Discourse of Resistance in Egyptian Women Writings
Presentation Overview

• Objectives
• Historical background
• Theoretical framework
• Resisting writers:
  - Latifa Al-Zayat
  - Nawal El-Sadai
  - Salwa Bakr
  - Nadine Idle
  - Ghada Abdel Aal
In this presentation, I hope to achieve the following:

• Correct the perceived stereotypical images of women in Egypt as docile, passive, silent, secluded, subdued beings

• Offer a rich cultural encounter in which the complex positions of Egyptian women and their forms of agency within the patriarchal society, as seen by FIVE women writers, is unveiled

• Conceptualize the resistance strategies used by these women writers to communicate their alternative discourses on gender roles
A Historical Background

- Women’s position under colonization
- Enlightenment figures – who encouraged the emancipation of women in the 2nd half of the 19th c:
  - Gamal El Dein El Afghani (1838-1897)
  - Rifa’a Rafi’l El Tahtawi (1801-1873)
  - Muhammed Abdu (1849 –1905)
  - Qasim Ameen (1836-1908)
Leading Figures in the Emancipation of Women

• Malak Hifni Nasif (1886-1918), *Bahithat al-Badiya* (the Inquiring Desert Woman) (founded the Union for the Education of Women)
• Huda Sharwai (founded Egyptian Feminist Union)
Resisting Writers

- Latifa al-Zayyad (1923-1996)
- Nawal al-Saadawi (1931-)
- Salwa Bakr (1949-)
- Nadine Idle
- Ghada Abdel Aal (1978-)
Theoretical Framework

- Foucault’s theory of power and resistance
- My definition of resistance
Hollander and Einwohner in “Conceptualizing Resistance,” say:

“There are multiple systems of hierarchy, and that individuals can be simultaneously powerful and powerless within different systems.” (550)
Latifa al-Zayyad (1923-1996)

Fiction:

- *ai-Shaykhukha wa qisas ukhra (Old Age and Other Stories, short stories)*. 1986.
- *Bi' wa shira' (Buying and Selling, play)*, 1994.
Layla: “To reach womanhood was to enter a prison where the confines of one’s life were clearly and decisively fixed. At its door stood her father, her brother, and her mother.” (24)

“a slave, nothing but a jariya! A jariya in the slave market.” (41)

Layla “felt alive, at once strong and weightless, as if she were one of those birds circling above.”

… “It seemed a voice that summoned her whole being, that united the old Layla with her future self and with the collective being of these thousands of people.” (50-51)
Nawal Al-Sadawi (1931-)

NOVELS (in Arabic):
• Memoirs of a Woman Doctor (1958)
• The Absent One (1969)
• Two Women in One (1971)
• Woman at Point Zero (1973)
• The Death of the Only Man on Earth (1975)
• The Children’s Circling Song (1976)
• The Fall of the Imam (1987)
• Ganat and the Devil (1991)
• Love in the Kingdom of Oil (1993)
• Zeina, Novel (2009)
The Hidden Face of Eve (1980):

The education that a female child receives in Arab society is a series of continuous warnings about things that are supposed to be harmful, forbidden, shameful or outlawed by religion. The child therefore is trained to suppress her own desires, to empty herself to authentic, original wants and wishes linked to her own self, and to fill the vacuum that results with the desires of others. Education of female children is therefore transformed into a slow process of annihilation, a gradual throttling of her personality and mind, leaving intact only the outside shell, the body, a lifeless mould of muscle and bone and blood that moves like a wound up rubber doll. (13)
“The Picture”

“When he told her to leave school and stay at home, she left school and stayed at home. When he told her not to open the windows, she didn’t open the windows. When he told her not to look out from behind the shutters, she didn’t look out from behind the shutters.” (61)
Salwa Bakr (1949-)
(Novels Translated from Arabic into English)


I don’t believe that man is responsible for the unhappiness of woman. I hold responsible the structure of relations, the social specifications, concepts, values and prevalent norms. I deliberately portrayed man with no distinct features as marginalized figure … I do not condemn man as a race or a sex but I do condemn the overall shape of our lives, the preconceived ideas which we accept as natural givens though they are not so, and should not be so. I condemn the common, the familiar, the taken-for-granted. (qtd. in Sada 133)
“Thirty One Beautiful Trees”

From that moment on I began to sense changes taking place inside me: there were slight pains in my insides and I would constantly have frightful headaches. To begin with I didn’t give the matter much thought, but things continued like this for days and weeks, and after a while the headache changed into ghastly pains in my head, crazy pains that accompanied every breath I took. (15-16)
“Thirty One Beautiful Trees”

I ran off to Mr. Aziz’s room and said to him, trembling with rage, that I had in fact forgotten to put on a brassiere, …. I also informed him that I had decided from now on to turn up at the Water Company without a brassiere because I had given a lot of thought to brassieres and had found that there was no need for such a piece of clothing, in the same way that there was absolutely no sense to the necktie he was wearing. (19-20)

“Thirty One Beautiful Trees”

Does your party do anything about planting trees in the city instead of concrete? Has it formed a well-equipped army to deal seriously with the weasels? … “It’s quite futile what you are all doing, with your bodies as flabby as they are, for a healthy mind is in a healthy body. Apart from which, most of our ministers are ugly and they have such fat necks one doubts their ability to do anything useful.” …”Where are the women? I see no women around me. Why have you not sought out the reasons for the sparrows having fled from our city and why it is full of flies and mosquitoes?” (23)
Nadia Idle and Alex Nunns (eds.)
Nora Shalaby says: “I think it is time for Mubarak to set himself on fire”

Gigi says: “There’s nothing that Mubarak can do now to prevent the madness that will end his regime. IT WILL HAPPEN THIS YEAR!! Down With Mubarak 2011.” (28)

Nadia Idle and Alex Nunns, eds. Tweets from Tahrir, New York: OR Books, 2011.
Gigi says: “Everyone in Cairo who wants Mubarak out and stands for justice come to Tahrir now.”

Gigi addresses Mubarak saying: “The people have waited 30 years for this, no way will back out now!! The people or Mubarak in this country!!”

She also adds: “Fear is over in EGYPT!!!” Fear has left the people and [is] now with Mubarak.” (83)

She later adds: “The situation is escalating by the minute, we WILL NEVER GIVE UP! Down with Mubarak and his thugs!” (112)
Ghada Abdel Aal (1978-)

- A hilarious blog, the trigger for a best-selling book and a 30-episode television series that became a hit.
- It is based heavily on the writer’s and her friends' experiences,
- she wrote in the voice of a character called Bride,
Thank you