

**EMERGING VOICES**

**Prison Memories: Reconstructing Subjectivity in Latifa al-Zayyat's  
*Personal Papers***

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**Introduction**

Latifa al-Zayyat (1923-1996) is an Egyptian novelist, short story writer, professor of literature, a literary critic, and a political activist. Her self-written life narrative was first published in 1992 as *Hamlet Taftīsh: Awrāq Shakhṣiyya [A Search Campaign: Personal Papers]*. Composed at separate junctures of her life, al-Zayyat's *Personal Papers* is formally divided into two sections. The first section encompasses autobiographical accounts written in the years 1967 and 1973, along with the concluding chapter of her unpublished manuscript, recounting her prison experience at Alexandria's al-Hadra Prison in 1949. The second section comprises her writings while incarcerated in al-Qanater Women's Prison in 1981. Al-Zayyat describes the first section of her *Personal Papers* as "the beginning of an undone autobiography" that portrays her coming of age, and moves towards her middle-age life experiences, whereas the second section, "centered around the prison experience," revisits the middle age in a new light, and "with a new perspective that becomes crystalized in prison" (1992, 232).<sup>1</sup>

Before its publication, Latifa al-Zayyat describes her *Personal Papers* as "a work hard to describe. It is definitely not a novel, and it is definitely not a traditional autobiography" (1992, 232). She states that although it embraces autobiographical accounts, her life narrative takes "a nonconventional form" (232), a designation she reiterates after its publication, asserting that her life narrative is uncategorizable in light of the stabilized classifications of the genre and practice of autobiography (1994, 180-181). The normative reference against which al-Zayyat designates her life narrative as nonconventional is the traditional self-referential prose narrative that presents a linear story of self-becoming, chronologically moving forward from

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childhood towards self-realization. The narrating ‘I’ projects the unified ‘self’ of the author-narrator-protagonist whose coherent individual selfhood has historical referentiality in the world beyond the text. Within the paradigm of such teleological normativity, self-inscription requires self-mastery to authorize a unified linear chronology onto the life story, and to authorize a singular wholeness of selfhood onto the autobiographical subject. In contrast, by proclaiming that her self-referential life story has a nonconventional form that ‘definitely’ breaks with the traditional autobiography, al-Zayyat invites readers and scholars to witness the disruption of the paradigmatic laws stabilizing that normative reference. Her *Personal Papers* calls for a reading that engages critically with the narrative as a transgression of the boundaries of autobiography proper.

Moreover, al-Zayyat notes that the economic, political, and social changes that followed the 1967 *Naksa* Defeat “complicated my vision of the truth,” and for that, she had to “*experiment*” and “find new [narrative] forms that capture the new reality” (1994, 182). This statement is critical when examining al-Zayyat’s self-referential narrative in light of life writing studies because it guides a reading that recognizes the weight of the historical specificity on situating the lived experience within a narrative form. This statement also identifies *Personal Papers* as an ‘outlaw genre,’ which Caren Kaplan (1992) defines as the counter-traditional narrative that defies simplistic classifications by representing the single life narrative as a site of multiple co-operating discursive strategies. Outlawed narratives complicate the purity of genre through narrative interventions and cross-generic strategies. Through experimentation, al-Zayyat composes an outlaw genre that disrupts “the familiarity of the discursive space of self-writing” (Kaplan 1992, 130), by subverting the normativity of organic unity fabricated under claims of generic purity, and deconstructing the unity of selfhood normalized under the dominant discourse of individualized authorship. Al-Zayyat’s statement acknowledges that the experimental interventions are a direct result of the sociopolitical conditions and historical context of the mediated memories and experiences. Hence, what this paper aims to highlight is how al-Zayyat’s narrative experimentation in her *Personal Papers* is a situated response to experiential realities and historicized conditions. The paper contributes to the literature on al-Zayyat’s oeuvre by reading her narrative in light of life writing studies, focusing on prison memories and their bearings on subjectivity reconstruction. The paper embarks from the contention that lived experiences destabilize expectations of genre and subjectivity, as opposed to the convention that the organizational patterns of genre stabilize experience and selfhood in the life narrative. Therefore, the paper employs the concept of ‘outlaw genre’ as an analytic tool in order to locate narrative “strategies that historicize and deconstruct mythologies of nationalism and individualism” (Kaplan 1992, 115-116), and investigate how these experimental subversive strategies engender al-Zayyat’s reconstruction of subjectivity. This paper also mindfully avoids a teleological reading of this non-teleological narrative.<sup>2</sup>

