrity of the modern human being (author interview with Etidal Osman, Cairo, 14 November 1992).

Whenever a woman is a writer, she is able to face the power (*sulta*) of society that imposes a marginal position upon her, with another power, and that is the suggestive power of the imagination (Osman 1993:13).

**M**y first encounter with Egyptian writer and critic Etidal Osman<sup>1</sup> was in the spring of 1992.<sup>2</sup> We had arranged over the telephone for an interview in the offices of the government-run General Book Organization, where she was serving as Deputy Supervisor of Publishing. I found Osman in one of the building's spacious editorial offices, sitting at an enormous table covered with papers and manuscripts. Like other Egyptian women authors I met over the course of that year, Osman greeted with enthusiasm my request for an interview to talk about her motivations and ideas about the role of women writers as social critics. As I became familiar with her creative

and critical writing, it became clear that Osman shared with other members of her literary cohort a sense that the woman writer could play a role in raising social consciousness about a variety of issues, including how dominant ideologies of gender impact women. Osman, like Salwa Bakr, Ibtihal Salem, Sahar Tawfiq, and others, has engaged in experimentation with prose style and narrative strategies to generate texts that privilege a female perspective (see “Washm al-shams” [Sun Tattoo]; “al-Sultana” [The Sultana]; “Bahr al-ishq wa-l-aiq” [The Sea of Passion and the Carnelian]).<sup>3</sup> However, particularly interesting for me was Osman’s focus on the role of the imagination in the development of the human consciousness. Osman draws upon a long Islamic philosophical tradition that treats the imagination as a basis for spiritual growth. Her fiction is not explicitly spiritual but rather addresses issues of personal experimentation and desire, particularly those of people who sit outside dominant structures of power. Osman’s focus on the imagination shows up in stories about children’s dreams and fantasies and explores the process of the child’s expanding consciousness (e.g., “al-Bahr laysa bi-ghaddar” [The Sea is Not Treacherous], “Bayt lana” [A House for Us], and “Yunus al-bahr” [Jonah of the Sea]). Osman is also a prominent literary critic, and her emphasis on the imagination manifests itself in her criticism of Egyptian women’s writing. She has discussed the work of several prominent Egyptian women writers (Osman 1996, 1997, 1999) and examined how some of these writers use the space of the imagination to evoke, question, and transform images from the popular tradition to suggest new ways of thinking about women’s psychology, intellect, and creative potential (1993).

In the first section of this article, I position my analysis of dominant themes and elements in some of Osman’s writing with respect to some of the ethnographic literature on the cultural meaning of fiction writing and other expressive forms. This literature has sparked my interest in what motivates the cultural creator to embark upon the project of writing and the manner in which she engages with her own literary tradition. Second, I situate some of Osman’s motivations and attitudes toward writing in the context of her personal biography and the intellectual world in which she has worked. Third, I examine some of Osman’s short stories dealing with questions of individual desire, intellectual creativity, and innovation, and I explore the ways she draws upon the Arabic literary tradition as one way to ground her uncompromisingly personal vision in a way that is aesthetically credible. In the final section of the article, I address some of her critical work

and explore her own critique of how Egyptian women writers have used the medium of creative writing to treat issues of women's inner emotional worlds, and the impact of gender relations and ideologies on women.

### ANTHROPOLOGY AND LITERATURE

My article draws upon anthropological approaches that seek to illuminate the role of the creative impulse in social and political life and in various forms of artistic expression.<sup>4</sup> Anthropologists of written literature, like those who have explored oral creative production, have been inspired by Michel Foucault, Raymond Williams, Jacques Derrida, and Antonio Gramsci among others to explore those narratives that are normally overpowered by hegemonic ones (Daniel and Peck 1996). In the ethnography of the Middle East, for example, Saddeka Arebi (1994) employs the Foucauldian notion of discourse to explore how Saudi Arabian women writers understand their position within larger contexts of power and how they see their work as creative or journalistic writers as a means of disturbing the "verbal machinery" in charge of theorizing women's roles and behavior. She details the various stylistic approaches used by Saudi women prose writers as they seek to establish a dialectic between opposition to certain aspects of society and affirmation of major cultural values and institutions. Arebi argues that appreciation of these approaches is key to understanding how Saudi female writers gain access to the field of cultural politics and submit their own interpretations of Islam, the relationship between men and women, and women's potential roles in society. In my own research in Egypt, I have argued that Salwa Bakr emphasizes the richness of the popular language of poor, uneducated women and the complexity of their personal and social positions by drawing upon classic frameworks of Arabic oral and written literature and by crafting a colloquialized form of *fusha*. Bakr's use of time-honored narrative strategies, such as the Arabesque, and her skillful linking of standard, colloquial, and Qur'anic Arabic allow her to demonstrate a competent literary voice. This literary voice helps to authorize both her treatment of the lives of women at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder and her damning critique of the impact of social norms on the lives and psyches of these women (Seymour-Jorn 2002). Elsewhere, I have argued that Nimat al-Bihiri, who also focuses on women and other

marginalized social actors, has made strategic use of the divide between standard and colloquial Arabic and the rich body of proverbs relating to women's lives in order to draw out the details and implications of women's personal desire and aspirations (Seymour-Jorn 2004).

Anthropologists working on written literature struggle to balance the degree to which they can treat literature as reflecting core cultural values of a particular time and place and the degree to which artistic production should be viewed as a unique and individual interpretation. Paul Friedrich (1996) argues that because all artistic representation is ensconced in society, culture, and history, a thorough and nuanced understanding of key poetic texts can provide a window into a culture's innermost symbolic values. However, he also emphasizes the importance of understanding the dynamic and creative ways in which individuals relate to their language and literary and cultural traditions—the “poetic indeterminacy” of individuals who think through and beyond these traditions (1986). For Friedrich, poetic language, that unpredictable, dynamic zone of human expression, is the locus of some of the most interesting differences between languages and cultures; thus the imagination and poetic production of the creative individual should be studied. The writer's creative production allows us some insight into his imagination—the ways an artist integrates knowledge, perceptions, and emotions in a creative way and generates new ways of thinking about his milieu (1986).

