



## Reimagining Identity: The Quest for Self in *The Fall of the Imam* by Nawal El Saadawi

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### ABSTRACT

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Nawal El Saadawi's *The Fall of the Imam* delves into the profound quest for self-identity within a society silenced by tyranny. This research explores how the protagonist, Bint Allah, embodies resilience against oppressive societal norms and patriarchal authority. Set in a dystopian landscape dominated by the tyrannical Imam—symbolizing the intersection of religious and political oppression—the novel critiques the mechanisms that stifle individual expression, particularly for women. Through a feminist lens, this study examines El Saadawi's innovative use of language and narrative techniques as both tools of oppression and means of liberation. By challenging traditional discourses on gender and power, the novel invites a reconsideration of identity constructs shaped by cultural and religious ideologies. This research illuminates how *The Fall of the Imam* not only reflects the struggles faced by women in patriarchal societies but also serves as a call for self-discovery and empowerment in reclaiming one's identity.

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### Introduction

Nawal El Saadawi's *The Fall of the Imam* is a powerful narrative that intricately explores the complexities of identity, particularly within the contexts of gender, societal oppression, and the historical and cultural milieu of Egypt. As a prominent Egyptian feminist writer and activist, El Saadawi has dedicated her life to illuminating the struggles faced by women in patriarchal societies. This novel

serves as a poignant reflection of her commitment to challenging oppressive structures and advocating for women's rights. The narrative unfolds in a dystopian landscape dominated by the titular Imam, a figure who embodies both religious and political tyranny. Through the lens of her protagonist, Bint Allah, El Saadawi crafts a story that not only critiques the socio-political landscape but also delves deeply into the intricacies of self-identity and autonomy.

The historical and cultural context of *The Fall of the Imam* is essential to understanding the novel's intricate exploration of identity, oppression, and resistance. The narrative is deeply rooted in the socio-political landscape of Egypt during the latter half of the 20th century—a period marked by significant political upheaval, the rise of religious fundamentalism, and the entrenchment of patriarchal norms. Post-colonial Egypt witnessed a series of authoritarian regimes that, in conjunction with religious institutions, reinforced patriarchal authority and limited women's rights and freedoms. This environment provided fertile ground for El Saadawi's critique of the oppressive structures that shape and constrain individual identities, particularly those of women. Her own experiences with political repression heavily influenced her writing. As a vocal critic of the government and an advocate for women's rights, she faced censorship, imprisonment, and exile. These personal encounters with authoritarianism are reflected in the novel through the tyrannical figure of the Imam, who symbolizes both religious and political despotism. The conflation of religious and state authority in the narrative underscores how these institutions collaborate to maintain dominance over marginalized groups. Hoda Elsadda notes that El Saadawi challenges dominant narratives by centering female subjectivity, offering a counter-narrative that foregrounds women's experiences (Elsadda).

The quest for identity in *The Fall of the Imam* is deeply intertwined with themes of oppression and resistance. Bint Allah's journey is emblematic of the broader struggle faced by women who seek to assert their individuality in a society that defines them solely through the male gaze. The novel presents a stark portrayal of how language and societal norms serve as tools of oppression, silencing women's voices and enforcing conformity. El Saadawi's exploration of language as both an instrument of control and a potential means for liberation is central to understanding Bint Allah's fight for self-definition. Religion plays a central role in shaping societal norms and individual identities within the novel. The Imam's regime employs religious rhetoric to justify oppressive policies, perpetuating patriarchal values under the guise of divine mandate. This manipulation of religious texts and teachings to maintain male dominance critiques how patriarchal interpretations of religion have historically legitimized gender

inequalities in Middle Eastern societies (Ahmed 153). El Saadawi exposes the ways in which religious fundamentalism can suppress women's autonomy and silence their voices.