### **An Outlawed ‘Autobiography’<sup>3</sup>**

Latifa al-Zayyat justifies the lack of an ‘organic unity’ in her writings, stating that given the loss of certainty and aim after the 1967 *Naksa* Defeat, it was “impossible” for an organic structure to proceed “with certainty from a beginning to a middle, and towards an end...with the comprehensive view of the truth that comes with [such an organic structure]” (1994, 182-183). The sociopolitical landscape of 1960 Egypt was overshadowed with a collective sense of apprehension and disillusionment at the post-independence nation-building project introduced by the Nasserite regime. In her life narrative, the disillusionment manifested itself in an urge to experiment, featuring fragmentation and multiplicity in the representation of the self and reality to correspond to the uncertainty and the complicated vision of truth. In al-Zayyat’s *Personal Papers*, the most evident experimental strategies are the episodic nonlinear self-narration of the life story, and the cross-generic hybridity of the narrative structure, which collaborate to reconstruct a fragmented multi-dimensional and multi-vocal subjectivity. Temporality, selfhood, and modes of self-narration are dispersed with the elliptic stream-of-consciousness narration of free associations, flashbacks, and intrusive memories. Historiography interpenetrates the personal memory recollection, and the collective intersects with the personal, blurring the line between the public and private.

The subversion of the familiar linear structure becomes clear with the multiple beginnings and ends of al-Zayyat’s life narrative. Unlike the conventional autobiography, the preface in *Personal Papers* professes both the commencement and the conclusion of self-narration. The author-narrator prefaces the narrative with both her intention to write an autobiography, and the fact that her autobiography is “not destined for completion” (al-Zayyat 2016, 11). Inserted as a prologue, the opening page declares the autobiographical impulse, as the author-narrator announces that she starts writing her life story in March of 1973, trying to escape the impending death of her brother, adding that the self-narration comes to an end in May of the same year when her brother dies (11). Nevertheless, the life narrative gets a new beginning a few months later when the author-narrator resumes self-writing, attributing the renewed impulse to the national victory of the 6<sup>th</sup> of October 1973 (79). The second beginning brings about a self-realization that runs throughout the narrative: “my political formation has saved me from individual pits” (79). Nonetheless, a third beginning appears with the writings composed inside al-Qanater Women’s Prison in 1981, ushered by an autobiographical impulse to locate a unifying continuity, and reassemble “the diaspora” created by a lost past (114). The arrival to prison for the second time in her life propels the narrative towards a restart into a journey guided by her commitment to the collective national struggle as “the total sum of my reality” (114). Unlike the individualist impulse assumed in the conventional autobiography, the autobiographical impulse in *Personal Papers* is both personal and collective. A painful experience in the author-narrator’s personal life triggers her initial urge to write, and a victorious collective experience rekindles

her desire to live and self-narrate, then a political experience forces a third reexamination of the past in direct relation to public work and activism.

Similar to the multiple beginnings, al-Zayyat's life narrative comes to an end at two narrative moments. Unlike the traditional autobiography, *Personal Papers* has no authorial claims to the narrative being a complete life story, as the self-narration concludes with a sense of anti-ending that is closer to a renewed beginning than a completion of the life story. The dual endings are manifested, in fact, as non-endings that ensure the narrative remains 'undone.' The first non-end comes at the conclusion of her retrospective autobiographical accounts, while the second comes with a testimonial account narrating an episode of the prison search, inserted as a coda at the end of the narrative. Both of these non-endings mark a re-start, with a declaration from the author-narrator that the expected culmination point is actually the moment of acknowledging the need to reread and revisit the past once again (al-Zayyat 2016, 129-130), and the moment of arriving to a renewed ability to "reorganize my papers," to *re-claim*, and reinterpret the meanings of her life story (146). Instead of reaching a fixed conclusion that offers a meaningful resolution to the completed life story, the author-narrator arrives to a deferred resolution through non-endings that are, in their duality, disruptive of any presumed closure. Al-Zayyat's life narrative, thus, defers the autobiographical arrival to a conclusive truth or a resolved destiny.

Latifa Zayyat states that she deliberately formulates the nonconventional structure of her *Personal Papers* to "liberate" her life story from the constraining requirements of the traditional autobiography, and to compose a life narrative in which unity "extends beyond the unity of the individual subject" and the organic unity of chronology; unity is to be woven out of the "interaction between the private and the public" (al-Zayyat 1994, 184-185). Her intervention to deconstruct the unidirectional linearity of the sequential self-narration is, hence, a liberatory strategy that is directly tied to what Kaplan describes as "a struggle for cultural survival than purely aesthetic experimentation or individual expression" (Kaplan 1992, 130). On the one level, the liberatory function of al-Zayyat's interventions lies in the degree of agency and "freedom" they engender during the selection and omission processes, as the author-narrator opts to select for inclusion the experiences and memories she perceives as formative of her subjectivity (al-Zayyat 1994, 185). She emphasizes that overstepping the templatic life course of the developmental story allows her to practice authorial agency to "select what has been significant and meaningful... in shaping my vision of the *public* course of my life" (185). On another level, adopting an outward-turning authorial position that is purposefully exercised to reach *out* liberates the life narrative from the assumption that the isolated introspective inwardness produces autobiography as a site of authentic identity. Al-Zayyat notes that her writing strategies were not about "experimentation for the sake of experimentation, but were critical in communicating my vision to others, and connecting me with others" (185).