Similarly, Michael Herzfeld, in his ethnographic biography of the Cretan novelist Andreas Nenedakis, suggests that focus on fiction writing allows insight into the subjectivity of a member, however idiosyncratic, of a given society, and therefore into “refractions of collective representations” of that society (1997:26). At the same time, Herzfeld argues that examining how a novelist depicts motivation and desire in a way that is socially plausible can illuminate local understandings of psychology and cultural values. Further, it can suggest the conventional assumptions that a knowledgeable reader within that ethnographic context would bring to the reading of fiction and perhaps by extension to issues dealt with in that fiction (1-27).

It is Herzfeld's problematic of defining the anthropological value of teasing out the fiction writer's approach to depicting motive and desire that I find particularly interesting. Much of Osman's fiction explores issues related to individual desire and inchoate intellectual or emotional

issues such as the desire for experimentation or artistic innovation. Clearly, there are very real limits to the degree from which one can draw sociological insights from any one author's approach to characterization or imagery. At the same time, it is instructive to examine a writer's topics and writing strategies in terms of current artistic trends and concerns, and, in the case of Osman, the way in which she renders her very personal and abstract topics in a manner more compelling to readers and critics. Osman writes in a dynamic literary milieu and is part of an avant-garde experimenting with subject matter, narrative structure, cross-genre writing, and a literary bricolage that draws upon the vast Arabic literary and scholarly tradition, ancient Egyptian cosmology, and popular language and belief. Osman's innovations must be seen in the context of this experimental milieu. However, I argue that Osman provides a unique approach to discussion of the human condition in often highly abstract stories that juxtapose the languages and imagery of Sufism with the structure and atmosphere of the folktale. These elements, woven together in a poetic prose style, evoke the experiential intensity of childhood desires, fears, and expanding awareness.

An ethnographic approach to writers and literature in the highly sophisticated and active literary environment of Cairo is a daunting task. As Bourdieu has pointed out, the study of writers and their creative production requires an approach that takes into account an array of factors that includes not only artists and writers but also those who produce the meaning and value of the work (critics, publishers, etc.). For Bourdieu, the study of art and literature also involves study of the "social conditions of the production of artists," their social origins and education, along with understanding the social conditions that define art as art (1993:37). Clearly, understanding a work of literary art as a manifestation of the entire cultural/literary field requires a longterm and comprehensive approach to the literary milieu in question. My own article is necessarily partial in this regard. I do not presume to give an exhaustive description of the "field of cultural production" but rather to provide a sketch of the Egyptian literary milieu, of Osman's personal biography, some of the factors that have shaped her perspectives, and some of the critical reaction to her work. I am not attempting literary analysis but attempting, after Herzfeld, to exploit the difference between fiction and ethnography (1997:26). That is, I acknowledge that the fiction writer's voice is but one

in a larger society. At the same time, the author must use socially salient images and vocabulary if she wishes to generate creative production that speaks to the Egyptian and the wider Arabic-speaking literary and critical community.

Joseph Zeidan claims that Arab women writers face two linguistic obstacles when they write in Arabic. First, Arabic literature has been subject to an ideology that holds the classical Arabic language to be sacred and inhibits changes in the formal language. Second, Arabic (like many other languages) can be described as a patriarchal language, and therefore women must change this language significantly in order to find their voices (1995:2). Obviously, both male and female writers struggle to innovate in a way that does not disregard literary standards. Yet women writing in Arabic and attempting to express a female perspective on women's everyday life, emotional, spiritual or intellectual experience, children's experience, or more general human topics must creatively engage with this language in a way that both reflects women's modes of expression but passes muster with critics and other readers. I argue that we can learn from exploring the strategies women writers use to achieve these two goals.

### BECOMING A WRITER IN CAIRO

As she narrated the story of her early life, Osman revealed a keen awareness both of the difficulties faced by women of her mother's generation and of the centrality of these women in the lives of the extended family. She was born in Cairo in 1942 but spent her early childhood years living in her maternal relatives' home in the countryside. Her father died two months after she was born, which prompted her mother's move back to her home village, Tukh, located in the delta province of al-Qalyubiyya. This area of the country was often described to me by Egyptians as socially conservative and one in which women's personal and social lives could be quite circumscribed. Osman's mother had been only twenty years old when she married Osman's father, a man forty years her senior. This was in fact her second marriage; she had married first as a teenager and lost her first husband to typhoid before conceiving children. Osman stated that her father had chosen her mother for marriage because he thought she was barren, and while he wanted a young wife to take care of

him as he aged, he wanted no further responsibilities of fatherhood.

Osman spent her first five years in Tukh, until her mother, concerned about the quality of education her daughter would receive in the village, moved back to Cairo. They settled in the area of al-Dahir, near Mahatat Nasr and Ramsis square. This middle-class district exposed the young Osman to people of various nationalities and religions, as it housed a large population of foreigners (including Greeks and Palestinians who came to work in Egypt in the 1940s) and minorities, including Christians and Jews. Osman attended school in the nearby area of al-Abbasiyya, an upper middle-class quarter during the 1940s and early 1950s. Osman recalls that during the time she and her mother lived in al-Dahir, her grandfather's house in al-Abbasiyya was "*bayt al-ā'ila*," the home and gathering place for the extended family. Osman recalls her paternal grandfather's house with affection because it was home to her paternal aunts, with whom she had close and supportive relationships. Her father's younger sisters had been very close to him and, as Osman saw it, they devoted much attention to her as a way of maintaining a final connection to him. Osman lived in al-Dahir until she was fourteen, at which time her mother remarried and they moved to the Pyramids area.