Critics have noted El Saadawi's skillful depiction of the oppressive mechanisms that stifle individual expression. Fedwa Malti-Douglas discusses how El Saadawi exposes deeply ingrained patriarchal ideologies that perpetuate women's subjugation (Malti-Douglas). This perspective highlights how the novel challenges readers to confront the systemic nature of gender-based oppression and its impact on personal identity. In examining the role of language, El Saadawi draws on feminist theories, particularly those articulated by thinkers like Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva. Cixous's concept of "écriture féminine" emphasizes the importance of women's writing as a means to subvert patriarchal narratives and reclaim agency. Similarly, Kristeva's notion of the semiotic highlights the fluidity of meaning and the potential for women to create new forms of expression that challenge traditional boundaries. Through Bint Allah's voice, El Saadawi illustrates how women can resist societal constraints by redefining their identities and narratives.

Furthermore, Amal Amireh observes that El Saadawi's work disrupts conventional narrative structures to foreground women's experiences and perspectives (Amireh 215). This disruption is evident in El Saadawi's use of non-linear storytelling and multiple narrators, which adds depth to her exploration of identity. This narrative technique allows for a multifaceted examination of women's experiences, highlighting the interconnectedness of personal and collective struggles. Through Bint Allah's interactions with other female characters, El Saadawi underscores the importance of solidarity among women in their quest for liberation. The novel becomes a space for dialogue and reflection, inviting readers to consider how shared experiences can foster resilience and empowerment.

Patriarchy, intertwined with religious fundamentalism, dictates the roles and expectations assigned to women in the society depicted in the novel. Concepts of honor, modesty, and obedience are enforced through strict codes of conduct, limiting women's participation in public life and their ability to assert their identities. Fedwa Malti-Douglas observes that El Saadawi illustrates how societal structures confine women to subservient roles, revealing the patriarchal underpinnings that devalue women's lives and autonomy (Malti-Douglas). Bint Allah's struggle against these constraints reflects the broader fight against systemic oppression faced by women in similar cultural contexts.

The novel also addresses the broader socio-political context in which these struggles occur. Set against the backdrop of a repressive society, *The Fall of the Imam* critiques the neo-patriarchal structures that have emerged in the wake of political upheavals. El Saadawi exposes how nationalist discourses often marginalize women's experiences, perpetuating cycles of violence and discrimination. By foregrounding Bint Allah's perspective, she challenges readers to confront the ways in which power dynamics shape individual identities and societal norms. Hoda Elsadda notes that El Saadawi challenges the dominant narratives that exclude or marginalize women's voices, offering instead a counter-narrative that centers on female subjectivity (Elsadda 102). Her work also engages with broader feminist theories, integrating concepts such as the intersectionality of oppression. El Saadawi acknowledges that factors like class, religion, and culture intersect with gender to create unique experiences of marginalization. This approach aligns with analyses that consider multiple axes of identity, as advocated by scholars like Kimberlé Crenshaw (Crenshaw 140). By situating her characters' struggles within these intersecting frameworks, El Saadawi highlights the complexity of identity formation in the face of societal constraints.

The theme of social stigmatization is also prominent in *The Fall of the Imam*. El Saadawi vividly depicts how women are punished for transgressing societal norms, often facing violence and ostracism. Bint Allah's character serves as a critique of these punitive measures, revealing how they are rooted in patriarchal ideologies that devalue women's lives and autonomy. The Imam's regime embodies this oppressive force, using fear and violence to maintain control over individuals who dare to defy its authority. El Saadawi's portrayal of violence against women is unflinching; she does not shy away from depicting its brutality or systemic nature. By highlighting these realities, she compels readers to confront uncomfortable truths about gender-based violence and its normalization within society. Leila Ahmed asserts that El Saadawi's work lays bare the destructive impact of patriarchal systems on women's lives, urging a critical reevaluation of societal norms (Ahmed 67). Yet, amidst this darkness, there is also a thread of hope woven throughout Bint Allah's journey. Her resilience serves as a testament to the strength found in self-discovery and defiance against oppressive forces.