Latifa al-Zayyat intervenes in the fabric of her life narrative with an outward-turning authorial position to reconstruct the unity of her life story through the

negotiated co-presence of the private and public as an alternative unifying thread to the paradigmatic unity of chronology, and the unity of individuated authorship. This is manifested in the selection of memories and life experiences in which the personal and the collective intersect, the subject's relationship with the world is negotiated, and the dispersed unity is reassembled. In *Personal Papers*, the author-narrator's testimonies of the shared collective past constitute her memory narrative. She mediates key episodes in Egypt's national collective memory, not as a mere contextual backdrop of her life, but rather as significantly formative experiences that authorize the reconstruction of her subjectivity as a committed political activist. The overlap between the public and the private, and the personal and the collective mirrors the interpenetration of historical documentation, memory recollection, and autobiographical retrospection. Transgressing the conventional chronology of the unidirectional arrow of physical time prompts the transgression of generic purity assumed in the autobiographical self-inscription. The hybridized narrative framework is achieved through the fusion between the testimonial, the mnemonic, and the autobiographical discursive modes of self-narration, and is further highlighted with the deliberate shifts in the narrative perspective from the autodiegetic narration in the first-person voice to the heterodiegetic narration in an estranged third-person voice.

### **The Pluralized Collective 'I'**

Latifa al-Zayyat was born in August 1923 in Damietta, then relocated with her family to al-Mansoura at the age of six. While the author-narrator recollects her childhood memories as a young girl, she mediates an eye-witness testimony of colonial violence. The retrospective autobiographical mode of narrating her girlhood overlaps with the testimonial mode of documenting the police shooting of fourteen young protestors in al-Mansoura in 1934 (al-Zayyat 2016, 50-51). The fusion of the discursive modes of self-narration is coupled with a shift in the narrative voice, at the moment when the author-narrator announces: "I shed away the girl," marking the abandonment of her childhood innocence prematurely at the age of eleven (51). Subjectivity is fragmented as the self-narrating 'I' mediates her childhood memories in the third-person voice, distancing the narrating-remembering self from her child self, "the girl," who stands counting the dead bodies of the murdered youth "one by one" from the balcony of her family house (52). The national trauma of state violence is remembered as a childhood traumatic memory that introduces the child to the evil of the world. In addition, the historical episode of popular contention documents the history of her subjectivity reconstruction as a political activist, and validates her identification with the collectivity of the national liberation movement. The author-narrator reclaims the first-person 'I' to declare this moment to be her initiation into the "commitment to the nation" (51). Then, an abrupt elliptic jump in the temporality occurs, and the mnemonic self-narration traverses from childhood memories in 1934 to a coming-of-age memory in 1946. Conscious of the memory trigger prompted by her childhood trauma, the author-narrator surrenders to the mnemonic urgency to

recall her memory of the student protest in 1946. As “the child falls,” the third-person voice takes over to recount the memory of the “young woman” marching with her colleagues on Abbas Bridge. The elliptic temporal jump in the self-narration is brought forward by memory work and free association, in order to open a space in the narrative for a declaration of the author-narrator’s fulfillment of her childhood calling.

Latifa al-Zayyat joined the Faculty of Arts, at Fouad I University, now Cairo University, in October 1942. By the year 1943, she began her formal career as a political activist within the students’ chapter of the national liberation movement against the British Occupation in Egypt. She served as one of the elected leaders of the National Committee for Students and Workers until her graduation in 1946. Her testimony of the Abbas Bridge Massacre is both her coming-of-age memory account as a young woman, and a historiographic account of Egypt’s anticolonial resistance. In her *Personal Papers*, the author-narrator details the students’ march on Abbas Bridge, the police assault on protestors, and the splitting of the bridge into two to prevent the march from reaching the heart of the city (al-Zayyat 2016, 52-53). Her testimony corresponds to the historical account of the Egyptian historian, Abd al-Rahman al-Rafei (1951, 180). However, the eye-witness testimony in al-Zayyat’s life narrative attests to the murder of tens of protestors, whose dead bodies were recovered later that day from the Nile, which stands in direct opposition to al-Rafei’s statement that any accounts of deaths on Abbas Bridge are exaggerated and false (180-181). The agony in al-Zayyat’s testimonial account is mediated in the third person, as the author-narrator recalls her younger self sitting by the banks of the Nile, wrapping the corpses of her comrades in the Egyptian flag, “shrouding the nakedness, her nakedness, their nakedness, our nakedness” (53). While the third-person voice estranges the narrated-remembered self, and compromises its identity tie with the self-narrating subject, the collective “we” renegotiates the identity relations by authorizing an identification with the collectivity, instead of the individual self: “every individual ‘I’ is a collective ‘I’ and its meaning ‘We’” (52).