The influence of strong senior female relatives emerged clearly in Osman's narration of her early life history, although she never directly related their influence to the other main theme that emerged in this story—her early love of reading. As a child, she read anything she could get her hands on, which ranged from the sentimental and romantic writings of Mustafa Lutfi al-Manfaluti to detective novels and the innovative stories of Yusuf Idris, who, she recalls, was very much in vogue in the 1950s. Throughout her school days, she continued to read both classical and modern Arabic literature, along with Western fiction in translation. Sufi writers such as Muhyi al-Din Muhammad ibn al-Arabi (1165-1240) and Muhammad ibn Abdi-l-Jabbar ibn al-Hasan al-Niffari (d. 970) were later influences. It was also during her middle school days that Osman began to write, sitting up late at night with a small lamp in her bedroom, working on a story until her mother scolded her for straining her eyes.

Osman graduated from Cairo University in 1963 with a degree in English literature. After university she stayed with her aunts in al-Abbasiyya until she married and moved to al-Duqqi. In 1979, Osman completed a second degree, this time in Arabic literature, at the American

University in Cairo. She started seriously writing stories around 1980.

As she narrated her life history, Osman portrayed her desire to write as being linked to the desire to change aspects of the world with which she was dissatisfied or to create an alternative reality. This desire is still clearly part of her motivation as a mature writer. Like other intellectuals I interviewed, she mentioned the obvious problems of high rates of illiteracy and poverty as being particularly difficult barriers to improving the lives of many Egyptians. However, she emphasized her idea that Egyptians have suffered a sort of crisis of identity as a result of the social, economic, and political turmoil of European colonization and wars with Israel. She suggests that one way writers can address this social and psychological fragmentation is to facilitate reflection at both the individual and social levels. She argues that all writers can contribute to this process but that female writers may have a special role. Women in Egypt (and other societies) are socialized to express indirectly their desires, aspirations, and frustrations, and some female writers (though not all) adopt a similar strategy for self-expression in their writing. This may involve the use of a complex or layered symbolism, which the reader must read and reread to discover underlying emotions and meanings in the text. The reader's encounter with unexpected style and images in a text may foster a willingness to discard assumptions and encourage a new reaction to reality. At the same time, Osman expressed frustration that prevailing Egyptian mores and public education levels render it easier for a female journalist to garner public attention than for a female literary writer, as the journalist's storytelling and social analysis are more direct and explicit and more accessible to the general public (author interviews with Osman, Cairo, 14 April 1992, 14 November 1992, and 22 December 1996).

Osman's first story to appear in print was "Yawm tawaqqafa al-junūn" [The Day the Madness Stopped], which was published in the journal *Ibda* [Creativity] in 1983. Since that time, she has been published widely in the fields of literary criticism and fiction (book-length published works are listed in the references). Osman has also published stories and articles in numerous literary magazines including *Ibda*, *Nur*, *al-Katiba*, and *Fusul*. She has held a number of posts in the Ministry of Culture as the editor of *Prism: Cultural Register and Report* (1970-5), editorial secretary of *Fusul: Journal of Literary Criticism* (1980-5), and

editorial manger of that journal (1985-92). In the 1990s she served as the deputy supervisor of publishing in the General Book Organization. Osman currently serves as the co-editor of the Arabic cultural magazine *Sutur* and teaches in the United Arab Emirates.

#### Some Aspects of the Writing Context

Anthropologists studying Egypt have documented the diversity and fluidity of the particular cultural milieu in which Etidal Osman has been a player—that of Cairo’s educated, intellectual, and cultural elite. Al-Ali (2000) has shown that women in activist groups in Cairo hold considerably varied political orientations, views on nationalism, class struggle, feminism, Islamism, and secularism. Al-Ali has also pointed to flux in these political positionings, as former liberal secularist writers have adopted some positions of political Islam. Her work mirrors historical studies demonstrating that there have always been important nuances and diversity in the ideas and social reformist goals of feminists and other Egyptian women writers (Booth 2001; Badran 1995). Lila Abu-Lughod, who has studied the secular progressive-oriented intellectuals producing television in Egypt, has pointed to the complex position of liberal intellectuals in Egypt as they stake out their positions on modernism, nationalism, Islam, and feminism. Abu-Lughod argues that while many TV writers define their projects as modernist and see themselves as nationalist, their views on feminism are, in some cases, as dismissive as those of Islamists (1993, 1998). This point was expressed to me by fiction writer Salwa Bakr,<sup>5</sup> who sometimes feels that male members of the literary establishment do not take seriously her perspectives as a writer because she is a woman (interview with Salwa Bakr, Cairo, 7 August 1992). Yet Bakr is only one of many women critiquing and exploring Egyptian gender dynamics in their published work.

There is also considerable diversity in the topics and approaches pursued by authors actively writing and publishing in turn-of-the-century Cairo. Many of these writers are experimenting with the literary text in terms of narrative strategies, exploring the divide between the colloquial and standard levels of Arabic and with cross-genre writing. Some have produced what Samia Mehrez has called “narratives on history,” authors who tap characters, images, landmarks, and literatures of particular historical periods to craft texts that “question and subvert the official,

exclusionary versions of history" (1994:61) and provide alternative, often unsettling discourses on history. Mehrez has explored the intertextual, dialogical nature of narrative in Gamal al-Ghitani's *Khitat al-Ghitani* [The Layouts of al-Ghitani] (1981). She argues that he draws upon centuries of Arab historiography to craft a forged history of modern Cairo, and in so doing destroys "the classic and comforting distinction between 'history' and 'fiction,' between the 'imagined' and the 'real'..." (1994:68). Al-Ghitani's forged history forces the reader to question not only official histories but the very nature of the "real"—and the circumstances of the present. Radwa Ashour, in *Granada* (1994), also critiques the nature of official histories by "rewriting" histories that are inclusive of female points of view and the perspectives of children and other less empowered social actors. Other Egyptian authors craft narratives that blur the line between history and fiction by incorporating documents into fictional texts (Ibrahim 1992) and by crafting polyphonic texts marked by fantasy (Bakr 1987, 1991). These narratives challenge the reader to question taken-for-granted "truths" about the historical past, about male and female natures, and the social and political circumstances of the present.

