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Hala El Badry. *A Certain Woman.* Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2003. 216 pp. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-977-424-787-3.

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Domination of Women Underlies Public Inequalities

This is a novel of love, hate, sex, seduction and betrayal in which complex voices and relationships interact to reveal the dichotomy between people's public and private lives in the Egyptian society. Both male and female characters in the novel are trapped in conflicting desires for love and marriage, which seem to run at different directions. They all enjoy sex outside marriage, but they insist on marriage as a social appearance. Lost in a maze, each character experiences fluctuations of love, hate, desire to end up becoming more alienated from their inner selves and the others.

The four major characters in the novel are Maggie, Nahid, Mustafa and Omar. They are all related to one another by the bond of sex outside marriage and sex within the context of marriage. Nahid is married to Mustafa, but her relationship with him is collapsing day by day, so she starts a love affair with Omar who is an ambitious writer, and who had previously been married to Maggie. In many chapters, Omar makes a vivid contrast between Maggie's "always devastating opinions of [his] books," her critical comments on his attitude towards women in his books, and Nahid's supportive and encouraging words that appeal to his dreams of fame "not just in Egypt or the Arab world, but throughout the world" (p. 16). Despite the deep love that connects between Nahid and Omar, Omar betrays Nahid within the context of their long-term relationship with Salma, a woman from Morocco.

Mustafa knows deep down that his wife Nahid is in love with another man, but he insists on practicing sex with her despite the absence of true feelings, in an attempt to deny his suspicions. The main concentration of the novel is the sexual lives of both women and men, and how they view their bodies and the nature of their desires. In most cases, erotic life is deprived of romantic feelings and sensations. True feelings are rarely exposed in public; instead they take place in the inner self of each character. Even the relationship of the married couple is exemplified as a sort of rape. Mustafa knows that his wife insists on separation, but he expects her to satisfy his "needs." In a chapter called "Collapse," Nahid admits, "His kisses started fires of rejection and did not arouse any desire." Despite her desperate attempts to free herself, to push him away, or to move his chest from her

lungs, he did not care, because "he was having a good time" (p. 32). Though this sexual encounter makes her faint and go to the hospital, Nahid was so intent on not hurting her husband's feelings, that she cried silently (p. 32).

There is lack of communication in the context of marriage where the wife becomes a mere housewife who has to follow the imposed social order, which expects the wife to belong "where her husband is" (p. 39). In this novel, El Badry makes it clear that women's professional and intellectual dreams die in the prison of "closed rooms" in which "words come back without connecting" (p. 38). Nahid's life is seen as wasted in waiting for her husband and in preparing dinner for his colleagues. For Nahid, her married life is a total disappointment, but she struggles to break the silence and to admit that "society sickened [her]" (p. 41). Family values control women's desires for happiness, whereas men are seen as more capable of creating a balance between their secret world and the public one. However, the distinction that is made between love and sex becomes ironic when Nahid, who rejects her husband's attitude in sex, finds herself repeating his views when she states that "[t]he body has its needs," and so the sexual desire for her is a bodily need, not an expression of love or emotion (p. 40).

Within the context of this novel, El Badry tackles the issue of forced migrations and how people are forced to live in exile due to certain political procedures. Hence, Maggie, who is "half Greek, half Italian" (p. 12), narrates the history of her family that used to live in Alexandria and sheds a nostalgic light on how her grandfather was forced to leave their "beloved city after the nationalization and 'Egyptianization' decrees" (p. 52). However, Maggie's sense of identity, which is deeply rooted in Alexandria, "didn't make her give up her determination to return to the place in which she had grown up" (p. 52). Maggie's dream of return makes Omar ignore his "defense of the land and nation" to ask himself "if anyone had the right to uproot someone who had grown up in one place and send them to another continent about which they knew nothing about, forgetting what he had learned about colonialism" (p. 59). In such a context, Maggie's attitude toward her body and toward sex, which she describes as "revealing factor in a relationship" (p. 57), is portrayed as different from an Egyptian woman's guilt-stricken relationship to her body.