These childhood and coming-of-age traumatic memories are mediated in a heterodiegetic narration, instead of the personal first-person ‘I’ to bestow, what Mary Mason describes as, a “quasi-objectivity” to women’s self-writings that confront figures of the establishment (1980, 219). A child’s eye-witness testimony of state violence may require the quasi-objectivity of the detached third-person perspective in order to be validated as a witness testimony, particularly since this memory inaugurates the author-narrator’s lifelong alliance with the popular masses as constitutive of her subjectivity. Similarly, the eye-witness testimony of the Abbas Bridge Massacre calls for a detached objective narrator to legitimize the historicized counter-memory during the intertextual confrontation with the history-proper account of the established historian Abd al-Rahman al-Rafei, who disavows the deaths, hence discredits the author-narrator’s testimony. Therefore, the shift in the narrative voice is strategically employed to safeguard the author-narrator’s accounts from being dismissed during such confrontations with power. Furthermore, in both

of these memory accounts, the historical documentation interweaves with the memory recollection. The modes of self-narration overlap while the author-narrator struggles to mediate the shared trauma. She reclaims the collective memory as formative experiences in the trajectory of her subjectivity formation. In these instances when “a kind of collective consciousness... ‘authorizes’ and validates the identity of the individual writer,” a collective authorial entity transpires (Kaplan 1992, 121). In both memory accounts, the author-narrator identifies the collective experiences and the intersubjective pasts as constitutive of her subjectivity, deconstructing the isolated autonomy of the conventional autobiographical subject.

In addition, the collective authorial position serves to distinguish “between opposing parts of the self,” as a disruption of the naturalized singularity of the coherent selfhood assumed by the self-narrating ‘I’ (Kaplan 1992, 132). This collective authorial position is manifested in the self-dissociated narrating subject, and articulated through the intrusive shift in the narrative voice, ushering a multi-vocal self-narration, and a polyphonic subject who refuses to hide behind an undivided ‘I’ inherited from the generic label. The conventional unity between the narrating-remembering self of the author-narrator and the narrated-remembered self of the author-protagonist is disrupted, ultimately highlighting the dialectic identity relation between the components of the fragmented subjectivity. The self-narrating subject in *Personal Papers* fractures the sequential continuity between the past and the present, and with it fractures the transparent bond between the narrating-remembering self, and her narrated-remembered past selves. Therefore, the overlapping modes of self-narration, the alternating shifts in the narrative voice, and the interpenetration of the collective into the personal are not ‘purely aesthetic’ practices of experimentation. They are rather functional interventions that establish the collective authorial position of the self-narrating subject via a multi-layered identification with the collectivity. This becomes glaringly evidenced when the author-narrator recounts her divorce and the 1967 *Naksa* Defeat in the same narrative moment.

Although she does not refer to it in the life narrative, it is interesting to highlight that Latifa al-Zayyat’s second marriage in 1952 coincided with the postcolonial national dream of the democratic republic, while her divorce in the year 1965 aligned with the mounting collective disillusionment in the post-independence project. As the author-narrator decides to “evaluate” and make sense of her divorce, the 1967 Defeat occurs, and she writes, “he suddenly drops out of my being” (al-Zayyat 2016, 63). The collective Defeat in the present imposes an intentional forgetting on the personal defeat in the past. The memory recollection of “personal suffering” retreats, and the “collective suffering” takes over the autobiographical introspection (63). Instead of making sense of her divorce and her personal disenchantment, she engages in a self-interrogation of her role in the national Defeat. Unlike her earlier traumatic memories, the author-narrator abandons the testimonial mode of self-narration, and, along with it, the detached heterodiegetic narration. She mediates the memory of the 1967 Defeat in an unwavering first-person voice to announce her alliance to the

affective community of pain and apprehension: “the people and I are wounded. The people and I are burdened with doubt” (66). The line between the personal and the collective disappears completely, when the author-narrator identifies with the defeated collectivity, reclaiming the national defeat as her personal defeat: “this Defeat happened to me personally, and it was the cruelest thing that happened to me on a personal level” (80). The dominance of the autodiegetic narration can be attributed to the fact that the traumatic memory of the 1967 Defeat is self-written in the same year of its occurrence, unlike the earlier traumas that are ruminated decades after their occurrence.