As Marilyn Booth has noted, many among Egypt's literary avant-garde are moving toward what writer and critic Idwar al-Kharrat has called "writing across genres," a form of writing that hovers between narrative prose and the more compact and suggestive language of poetry (Booth 2002; al-Kharrat 1990, 1994b). Some of the writings by Ibtihal Salem, Sahar Tawfiq, and Etidal Osman fall into this category, and their writings converge in interesting ways even as they each bear distinctive characteristics. Sahar Tawfiq employs a sparse prose and interior monologue and draws upon myth and folklore to explore women's consciousness and feelings of hopelessness and alienation from society. Ibtihal Salem sets some of her stories in the Mediterranean city of Port Said, where she explores the effect of increasing consumerism, capitalism, and war on women. Use of the colloquial and of the proverbs marking women's speech figure prominently in her fiction.<sup>6</sup> Osman also evokes images of the sea and experiments with representing women's speech, but her fiction is also richly marked by images and vocabulary of the Sufi text.

Clearly, Osman is also one of several women writers, including Latifa al-Zayyat, Radwa Ashour, and Salwa Bakr, crafting alternative narratives on women and other oppressed groups in patriarchal societies. As

Mehrez notes, these narratives explore the silencing and marginalization of subjects “within the more general and pressing context of dependency and closure in the Arab world at large” (Mehrez 1994:11). Scholars have treated these innovative approaches extensively elsewhere (e.g., Mehrez 1994; Ceza Kassem Draz 1994; Edwar al-Kharrat 1990, 1994a, 1994b; Booth 2002; al-Zayyat 1992). I argue that what makes Osman’s brand of narrative experimentation so interesting is how she draws upon two disparate aspects of the Arabic tradition: the esoteric language and imagery of Sufism, and the child-oriented fantastic language, motifs, and structures of folktales. Osman draws together these elements to evoke the childlike sense of surprise at discovering the new in both everyday and imaginary worlds. For Osman, this surprise may serve to provoke the reader into reconsidering assumptions about literature, personal experience, and ultimately, social reality.

### THE ADVENTURE OF WRITING

In the introduction to her collection of short stories, *Yunus al-bahr* [Jonah of the Sea], Osman describes her literary experiment as an adventure upon which she is accompanied by “...a supply of ancient texts, tales and myths” (1987:6). Her project is to create a type of “new writing” that is somewhere between narrative and poetry. Her creative trajectory also has a social element in that she argues that literature can encourage the intellectual flexibility that is important for people’s existence in a new age. In a tone echoing Wittgenstein or Whorf, Osman claims that language shapes the structures of consciousness through which individuals perceive the world (5-7). She argues that if people have become mired in fixed ways of doing things, it is because they are constrained by fixed ways of thinking, and that the author may address what she perceives to be deficiencies in the way people think and act in the world by generating a new style of writing that will stimulate new ways of thinking. Osman argues that this is not an easy task, however, because the writer must first come to terms with the vast heritage of Arabic literature. She claims that the Arabic writer must always struggle to find her own creative trajectory, as the weight of the Arabic literary tradition is constantly pressing down upon her and is ever present in her consciousness. Significant for Osman is the fact that the Arabic language has a sacred aspect, as the holy Quran

was revealed to Mohammad and then recorded in Arabic. According to her, the writer cannot possibly write without being influenced by this weighty and sacred heritage, but as a contemporary person, she cannot relate to or be harmonious with all aspects of this tradition. Thus, the author is always faced with the question of what she takes from this heritage and what she rejects (interview with Osman, Cairo, 14 March 1992). In the end, Osman feels, the writer must find a balance between her identity as a contemporary being and her identity as an inheritor of the Arabic tradition, for she can neither live in the present without the past nor understand the past without the present.

Osman's discussion about her relationship to the Arabic language mirrors that of other Egyptian writers such as Gamal al-Ghitani and Salwa Bakr, who acknowledge the impact of time-honored narrative models on their work (al-Ghitani 1994).<sup>7</sup> Osman's concerns with innovation in writing and intellectual freedom also relate to current debates and discussions in Egyptian and Arab literary circles. During the 1990s, literary journals published many articles on the issue of writing and freedom. In 1992, *Fusul* published three editions with the title "Literature and Freedom."<sup>8</sup> These special issues contained articles from prominent male and female writers from Egypt, the Arab world, and the West and dealt with issues ranging from the relationship between social conditions and creativity, Foucault's concepts of discourse and power, and individual testimonies by Arab authors about their own writing practices. Women writers and critics contributed to this discussion, including Radwa Ashour (1995), who published an article exploring various metaphors and strategies used by Arab women writers such as Latifa al-Zayyat, Nawal al-Saadawi, Liana Badr, and Etidal Osman to portray restrictions on women's experience and consciousness.<sup>9</sup>

In her introduction to *Jonah of the Sea*, Osman argues that developing an innovative style in Arabic writing is difficult because it requires dispensing with certain fixed, exhausted forms in Arabic writing. She states that the field of literature must be stirred up, and she poses the question of how this might be accomplished.

How can writing be new?

The only answer is in the beginning of this matter that has no end.

The writing itself.

Willing, voluntarily, I place the noose of the question around my neck, and the noose tightens.

The question slips away again, wittily and boisterously:

How can you constantly maintain the child-like surprise at the sea of letters forever suspended between lightning and brilliance? (5)

*Jonah of the Sea* is divided into two parts, the first of which contains abstract stories written in poetic language and explores themes of loneliness, the struggle for connection between people, and for existential understanding. These stories have the tone of a spiritual journey and, as al-Kharrat notes, are heavily influenced by the language and imagery of Sufism (1990:7-16). In the second part, Osman further explores the notion of “child-like surprise” in several stories narrated from a child’s perspective as he develops an understanding of himself and the world and people around him. Both the title story and “Al-Bahr laysa bi-ghaddar” [The Sea is Not Treacherous] evoke images from the Quran, Sufi writings, and popular tales as they explore issues of creativity and openness to a range of human experiences.