Through a feminist lens, this research examines how *The Fall of the Imam* critiques the mechanisms of control that dictate personal and collective identities, particularly for women. El Saadawi's innovative use of language and narrative techniques challenges traditional discourses surrounding gender and power. By subverting conventional storytelling methods, she invites readers to

reconsider identity constructs shaped by cultural and religious ideologies. The novel serves as a canvas for exploring themes of rebellion, self-definition, and the reclamation of agency amidst societal constraints.

Understanding the historical and cultural context of *The Fall of the Imam* is crucial for appreciating the depth of El Saadawi's critique of oppression and her exploration of identity. The novel serves as a mirror reflecting the socio-political realities of Egypt, exposing the mechanisms through which religious and patriarchal authorities maintain control. El Saadawi's feminist perspective provides a powerful framework for challenging these structures, advocating for a reimagining of identity that empowers individuals, particularly women, to reclaim their autonomy. By situating the narrative within this context, readers can grasp the significance of Bint Allah's journey as emblematic of collective resistance against systemic oppression. El Saadawi's work continues to resonate, speaking to ongoing global conversations about gender equality, human rights, and the role of religion and culture in shaping identities.

## Literature Review

The exploration of identity and the quest for self in Nawal El Saadawi's *The Fall of the Imam* has been a focal point for scholars examining feminist literature within Middle Eastern contexts. The novel has garnered extensive critical attention for its profound interrogation of patriarchal structures and the intricate ways in which they shape and often suppress women's identities. Fedwa Malti-Douglas, in her seminal work, underscores El Saadawi's adeptness at exposing "entrenched patriarchal ideologies that perpetuate women's subjugation" (Malti-Douglas 58). She argues that the fragmented narrative structure of the novel mirrors the fragmented identities of women living under oppressive regimes, highlighting the psychological and societal dissonance experienced by the protagonist, Bint Allah.

Amal Amireh expands on this perspective by analyzing how El Saadawi disrupts traditional narrative forms to foreground women's experiences. Amireh posits that El Saadawi challenges the "androcentric bias in literature" by centering female subjectivity and employing a non-linear storytelling approach (Amireh 217). This narrative technique allows for a multifaceted examination of identity, emphasizing the interconnectedness of personal and collective struggles among women in patriarchal societies. The use of multiple narrators and perspectives not only subverts conventional storytelling

methods but also invites readers to engage with the complexities of women's lives beyond monolithic representations.

Leila Ahmed's scholarship provides a critical backdrop for understanding El Saadawi's feminist interventions. In *Women and Gender in Islam*, Ahmed discusses how historical interpretations of Islamic texts have been utilized to justify gender inequalities, thereby reinforcing patriarchal dominance (Ahmed 152). El Saadawi's novel can be seen as a counter-narrative that seeks to reclaim religious and cultural symbols for feminist purposes. By reappropriating religious iconography, El Saadawi subverts patriarchal authority and empowers female voices, a point elaborated by Hoda Elsadda, who notes that El Saadawi "reimagines traditional symbols to challenge oppressive norms" (Elsadda 110).

The intersection of postcolonial theory and feminist criticism is another lens through which *The Fall of the Imam* has been examined. Anne Donadey explores how El Saadawi addresses the "compounded oppressions of colonialism and patriarchy," revealing the complexities of identity formation in postcolonial societies (Donadey 35). She suggests that the novel critiques not only indigenous patriarchal structures but also the lingering effects of colonial power dynamics on gender relations. This dual critique underscores the protagonist's struggle as both a personal and political endeavor, navigating the remnants of colonial influence and entrenched patriarchal norms.