Nonetheless, in *Personal Papers*, the deconstruction of the traditional subject unity is followed by an active intervention to reconstruct the subjectivity through a collective authorial position. The collectively reconstructed subjectivity is manifested in a self-narrating subject whose presence in the narrative is re-formed through a pluralized ‘I’ that sutures the ruptured course of her history. The self-narrating subject *re-members* and stitches back the dismembered scattered subjectivity through collective memories and shared experiences. The self-suturing takes the form of a self-search, hence the original title of al-Zayyat’s life story, *A Search Campaign: Personal Papers*. Al-Zayyat describes the self-search as the thematic thread extending through her life narrative. She attempts to “search within the depth of myself, dispelling one self-illusion after the other, tearing apart my myths, one myth after the other, to stand at the end of the road, reconciled with myself” (1992, 232). Such self-search and self-reconciliation materialize in her writings inside al-Qanater Women’s Prison, where she was incarcerated for the second time for her political activism. By the year 1979, Latifa al-Zayyat was the president and cofounding member of the Committee for the Defense of National Culture that came into being in response to the Camp David Accord and the Egyptian-Israeli normalization efforts. Consequently, she was arrested on the 8<sup>th</sup> of September 1981, as part of the state’s mass detention campaign that targeted intellectuals and activists who voiced their opposition to the treaty with Israel. It is inside the prison walls that she concludes writing her *Personal Papers*.

Upon her arrival at the gate of al-Qanater Women’s Prison, the author-narrator announces the need to “suture what has been severed of my life for a while” (al-Zayyat 2016, 105). She embarks on a mnemonic journey to her past, during which the disjunctive nonlinearity of the self-narration aligns with the urge to self-search. She outlines the components of her scattered subjectivity, and situates each of her ‘selves’ in a memory episode from the dislocated past. The digressive jumps in temporality, and the oscillations in the narrative voice are interventions that contribute to the sense of loss overwhelming the author-narrator in her self-search. In narrative moments when “the self is lost,” fractures appear in the narrative, and the “unconscious memory floods in” (Anderson 2011, 95). The disruption brought about by the unconscious flood of memory content is intensified with parenthetical authorial interventions that interrupt the mnemonic mode of self-narrating the past to offer introspective reflections with presently acquired knowledge in the first-



person voice. The author-narrator reclaims the self-narrating 'I' at a point in her disjunctive mnemonic journey to express a present-moment realization that her political activism has been the "unifying line" of all her life's junctures (al-Zayyat 2016, 114-115). Her committed involvement in the collective struggle places her present in a continuation with her past, and collates "these multiple faces of the one woman who is me" (114). However, she notices a missing stitch in the tapestry of her life story, where one model of self refuses to align with the others: "the woman of al-Hadra Prison."

In March 1949, and at the age of twenty-six, Latifa al-Zayyat was arrested on remand by the colonial state, and detained at al-Hadra Prison in Alexandria, where she spent six months in solitary confinement, as an undertrial prisoner. She was tried for conspiracy to topple the regime, and received a suspended one-year sentence for her activities as a member of the underground leftist movement. In *Personal Papers*, the author-narrator journeys back in her past to restore the history of this particular 'woman,' and to resolve this one final suture. She locates the missing stitch within the unifying thread to be her second marriage in 1952. Al-Zayyat writes, "the girl and woman I was before this marriage were almost erased" (115). She takes responsibility for her lost self, stating, "unconsciously, I killed the girl" engaged in the political struggle the moment she goes into the "isolation" of her second marriage (116-119). She perceives her alienation from the collectivity, and withdrawal from public life as a suicide. Defining her second marriage as "the wrong path," she takes another mnemonic journey reaching back to her adolescence, searching for reasons to justify this diversion in the course of her life (119). She employs the third-person voice to mediate her first encounter with her female body as 'the girl,' and the "acute sense of guilt" and "feeling of shame" that come with that knowledge (119). The encounter between the author-narrator and her female body at an early age is productive of a negative emotional reaction that has its lineage in the affective logic that normalizes female guilt and shame as the proper response to women's identification with their bodies. Attributing her negative emotions to "her upbringing and her seriousness," the author-narrator admits that her past self, "the young woman," steps into university in 1942 with defiant determination to "prove something" in response to the shared female shame, and "every girl's feeling of belittlement" for being a woman (119-120).

However, an unforeseeable transformation takes place when she engages in political activism two years into her university life, and she "no longer feels the need to prove anything" (119-121). Describing the engagement in the collective struggle as a "rebirth," she "transforms from a girl carrying her female body like a sin to a liberated outspoken strong woman" (120-121). The centrality of the female body in these recollected memories foregrounds the gendered subjectivity of the author-narrator as a woman political activist. Her corporeal memories of her female body are recalled in the narrative moment when she historicizes her self-becoming as a political activist. The author-narrator recognizes that collective activism liberates the young woman from the 'sin' of her female body, alas by separating her from that