#### Jonah of the Sea

“Jonah of the Sea” revolves around the narrator’s reminiscences of boyhood experiences with Jonah (Yunus), a mysterious man who takes him out to a sea cave in his boat, and becomes a focal point for the boy’s expanding consciousness. The story begins with the phrase “[I]t was you that took me to the sea, Jonah,” which is repeated throughout the second person narration, as though the narrator is relating the events of Jonah’s life to Jonah himself. The boy/narrator describes his venture in Jonah’s boat as an experience that was both frightening and stimulating.

On the way you chatter away, relating rumors and gossip, the secrets slide from your face; a face broiled by the sea sun, yet the taut skin over your prominent cheekbones remains unaffected by all those secrets...(85).

Throughout “Jonah,” the perspective and identity of both the narrator and of Jonah seem to shift. This ambiguity works to keep the reader in a liminal state, being unable to place easily either the narrator or Jonah. For example, Osman renders unclear the narrator’s gender for most of the story—a technique she uses elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> At first, it appears the

narrator is feminine because the narrative voice describes in appreciative detail Jonah's vitality and masculinity but betrays an apprehension about being alone with Jonah in the boat. However, the narrator's subsequent reminiscence of playing in the streets with the other boys makes clearer his identity. As al-Kharrat points out, despite the masculine narration, a feminine sensibility pervades the story and the entire book (1990). The multiple identifications associated with Jonah also render his character ambiguous. Jonah's association with the sea evokes in the mind of the reader the Qur'anic narrative of the Prophet Jonah, who was swallowed by a whale but allowed to survive because of God's mercy.<sup>11</sup> This Qur'anic image is set against the description of Jonah as a man of strong masculinity and aggressive sexuality and whose sexual exploits seem to lead to his eventual expulsion from the village. However, Jonah is also characterized in supernatural terms. At one point, the narrator refers to the demon driving Jonah's behavior. "You looked in my direction and saw your own devil who had just emerged from his narrow-necked bottle..." (86).<sup>12</sup> The identification with supernatural creatures recurs at the end of the story, after Jonah disappears and villagers speculate he was adopted as a brother by a *jinni*, while others speculate he was swallowed by a whale, like his namesake. Osman's complex characterization of Jonah is evocative of several layers of Egyptian culture: detailed popular beliefs about the *jinni*, traditional stories including powerfully erotic male characters, e.g., *The Thousand and One Nights*, and the standard Qur'anic narrative of Jonah.

The boy's sea voyage with Jonah is a voyage into uncertainty—it stirs his imagination and growing consciousness of adult things. At the same time, the voyage and the boy's observations of Jonah are a voyage into sensuality as played out in the narrator's ruminations about Jonah's ubiquitous erotic presence and the stories of his sexual exploits with village women, who seem unable to resist him. As al-Kharrat notes, throughout this collection of stories, the sea represents erotic desire and experience and the youthful human drive for activity and creativity as opposed to sedateness and constriction (1990:11).

In "The Sea is Not Treacherous," Osman again employs the image of the sea and the sea journey to explore the issue of creativity and experimentation. However, in this piece she also incorporates elements from the Arabic folktale tradition to describe the dreamlike sea adventure of a

child. The story begins with the child relating his mother's warning not to play by the sea and his overwhelming desire to play in the sun and wind on the beach. Despite his mother's warning about the sea and its treacherous waves, the child goes down to the beach early one morning and petitions the sea to carry him away to distant places, just as it did the mythical Sindibad. First crashing and then calm, the sea reveals a bewildered sailor who takes the boy on a hundred days' journey in a day, to the "children's island" (*jazīrat al-atfal*). There the child encounters trees and flowers resembling boys and girls, with arms, legs, and hair, and their companions, which are hoes and jugs of water. The child pursues his quest for knowledge by engaging the fantastic, hybrid creatures inhabiting the island. These plant/children befriend him and show him how they spend their days planting seeds and growing trees and vines from which they harvest sweet fruits, while at night they transform into knights on steeds and ride to the place where they obtain the seeds. The "children" show the boy how to plant the seeds in earth that laughs when it is dug into and absorbs the water with an audible sound. The child is initially perplexed by their play but eventually joins their activities. Upon nightfall, the companions transform into mounted knights armed with large sacks in place of swords, and they all ride into the night, taking the child with them. They come to a halt when they encounter two date palms, a mother and a father, between whom a scale is suspended.

My friend the Narcissus came and, leaning over me with her emerald-green stalk and blonde locks, whispered in my ear: "In the mother's pan are the seeds of the summer, and in the father's pan are the seeds of the winter. Each scale is guarded by a sparrow day and night. We take sparingly from each, a seed from here, and a seed from there. And however much we might take, the scale is never emptied. But if we lose a seed, the sparrow will flutter its wings, and so the mother knows, and the father knows, and the right or left side is tipped. And when the scale is out of balance, it does not give its seeds" (58).

The child experiences joy once he has understood the importance of the scales' balance and along with Narcissus fills his sack with seeds, taking care not to tip the scale. The two engage happily in this activity for some time, until finally the child feels content and decides to return home with his sack of seeds. His "return" is an awakening from a dream, after which

he tells his mother about the gifts that he has brought home for her.