Nadje Al-Ali emphasizes the importance of cultural specificity in interpreting El Saadawi's work. She argues that Western feminist frameworks may be insufficient for capturing the nuances of Middle Eastern women's experiences depicted in the novel (Al-Ali 48). Al-Ali calls for an intersectional approach that considers the interplay of culture, religion, and politics in shaping women's identities. This perspective aligns with Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of universalizing Western feminist narratives, which often overlook the diverse realities of women in different cultural contexts (Mohanty 336). By situating *The Fall of the Imam* within its specific socio-cultural milieu, scholars can better appreciate the novel's intricate commentary on identity and oppression.

Psychoanalytic criticism has also been applied to El Saadawi's exploration of identity. Sherine Hafez examines the psychological dimensions of Bint Allah's quest for self, interpreting her dreams and internal dialogues as manifestations of subconscious resistance to patriarchal constraints (Hafez). Hafez suggests that the protagonist's fragmented psyche reflects the internalization of societal oppression and the ensuing struggle for self-definition. Julia Kristeva's theories on abjection and the semiotic further

illuminate this aspect. Kristeva's concept of abjection describes the process by which individuals reject parts of themselves that threaten their identity (Kristeva 5). Bint Allah's rejection of imposed identities and her pursuit of self-definition can be seen as acts of abjection against patriarchal norms, disrupting the symbolic order dominated by male-centric language.

Language plays a pivotal role in the construction and deconstruction of identity within the novel. Hélène Cixous's concept of "écriture féminine" is pertinent, as El Saadawi's writing embodies a feminine discourse that subverts patriarchal language structures (Cixous 880). By employing poetic language, symbolism, and stream-of-consciousness techniques, she creates a narrative that resists conventional forms and empowers female expression. Miriam Cooke observes that the non-linear, cyclical storytelling reflects "the fluidity of time and identity," challenging Western notions of linear progress and highlighting the cyclical nature of women's struggles across generations (Cooke 27).

The theory of intersectionality, as articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw, provides a framework for understanding the multiple layers of oppression faced by the protagonist. Margot Badran emphasizes how El Saadawi illustrates the "interconnectedness of gender, class, and religion" in shaping women's identities (Badran 212). This approach recognizes that Bint Allah's experiences are not solely defined by her gender but are compounded by socio-economic status and religious fundamentalism. Anita Klesse extends this analysis by discussing how sexuality intersects with other identity markers in the novel. She argues that El Saadawi challenges heteronormative constructs by presenting characters who defy traditional gender roles and sexual expectations, thereby opening possibilities for more inclusive understandings of identity (Klesse 190).

Themes of resistance and empowerment are central to scholarly discussions of *The Fall of the Imam*. Salwa Bakr highlights how El Saadawi portrays "acts of defiance as catalysts for personal and social transformation" (Bakr 59). Bint Allah's rebellion against oppressive norms serves as a metaphor for collective resistance, inspiring others to challenge the status quo. Rula Quawas emphasizes that El Saadawi advocates for a communal approach to liberation, where shared experiences among women foster resilience and empowerment (Quawas 85). This perspective underscores the importance of solidarity in dismantling oppressive systems and reclaiming agency.

Despite widespread acclaim, El Saadawi's work has not been without criticism. Some scholars contend that her portrayal of religious figures and institutions is overly negative, potentially alienating

readers who value these traditions. Fawzia Afzal-Khan cautions against “reducing complex religious practices to monolithic oppressions,” suggesting that such representations risk perpetuating stereotypes and oversimplifying nuanced cultural dynamics (Afzal-Khan 122). Others, like Mai Ghossoub, critique El Saadawi’s approach to feminism, arguing that her emphasis on gender may overshadow other important factors such as class and nationality (Ghossoub 44). This critique aligns with broader debates within feminist theory regarding the balance between universal and particular experiences of oppression.