body. To be serious and confident, and to engage in the public domain, the young woman is reborn “a human not a female,” as the people “rename her” the serious committed activist, and “coronate her the intellectual and the leader” (120-121). The author-narrator recognizes that her experience in the collective struggle allows her rebirth as a political leader, yet stifles her development as a woman. At this point, she interrupts the memory recollection, and inserts a parenthetical statement that interrogates the contradiction in the process of her rebirth as a nongendered subject. Reflecting on the past with the retrospective knowledge she has at the present narrative moment, she realizes that “the people turned her from being a human into an image...into a myth” (121). She comes to the conclusion that the rebirth has been her reframing as a nongendered non-embodied myth, which aligns with the inherited dichotomous binary that renders a split between the female model of subjectivity as private, and the political activist model of subjectivity as public. This split and the contradiction correspond to the dissociation of the author-narrator’s subjectivity into opposing ‘selves:’ the “female buried deep down until absented” (119), and the image drafted by the people of her as the “serious committed activist” (121-122).

Nonetheless, the recurring ellipsis in the unconscious memory flood makes it hard to identify the motive behind mediating these gendered experiences, and centralizing the female body during a mnemonic journey that begins with an impulse to restore the lost self of “the woman of al-Hadra Prison,” to historicize her life experiences as the missing stitch, and consequently to find a meaningful logic for the wrong turn she takes through her second marriage. Although implicit and belated, the motive behind these memories intruding into the narrative surfaces when the author-narrator intervenes in the heterodiegetic memory recollection with a first-person interjection. She explains that the normalized binary opposition between the public activist and the private woman has been the cause of “the split” in her subjectivity, and the “disruption” in the trajectory of her life (122). Reevaluating her past, the author-narrator realizes that the nongendered myth of the serious activist who entered al-Hadra Prison for her political commitment is released from prison “a fiery woman seeking revenge for her long deprivation,” seeking a feminine womanhood in its archetypal sense, to reclaim her female body through her second marriage, and settle the score with the nongendered non-embodied myth (122-124). Ultimately, she confronts her married self: “this woman has walked a path different from that trodden by the woman of al-Hadra Prison,” because instead of the committed activist seeking unity with the collectivity, the younger self diverts into a path of a lover seeking “oneness” with her partner (124). Attempting to defend her younger self and justify her past decisions, the author-narrator reiterates a refrain-like authorial interjection: “she was young...but now I know,” thus, bringing the fragmented subjectivity to a climactic point before engaging in a processual self-suturing that unfolds through a series of painful confessions (125-130). The author-narrator acknowledges that she has consciously absented the reality that the young activist woman who entered al-Hadra Prison at the age of twenty-six has been defeated at one point, eventually turning “the prison gate into the gate of the second marriage” (126).

The missing stitch is located when the author-narrator declares that the reason why this particular self refuses to align with the other components of her subjectivity is that she has never been released to freedom, rather transported from the public prison of the colonial state to the private prison of her marriage. The author-narrator confesses that it has taken her a lifetime to summon up the courage to acknowledge this agonizing reality because the myth of the serious activist detained at al-Hadra Prison for her political commitment, “the woman she was,” has been her savior from the prison of her second marriage (115 & 124). This myth has also been her guide. Throughout her life, the author-narrator has “twisted her neck looking backward” at this myth, seeking guidance towards the future (124). To admit that her young self has been defeated in the past is to bring the collapse of the larger-than-life illusion of the woman of al-Hadra Prison. Nonetheless, the author-narrator asserts that “my myth” must inevitably be interrogated then demolished because “now I know,” signifying the arrival to the needed knowledge to make sense of the past, and make peace with her younger self: “I do not care, I no longer care. Something in my present is crystallizing that rids me of the need for a myth, the need to twist my neck glancing backward” (126). The self-search comes to an end as the lost self is restored; she is restored to be put on the stand for yet another round of self-questioning and self-confrontation: “I have never wondered before; has the woman been defeated inside prison? Or was it even before that?” (127). Instead of arriving to a conclusion with the self-suturing of her fragmented subjectivity, the self-narrating subject summons a new beginning when she decides to revisit the unpublished manuscript in which she had recorded the memories of her incarceration inside al-Hadra Prison in Alexandria.

### **Presenting Absence: Al-Zayyat’s Lost Memoir**

Latifa al-Zayyat explains that while “weaving a main [plot] conflict out of my life story,” diverging genres and temporalities “interpenetrated one another,” producing multiple images of the single truth, “without one delegitimizing the other” (1994, 183). The one particular example when the divergent multiplicity of genres, temporalities, and truths come to serve the lifeline of al-Zayyat’s narrative is the memory account of her politically motivated incarceration at al-Hadra Prison in 1949. This specific memory is mediated twice in *Personal Papers*, at two separate junctures of the author-narrator’s lifetime: the first in her mid-twenties following her release from prison in 1949, and the second in her late fifties while detained for the second time in 1981. The first account appears in the form of an epistolary excerpt, extracted from her unpublished manuscript entitled *Inside the Women’s Prison*, to be inserted in her *Personal Papers*. While its selection for inclusion in *Personal Papers* remains unjustified, al-Zayyat inserts the concluding chapter of this manuscript in the middle of her life narrative unannouncedly except for a short preface, in which the author-narrator explains that upon her release in July 1949, she embarks on chronicling her prison experience in “a book” that she finishes and prepares for publication by the year 1950 (al-Zayyat 2016, 71). The preface ends

with a lingering question, “although ready for publication, why has it not been published then, or later?” (71).