In many respects, "The Sea" mirrors a subset of fantasy tales from the oral tradition that el-Shamy (1999) classifies as revolving around the relationship between mothers and children. In these folktales, the mother attempts to teach and protect her young one(s) and is presented as a source of protection, while the father is conspicuously absent. The tales may begin with the mother giving her young one(s) instructions in order to keep them safe from the potentially dangerous forces of the outside world. In the "mother and children" tales, as in other types of fantasy tales, human characters may be perceived as animals or things, and animals or things may be perceived as human. These tales may include the motif of a swallow guarding a precious tree and the reunion of the mother and child(ren) at the end of the story, sometimes with the child bringing the mother treasures acquired during an adventure away from her protective presence. All the elements that are so prominent in mother and children fantasy tales are present in "The Sea." However, for the sea journey part of her story, Osman draws upon adventure tales like those of Sindibad from the stories that have come to be known in the Arabic oral and literary traditions as *The Thousand and One Nights*. Like Sindibad, the child travels to an exotic island rich with plants and fruits and inhabited by strange and larger-than-life birds and other creatures (see the second journey of Sindibad in *One Thousand and One Nights*, 147-54).

Characterization in "The Sea" also mirrors the strange or surprising nature of characterization in folktales, in which things and animals are described as though human, or where things readily change from one being into another. Osman describes the plants and trees as smiling and speaking (*ibtasamat zahrāt narjis wa qalat shajara*) (56), and she describes the hoes and jugs becoming knights by using the phrase "*iktasaw bi-malābis al-fursān*" (they dressed in knights' clothing) (58). Osman achieves a tension between the folktale elements in the story and the nature of the prose itself. She narrates the story not in the descriptive colloquial Arabic of popular tales but in a spare, poetic prose composed of standard Arabic, aside from a few colloquial words in the dialogue.

Osman's reliance on the Arabic storytelling tradition is strong in "The Sea," but the story also evokes elements of the Sufi tradition, particularly the spiritual quest. Indeed, the central metaphor of the story is the quest for the understanding of self and of the possibilities and limits

of exploration. The character of the bewildered sailor who guides the child is also suggestive of the Sufi concept of *hayra* or bewilderment, which functions as a stage on the path of spiritual development and understanding of the Divine. The child himself also experiences this productive bewilderment upon first encountering the island's strange creatures but ultimately feels both contentment and joy with his increasing understanding.<sup>13</sup>

Sufi imagery emerges with more prominence in the title story of Osman's second collection, *Washm al-shams* [Sun Tattoo]. The narrator observes and describes in erotic terms the dance of Berber youths in the courtyard of al-Fana mosque in Marrakesh, but she is also positioned as a spiritual seeker. The narrative mirrors the paradoxical language of the Sufi text, which emphasizes the limitations of rational explanation, and the awe that can be achieved through bewilderment (see Chittick 2000:34-5 and al-Jilani 1992 on the limits of rational explanation).

The graceful young woman advances, unveils the tattoo of the crescent moons and veils them again, without speaking. For all discourse is a veil, except the discourse of emotion and passion. She looks and looks away. Her tattoo trembles and silently says: take me powerfully. The young man quivers, perplexed and bewildered (160-1).

Here Osman makes reference to the concept of the veil, an image that appears in the work of Sufi writers such as ibn al-Arabi and al-Niffari, to represent the obstructions that stand between the spiritual seeker and his greater understanding of the Divine, of himself, and the universe (Chittick 2000:144-51).<sup>14</sup> After watching the dancing and after her interaction with the fortune teller, the narrator says, "In ignorance is bewilderment and in knowledge is bewilderment" (163). However, Osman does not merely replicate a type of mystical commentary in this story but allows the reader access to both the narrator's liminal psychological state and to the physical sensations and visual images that pass through her consciousness as she watches the dance. By weaving together the physical and spiritual/psychological experiences of the narrator, Osman achieves an integrated image of the woman. The body, which is the subject of the youths' dance and through which the narrator experiences the sights, sounds, and smells of Marrakech, becomes defined as the "soul's tattoo" (*wa-l-jism qad šāra washman lil-rūh*).

This integrated image of the woman is in turn mirrored by an integrated image of the geographical region. As Magdy Tawfiq notes (1994), Osman artfully draws together references to Sufism with references to indigenous art and practices of Morocco, Pharoanic civilization, famous Islamic sites in Egypt (al-Ghoury mosque), Mecca (the well of Zamzam), and the Levant in order to create a universal image of Middle Eastern cultures that incorporates the dominant and marginal, the past and present. Osman's reference to the integration of the spiritually advancing consciousness of the woman with her physical self and the simultaneous weaving together of the disparate and illustrious histories and cultures of the Middle East raises the possibility of a sense of wholeness and integration for both Arab individuals and societies.

#### Sultana

In Osman's "Sultana" (1992), we see the combination of several themes common to her other stories: childhood, the reliance on the folktale, the personal quest of an individual to make her informed consciousness impinge upon her experience of the everyday world. Osman evokes the figure of Shaharazad to explore the impact of women's storytelling on children's consciousness (Osman 1992:23-37). Narrated initially through the voice of a child, this piece relates the story of "Auntie Sultana," a motherly and mysterious village woman who teaches and entertains generations of children through her storytelling. Sultana's stories are laced with references to supernatural beings, unjust rulers, and noble characters and are presented like riddles, with no resolution. Osman evokes the storytelling milieu as she weaves Sultana's tales into the narrative, only to be interrupted by the questions of the children as they try to understand the strange words and images that make up the stories. Osman introduces colloquial Arabic to the dialogue between Sultana and the children, thereby setting up a tension with her prose, which is largely formal Arabic and often poetic in nature, but she also captures poetic moments in this everyday language. Sultana winds up her story of the king with words that a mother might use to close a children's story: "*Tuuta tuuta, farāghat al-hadduuta*" [Tuuta tuuta, the story is told out] (73).