Consequently, there is an apparent clash of cultures and difficulty of communication between Omar, the Egyptian writer who wants the woman to be "the biggest motive for [his] coming success," and Maggie, the woman who refuses to be portrayed in his writings as a prostitute, "to be presented to society as a horrible woman," or to be one of those women in his work who tend to represent all the evils of the world (p. 17). Each person regards the relationship from a different perspective. Omar thinks that Maggie "is getting more tense everyday as I work to develop my novels" (p. 29), whereas Maggie thinks that he describes her as a horrible character in his novel and abuses their intimate relationship. The encounter between Maggie and Omar is regarded as an encounter between the women in the west who have a direct and simple manner in talking about [their] past experiences with men without "any shame or regret," and "men in the east [who] insisted on inexperienced virgins" (pp. 64-65). Omar describes their relationship as "a game" which is "part of the ritual of flirting," in which he "took into account the difference in environment, culture, and character formation" (p. 139). In describing their relationship, he insists on regarding himself as a victim who was manipulated and seduced by Maggie, without being capable of seducing her in return. He also criticizes "her rigid ideas about women's liberation and equality, â¦ and her precise separation of our finances and her ability to use sex to pressure and extort me" (p. 139).

Thus, El Badry's novel is interested primarily in sex, marriage, and divorce. Most subjects revolve around marital sex, and sex between lovers. Like Catherine Mackinnon, El Badry abides by the view that the sexual domination of women is the heart of sexual inequality, and that it underlies the familiar public inequalities. Nevertheless, she tries to reflect sexuality from the side of both men and women, in order to show that sexual relations outside the context of marriage are not much different from marital sex, especially when these relations become long-lasting ones in which each partner would consider the other as a sexual property. Since sexuality is socially organized to be deeply misogynistic, El Badry's novel reveals an attempt at creating a sexuality that is based on equality, and shows the contradictions inherent in doing so. However, any attempt on the part of the woman to deconstruct the sexual misogyny is usually met with traditional views from women themselves who give legitimacy to sexual inequality. Consequently, some of the views reflected by the female characters assert the common dogma that it is women who betray women when they start affairs with married men. Such a perception would deny men the responsibility for their actions and turn them into helpless victims who have no say in their private lives.

Through the stream of consciousness technique, El Badry portrays the feeling of loneliness in "closed rooms." There are some scenes which are reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dallaway, but El Badry's "certain woman" is more traditional, especially when she compares her relationship with a sexually impotent man to a relationship with a woman. In other words, lesbianism seems to be something unheard of and the women of the novel deny it both physically and spiritually. By the end of the novel, Nahid discovers for the first time that she never knew women or got close to any woman's body. She "strongly resented gatherings of women only because they reminded her of mandatory segregation which she totally rejected" (p. 195). Her alienation from women's bodies can be attributed to the fact that women's private and public lives seem to be shaped by men's laws and values.

In this novel, it is men more than women who consider their "bodies forbidden or taboo" (p. 97), and consequently, they are portrayed as "crushed between the millstones of impotence and desire" (p. 93). In a chapter entitled "Desire," El Badry examines very closely people's intimate feelings, conflicting desires and contradictory sexual expectations. For example, Mustafa becomes impotent when his wife subverts positions. Similarly, Omar thinks that "Maggie has used [his] burning desire for her to pressure [him]. She used it as skillfully as the most lowborn women in Cairo poor neighborhoods" (p. 138). Consequently, Omar describes his relationship with Maggie as "just a game" in which "she'd lure me and when I got ready, she'd broach a thorny topic and demand immediate answers" (p. 139).

The novel contains voices and each voice represents the inner and the outer life of the characters both in the past and in the present. The social life of people is historically surrounded by fear of "informers and spies," a fear that creates a sort of a deathly silence and divides people by feelings of hatred and suspicion. By referring to these political issues, El-Badri's novel makes an adequate connection between the inhibition that surrounds women's sexual lives and the inhibition that locks people's tongues in the public and the political spheres. When the journey of self-discovery reaches its end, nothing seems to be certain to the woman who wished to have the certainty to be able to defend love against herself and to "force it for the sake of the authentic and the permanent, no matter what the price might be" (p. 190). The novel seems to pose the following questions: How can one be certain that there is anything certain? What is the meaning of anything if nothing is certain?

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