This excerpt presents Latifa al-Zayyat’s first attempt at writing, and the earliest record of her coming of age as an author. The unpublished manuscript, *Inside the Women’s Prison*, could have been a prison memoir par excellence. In terms of generic purity, it is limited in its chronological scope to the prison time, and limited in its thematic scope to the prison experience as a single episode of the author-narrator’s lifetime. It corresponds to the generic designation of the memoir as a “single-dimension” life writing that is centered in its temporality and subjectivity within a discrete “single-experience narrative” (Couser 2012, 22-23). Subjectivity in al-Zayyat’s unpublished prison memoir is situated almost exclusively upon the author-narrator’s model of subjectivity as a political detainee, reconstructed through an inter-prison network of relations with the inmates and the prison wardress, Sit ‘Aliya. The inserted chapter is framed by the epistolary mode of self-narration, with the letter-like account addressed to “my friends” and “my guardian” as the direct recipients (al-Zayyat 2016, 71-72). Yet, the epistolary mixes with the autobiographical mode when the author-narrator retrospectively recounts her arrival to al-Hadra Prison, and revisits, via a series of resignifications, the experience of her incarceration. The inmates are resignified as friends, sisters, and daughters. The wardress, who is the representative of state authority in prison, is resignified as a guardian angel and companion who turns prison into “a homeland” (72-74). In a lapse forward in time within the epistolary account, the author-narrator recalls her voluntary trip back to al-Hadra Prison after her release, describing it as a “pilgrimage” (73). The prison narrative of a political detainee is typically a “journey back to hell” during which the author-narrator willingly chooses to revisit and reconstruct the memory of imprisonment, in order to analyze and reexamine the past intervening in the present and future (Ashour 2019, 93). However, in al-Zayyat’s epistolary excerpt, the physical journey back to prison post release is depicted as a ritualistic visit to a holy site of worship, “driven by love...nostalgia drove me into the prison” (al-Zayyat 2016, 73). The buoyant resignification of the place where she experiences “the worst days of my life” adds to the strangeness and contradiction of the narrated experience (73).

The voice of the narrating-remembering ‘I’ in the letter-like account is that of the author-narrator as a young woman in her mid-twenties, recounting the past in relation to the narrative moment of the year 1950 following her release. It is critical to situate the subjectivity that emerges at the enunciatory site of the narrating-remembering ‘I’ because the author-narrator takes a second mnemonic journey to the same past, yet later in her life. While incarcerated for the second time in her life, the narrating-remembering ‘I’ of the author-narrator as the fifty-eight-year-old woman reexamines her past self, “the woman of al-Hadra Prison,” and her prison experience in 1949, in relation to the narrative present-time in the year 1981. In the revisited memory account, the divergent truths come to uncover the defeat of the woman of al-Hadra Prison.” Unlike the first romantic nostalgic memory, the self-narrating subject, in her

late fifties, recounts her suffering for six months in solitary confinement, and details her first nights in police custody, sleeping on the floor of an empty cell, “mixing with urine and feces,” locked up with no food or water for two consecutive nights until she lost consciousness (al-Zayyat 2016, 109-113). She unveils her experience of homelessness trying to escape the police, her consequent arrest, the menacing interrogation scene, and her unwavering fear of torture as the screams of the tortured comrades reach her in the interrogation room (109-113). Unlike the epistolary mode adopted by the self-narrating ‘I’ of the young woman, the second account features the autobiographical as the primary mode employed to re-mediate the same past at a later stage of her life. Through this shift in the discursive mode, she brings forth retrospection, which is the characteristic element of autobiographical self-narration. By summoning the autobiographical retrospection to recall this particular memory, the self-narrating subject carves for herself a temporal space between the past and the present reconstruction of this past, which enables her to revisit and reinterpret the lived experience with an extended temporal distance from the prison trauma. She revises the memory account mediated earlier in her life with the accumulated knowledge she acquires later in her lifetime.