Despite the children's protestations, Sultana ends the story session without providing an ending, suggesting that the children tell what hap-

pens next. Thus, she privileges individual creativity and uncertainty over authority and convention. In the final lines of the story, this ethic leads the narrator, now a grown woman, to buck the authority of her own boss at the newspaper office where she works by refusing to submit writing on a mundane matter only because it is demanded by the daily production of the newspaper. As in "The Sea is Not Treacherous," the imagination itself becomes an essential element in the individual's ability to transform him or herself and to move beyond the confines of conventional expectations or ways of thinking. Like "Sun Tattoo," this story works both at the personal and psychological levels and at the level of society. As Latifa al-Zayyat notes (1994), by juxtaposing the magical, mythical atmosphere of Sultana and her stories with the depressing reality of the grown narrator at the end of the story, Osman provides an effective commentary on the lack of justice and individual freedom in Egypt and the "rule of falseness" pervasive in the media and in society more generally.

#### WOMEN WRITING BETWEEN THE POWER OF REALITY AND THE POWER OF THE IMAGINATION

In her role as critic, Osman has explored the role of the female imagination in Arab women's writing. In her article "Al-khitab al-adabi al-nisa iyy: bayna sultat al-waqi wa sultat al-takhyiil" [Women's Literary Discourse: Between the Power of Reality and the Suggestive Power of Imagination], Osman contributes to the debate in Egypt and the Arab world about whether there are definable characteristics distinguishing women's literature, and she examines the manner in which women writers characterize women's and men's imaginative worlds as they pertain to the qualities and possibilities of women's lives. Osman describes two characteristics that inform the "female consciousness" and literary production of several Egyptian women writers. The first is the focus on women's alienation from their bodies, a theme she analyzes in works by Nawal Al-Saadawi, Alifa Rifaat, and Latifa Al-Zayyat. Osman addresses Alifa Rifaat's story "alami al-majhul" [My World of the Unknown] (1981), in which a female protagonist relates the story of the strange passion that develops between herself and a snake that appears in the garden of her rural Egyptian home (see Denys Johnson-Davies' 1983 translation). Osman offers an analysis of the narrator's fantasy relationship as "dis-

patching the erotic desires that Michel Foucault considers expressive of a type of wisdom and reason, and which are in their essence part of the system of nature" (1993:16). She argues that Rifaat's use of the imaginary world constitutes a rebellion against the power of reality and the factors that contribute to the woman's alienation from her body. Osman suggests that other women writers such as Nawal al-Saadawi and Latifa al-Zayyat explore the emotional impact upon women of social conventions that emphasize their physical attributes over their intellectual or creative talents. Osman argues that both authors point out that women should be permitted to realize their complete humanity—the integration of physical, intellectual, and emotional aspects.

According to Osman, a second important characteristic that appears in the work of Egyptian women writers such as Rifaat and Bakr is a challenge to the prevailing set of negative images of women in history and in popular stories and myths. This challenge involves taking refuge in that heritage itself and extracting from it "anti-myths" that represent positive or at least more nuanced images of women. Osman argues that in her 1987 novella *Maqam Atiyya* [Atiyya's Shrine], Salwa Bakr constructs a semimythical figure of Atiyya by weaving together contradictory images of women from the popular imagination—images of the woman as saint and images of the woman as manipulative or immoral. These images are conveyed by the primary narrative voice of a young journalist and the interviewees who offer their conflicting views on the deceased Atiyya. As Osman observes, the interviewees "represent different social segments, presenting voices in the Bakhtinian sense of polyphony, a multiplicity of voices" (19). The multiple narrative voices sometimes contradict and sometimes agree on the nature of Atiyya's personality and life, with interviewees describing Atiyya as saintly, rather average, or vulgar and manipulative. Osman argues that in this story Bakr constructs

...a number of general systems of value, each one possessing its own relative truth, independently possessing its own guiding principle, while the writer abstains from subjugating these systems to a ruling system of values; leaving to the reader the right to assess this for himself and arrive at his own private judgments regarding the mythical woman that the imaginative world embodies. And thus building the literary text becomes a matter of equal participation between the numerous narrators on the one hand and the equally numerous readers on the other, both male and female (20).

Osman argues that when a woman writer presents a countermyth derived from existing myths or images of women, she assumes the position of a neutral observer who merely refers to existing elements of the popular imagination, such as the image of the woman who is raised to status of local saint (21). At the same time, by emphasizing the relativity of “truths” about women, women writers like Bakr and Rifaat suggest that these and other “truths” can be challenged. Elsewhere, Osman (1996) treats the historical novels of Radwa Ashour by arguing that in works such as *Hagar Dafi* [A Warm Stone] (1985), *Khadiga wa Sawsan* [Khadiga and Sawsan] (1989), and *Granada* (1994), Ashour constructs a series of compelling complex and varied female personalities within the context of a wide range of historical realities.

Osman argues that women writers who achieve an understanding of the ways in which women are oppressed and who also master the forms of artistic production are in a position to use the power of suggestion and the imagination to valorize positive images of women in the Arab literary/cultural heritage, and to challenge those that deny women’s humanity. In so doing the woman writer may challenge

...that external image [that] includes mental and social structures that impose upon the woman a marginal place and a lowly position on the social ladder, and also includes a noteworthy amount of created myths about the woman that contradict her humanity (13).

## CONCLUSION

My exploration of some of Osman’s creative and critical work suggests how one “poetic imagination,” in Friedrich’s sense, works to analyze and synthesize her cultural tradition and to address her own artistic, intellectual, and social concerns. Much of her work focuses on the process of expanding consciousness, of children, of adults interacting with children, or of adults in new social or personal landscapes. Her short stories draw on the space of the imagination as a site for this expanding consciousness—the dream or imaginings about supernatural creatures and figures from fairytales. Her criticism of women’s literature has focused, among other things, on how women writers use the space of the imagination to evoke, question, and transform images from the popular tradition to suggest new ways of thinking about women’s psychology, intellect, and

creative potential. Of course, Osman's focus on the intellectual value of the imagination is hardly new in Islamic thought. Medieval philosophers such as ibn Tufayl and Avicenna viewed the imagination as complementing the capacities of the rational faculties. These authors saw the imagination as central to achieving spiritual knowledge and progress, which would otherwise be unattainable because of the limits of human rational processes (Hughes 2004). This position mirrors that of Sufi thinkers who hold that the imagination alone can help man to make sense of contradictions and opposites and to understand the fundamental ambiguity of the universe.<sup>15</sup> While Osman's work draws on a long philosophical tradition that treats the imagination as a basis for spiritual growth, her own fiction is less explicitly spiritual and addresses issues of personal experimentation and desire, particularly that of people outside the dominant structures of power. Unlike many female writers of her literary generation, Osman does not always use a woman narrator to express this perspective. She often adopts the point of view of a child, sometimes a male child, to explore other, less empowered points of view.