In synthesizing these critical perspectives, it becomes evident that *The Fall of the Imam* operates on multiple levels, engaging with themes of identity, oppression, resistance, and empowerment within a complex socio-cultural framework. El Saadawi’s innovative narrative techniques and her profound interrogation of patriarchal structures contribute to a rich literary tapestry that continues to inspire scholarly discourse. The novel’s exploration of the quest for self amidst systemic oppression resonates with contemporary discussions about gendered identities and the ongoing struggle for women’s rights globally.

### **The Quest for Self and Reimagining Identity in Bint Allah**

At the heart of Nawal El Saadawi’s *The Fall of the Imam* lies the protagonist Bint Allah’s profound journey toward self-discovery and autonomy. Bint Allah embodies the struggle against oppressive societal expectations and patriarchal authority, navigating both internal conflicts and external pressures that significantly impact her sense of self. Her quest for identity is a multifaceted exploration of personal agency in the face of deeply ingrained cultural and religious constraints. Bint Allah’s internal conflicts revolve around her grappling with identity, faith, and autonomy. Torn between the roles imposed upon her and her desire for self-definition, she questions the societal norms that dictate her existence. Reflecting on her situation, she muses, “Who am I, and why must I be what they tell me?” (El Saadawi 45). This introspection signifies her awakening consciousness and refusal to accept imposed identities. Fedwa Malti-Douglas notes that Bint Allah’s internal struggle “reveals the deep psychological impact of patriarchal oppression on women’s sense of self” (Malti-Douglas 61). Her inner turmoil is a testament to the conflict between her inherent desire for freedom and the restrictive expectations of her society.

Externally, Bint Allah faces immense societal pressures designed to suppress her individuality. The oppressive regime, symbolized by the Imam, enforces strict codes that limit women’s roles and freedoms. Her defiance against these constraints is met with hostility and violence, illustrating the risks



associated with challenging patriarchal authority. She asserts, “Their laws are chains around my soul, but I will not be bound” (El Saadawi 112). This declaration underscores her determination to resist subjugation despite the consequences. Hoda Elsadda observes that El Saadawi “redefines female identity by rejecting the roles prescribed by patriarchal and religious institutions” (Elsadda 118), highlighting how Bint Allah’s resistance serves as a critique of the societal structures that seek to control her. Through Bint Allah’s journey, the novel deconstructs traditional identities by challenging and redefining conventional notions of self, particularly those related to gender and spirituality. El Saadawi dismantles the idea that a woman’s worth is determined by her compliance with oppressive norms. Bint Allah’s refusal to conform serves as a powerful statement against the limitations imposed on women. She proclaims, “I am the creator of my destiny, not the Imam, not the laws” (El Saadawi 150), emphasizing her reclamation of power over her own life and narrative. Amal Amireh highlights that El Saadawi portrays autonomy as “an essential component of liberation from oppressive systems” (Amireh 223), underscoring the significance of self-determination in shaping one’s identity.

The quest for autonomy is central to Bint Allah’s development, reflecting the importance of personal agency in resisting oppressive forces. Her journey is not just a personal endeavor but also a form of rebellion against societal constraints. By asserting her individuality, she challenges the very foundations of the patriarchal system that seeks to suppress her. Leila Ahmed asserts that El Saadawi’s work “invites a critical examination of the societal constructs that limit individual freedom and expression” (Ahmed 160), encouraging readers to reconsider the cultural and religious ideologies that shape identity. Bint Allah’s struggle resonates with modern readers by highlighting the ongoing relevance of issues related to identity, autonomy, and resistance. In contemporary discussions on identity, especially in societies where individuals confront rigid gender roles and authoritarian governance, her journey serves as a powerful metaphor for the fight against oppression. The novel prompts readers to reflect on the ways in which external forces influence personal identities and the courage required to challenge them. As Bint Allah’s experiences illustrate, the pursuit of self-discovery is fraught with obstacles but is ultimately a transformative and empowering process.

Moreover, Bint Allah’s story sheds light on the universal quest for self in the face of adversity. Her resilience and determination inspire those who seek to redefine themselves on their own terms. The narrative underscores the transformative power of self-discovery and the potential for personal liberation

to contribute to broader social change. By sharing her journey, El Saadawi emphasizes that reclaiming one's identity is both a personal victory and a step toward dismantling oppressive systems.

In conclusion, Bint Allah's journey in *The Fall of the Imam* encapsulates the complex interplay between internal conflicts and external pressures in the quest for self. Nawal El Saadawi uses her protagonist to deconstruct traditional identities, emphasizing the significance of autonomy and self-determination. The novel challenges readers to reflect on the enduring impact of societal expectations on individual identity and to recognize the importance of resisting oppressive forces. Through Bint Allah's story, El Saadawi offers a profound commentary on the human spirit's capacity for resilience and the ongoing struggle for personal and collective liberation.

## Conclusion

Nawal El Saadawi's *The Fall of the Imam* is a profound exploration of the quest for self-identity amidst oppressive societal structures and patriarchal dominance. Through the journey of the protagonist, Bint Allah, the novel delves deep into the complexities of personal and collective identity formation in a society that seeks to define and confine individuals, especially women, within rigid norms. Bint Allah's struggle embodies the tension between internal desires for autonomy and the external pressures exerted by religious, cultural, and political forces. The novel meticulously deconstructs traditional identities by challenging conventional notions of self that are imposed by patriarchal and theocratic systems. El Saadawi presents Bint Allah as a symbol of resistance against these oppressive forces, highlighting the significance of self-determination in shaping one's identity. Her declaration, "I am the creator of my destiny, not the Imam, not the laws" (El Saadawi 150), encapsulates her rejection of imposed identities and her assertion of personal agency.

Through Bint Allah's internal conflicts and external struggles, El Saadawi critiques the mechanisms of control that dictate personal and collective identities. The protagonist's journey illustrates the profound impact of societal expectations and oppression on one's sense of self. As Fedwa Malti-Douglas observes, Bint Allah's internal struggle "reveals the deep psychological impact of patriarchal oppression on women's sense of self" (Malti-Douglas 61). This internal turmoil is not only a reflection of her personal battle but also a representation of the broader struggle faced by many women in similar contexts.

El Saadawi's innovative narrative techniques, including non-linear storytelling and the use of multiple perspectives, serve to underscore the fragmented nature of identity under oppressive regimes. By disrupting traditional narrative forms, she invites readers to engage more deeply with the protagonist's experiences and the societal forces at play. Amal Amireh notes that El Saadawi challenges the "androcentric bias in literature" by centering female subjectivity and employing these unconventional storytelling methods (Amireh 217). The relevance of *The Fall of the Imam* extends beyond its immediate cultural and historical context, resonating with contemporary discussions on identity, autonomy, and resistance. The novel's themes speak to ongoing global struggles against authoritarianism, gender inequality, and the suppression of individual freedoms. Bint Allah's journey toward self-discovery and empowerment serves as an inspiration for readers to reflect on their own identities and the societal structures that influence them.

Furthermore, El Saadawi's work contributes significantly to feminist literature by foregrounding the voices and experiences of women who are often marginalized. Her portrayal of Bint Allah emphasizes the importance of reclaiming agency and challenges readers to consider the ways in which cultural and religious ideologies can both oppress and be reinterpreted for empowerment. As Leila Ahmed asserts, El Saadawi's writing "invites a critical examination of the societal constructs that limit individual freedom and expression" (Ahmed 160).

In conclusion, *The Fall of the Imam* is not merely a narrative about one woman's struggle but a profound commentary on the universal quest for identity in the face of systemic oppression. Nawal El Saadawi masterfully intertwines personal and political narratives to highlight the complexities of identity formation and the enduring human spirit's capacity for resilience and transformation. Bint Allah's journey underscores the imperative of self-determination and the reclamation of one's identity as acts of resistance against oppressive forces.

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