Herbert Phillips (1987) has argued that literary figures raise social consciousness by sacralizing and desacrilizing cherished beliefs and institutions, and by crystallizing new ways of looking at the past and the all-too-familiar present. I argue that Osman does precisely this by drawing on the many layers of Egyptian and Arab heritage, Sufi writings, the Qur'an, popular tales, and local belief about jinni and other supernatural creatures to reinforce a sense of cultural rootedness while inspiring an exploration of issues of personal freedom and desire and the reconsideration of personal and social realities. While some of the writing strategies she adopts—finding a middle ground between poetry and prose, between standard and colloquial Arabic, between the written and oral traditions—are common in avant-garde Egyptian literature, the originality in her work lies in how she combines these with the image of the Sufi search and the trope of the child's experience. By combining the latter two elements in many stories, Osman draws an implicit parallel between the types of exploration and learning involved in the child's experience of the folktale, in the Sufi spiritual search, and in the process of reading innovative literature. The critical response to her work indicates that her version of "new writing" has generated an interpretation of human experience that has been compelling to Egyptian critics and other readers.

## NOTES

1. Formally transliterated as Itidal Uthman, I have rendered the author's name as Etidal Osman because this spelling reflects the Egyptian pronunciation and how critics have spelled her name in English (Mehrez 1994; Booth 1991).

2. My research on Osman has been part of a larger study of the motivations, writing strategies, and critical reception of Cairene women authors for which I have conducted research from 1991 to the present, including fieldwork in Egypt during 1991-2 and for shorter periods during 1996 and 2004. This fieldwork was supported by grants from the Fulbright-Hayes commission and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Center for International Studies.

3. "Sun Tattoo" and "The Sultana" in *Sun Tattoo* (1992). Both stories have been translated into English by Radwa Ashour in *Samaan* (1994). "The Sea of Passion and the Carnelian" in *Yunus al-Bahr* [Jonah of the Sea] (1987).

4. In the Middle Eastern context, ethnographers have explored the ways in which both oral and written poetry inform daily conversation and other aspects of discourse. Abu Lughod (1986) has shown how poetic two-liners (*ghinnawas*) are a way of dealing with emotional, liminal, and intimate situations in Egyptian Bedouin society. Caton (1990) has described the ways in which oral poetry is used by Yemeni tribesmen as a form of persuasion and thus becomes central to dispute mediation and, more broadly, to a system of power.

5. Also see Ni'mat al-Bihiri's *Nisf imra a wa qisas ukhra* [Half a Woman and Other Stories] and "Al-asafir tu riq samt al-madina" [The Birds Disturb the Silence of the City]; Sahar Tawfiq, *An tanhadira al-shams* [That the Sun May Sink], translated into English as *Points of the Compass* by Marilyn Booth (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1995).

6. A good example of Salem's use of the colloquial, proverbs and women's expression include "Al-Arabi" in *Al-Nawras* [The Seagull]. See also Salem's story collection *Dunya saghira* [A Small World]. Booth has translated stories from both collections in *My Grandmother's Cactus*.

7. Samia Mehrez argues that for al-Ghitani, intertextuality becomes a conscious strategy for subverting the conventional differences between "fiction" and "history" and between the imaginary and the real. She suggests that for al-Ghitani and others, resurrecting models from the Arabic literary tradition may serve to mislead censors but also invites a rethinking of the historical record (1994:1-16, 58-77). Salwa Bakr has described her use of the story within a story technique and other digressive writing strategies popular in the oral and written Arabic tradition as a way of portraying the repetitive and mundane nature of women's lives in the lower socioeconomic classes and also in the women's prisons (Seymour-Jorn 2002).

8. *Fusul*, Spring, Summer, Fall 1992. In his introductory article for the first edition, editor-in-chief Gabir Asfour wrote that the editorial staff decided to pursue this theme out of the conviction that freedom is the basis for social and intellectual progress and is also the first condition for the development and flourishing of literary criticism. Asfour states that the journal should be a venue in which authors can

express their independent judgments and readers can engage with these judgments and opinions.

9. Ashour argues that Osman's story "The Ocean of Passion and the Carnelian" (in *Jonah of the Sea*) effectively draws upon the Arabic oral tradition and on scriptural stories of the first man to raise the issue of the tension between personal and social constraints on women's knowledge and women's innate desire for knowledge and exploration.

10. For example, in "The Day the Madness Stopped," originally published in *Ibda* (September 1983, pp. 66-7) and also in Osman 1992.

11. Jonah is mentioned several times in the Quran, including the verses 37:139-48 and 68:48-50. Sura 10 carries his name. (Booth 1991 has translated Osman's "Jonah of the Sea" into English).

12. Here, as Booth notes, Osman plays on the popular belief that within every person is a devil that may control his behavior in various ways (1991:89).

13. Osman describes the expanding awareness of a child in the context of a relationship in another story, "Bayt lana" [A House for Us] in *Jonah of the Sea*, pp. 49-52.

14. For an example of the image of the veil in Niffari: "He stopped me in discovery and perplexity and he said to me, consider the veils, and I considered the veils and indeed they are everything that has appeared and everything that has appeared in what has appeared, and he said, consider the veils and what is of the veils (in Arberry 1935).

15. Corbin 1969 and Chittick 1989 have written extensively on the importance of creativity and imagination in ibn al-Arabi's work.

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