Moreover, unlike the first-person voice self-narrating the epistolary version of the memory account, the author-narrator adopts a third-person narrative voice to re-narrate the prison experience of her younger self. The shift in the narrative voice highlights the self-dissociation, as well as the contradictions between the two memory accounts. However, the two estranged selves with their two divergent ‘truths’ do not delegitimize one another. While the third-person voice stands as a consistent signal of the intentional self-othering, it also serves to open a space in the memory narrative for authorial interventions into the re-mediated past with self-evaluation and self-justification. The author-narrator acknowledges the weight of solitary confinement and the fear of physical torture on her younger self, concluding with a self-defense: “the woman at the age of twenty-six was deluded. She thought as she entered al-Hadra Prison that she was ready. I now know as I enter al-Qanater Prison that nobody is ever ready” (113). Presenting the absented memory and confronting the trauma liberate the past, and allow the author-narrator to reconcile with her younger self, accept her shortcomings, her defeat, and her lack of knowledge, all while praising her strength and her commitment to the collective struggle (111-113). The two accounts, hence, offer multiple truths that are both in their contradictions equally valid when placed in their historicized locations within the trajectory of the subject’s history. The author-narrator journeys from innocence to experience, making no claims to a singular objective truth nor to a singular coherent selfhood.

Nonetheless, a question remains: why has Latifa al-Zayyat decided to insert the first memory account as it was originally written in 1950, instead of rewriting it from the authorial position of the middle-aged woman in 1981? Why has she selected for inclusion in her *Personal Papers* an excerpt from her unpublished manuscript *Inside the Women’s Prison*, instead of editing its memory content for publication in 1992?

Why has she presented the absence instead of attempting to fill it? It may be that she has intended to present to the readers her experience at a young age with the quasi-immediacy of the epistolary account, so that the reader would bear witness to a shred of her past subjectivity as it was. By inserting the excerpt from the unpublished memoir, she presents the absence instead of rewriting it, and with that, instead of *re-presenting* her younger self, she allows her younger self, with all her inexperience and naivete, to be visible to the reader. Al-Zayyat, thus, achieves a level of self-revelation that would not have been possible through an edited subjectivity. It may be that al-Zayyat has intended to situate her subjectivity in its own historicized location in the trajectory of her life story, using the excerpt as a historical document of the woman that was once here, so that the excerpt would serve the same function as the old photograph typically inserted in published autobiographies and memoirs to *show* the author at a younger age. It may be that including the unpublished excerpt is part of the author-narrator's mission to give her younger self the narrative space to speak for herself, and claim agency as a self-narrating 'I,' before being subjected to evaluation and scrutiny by her own older self.

It may also be that al-Zayyat inserted the excerpt of her unpublished prison memoir for her readers to actually get to read "her first book" (2016, 128), and to reclaim the deferred first attempt at authorship that was pushed into absence. Al-Zayyat may have wanted to readjust the sequential history of her subjectivity as an author, and rearrange the sequence of her written oeuvres to start with *Inside the Women's Prison*, written in 1950, and not her acclaimed first novel, *The Open Door*, published ten years later. The reader would get to place the beginning of Latifa al-Zayyat's writing career and her coming of age as an author at the point of her anticolonial commitment, and the price she pays as an activist for national liberation, instead of associating the beginning of her writing career with the novel celebrating the post-independence nationalist sentiments. Furthermore, the inclusion of the unpublished manuscript serves to trace an answer to the persistent question of its non-publication. While the young woman in her mid-twenties is incapable of resolving this dilemma, the author-narrator in her late fifties sits in her cell at al-Qanater Women's Prison pondering the question that would bring the self-narration to its end. She recalls the manuscript completed and edited for publication, with a note from her second husband -the renowned writer, literary critic, and professor of literature- describing the manuscript as "emotional, profuse in its sentimentality" (al-Zayyat 2016, 128). The manuscript may have been 'profuse in its sentimentality' because it is written as a memoir, a genre of life writing typically composed through non-authoritative reminiscence, and memory work that is primarily "impressionistic and subjective" (Couser 2012, 19).

The author-narrator, however, interferes to vindicate her ex-husband, and questions her younger self, stating that it is impossible for her to determine if the young author had true intentions to publish her prison memoir (al-Zayyat 2016, 128). She reflects on other reasons for her prison memoir remaining unpublished. The technical and practical difficulties of book publication, and the restrictions imposed

by the state's Committee of Censorship "render it impossible to publish this book" (129). With a sudden shift in the narrative voice, the first-person 'I' comes to the forefront: "I did not try to publish it" (129). After reviewing all the possible answers to the question that has lingered since 1950, the author-narrator takes full responsibility thirty years later, and holds herself accountable for absencing her first prison experience and 'the woman of al-Hadra Prison.' The persistent question shifts, for the first time in the narrative, from its passive voice 'why has not the manuscript been published?' to the active voice "why did not I try to publish the manuscript?" (129). The life narrative and the self-interrogation come to an end with the answer. She has not published her prison memoir in 1950 because of her fear that the publication may entice the state authorities to revoke the suspension of the prison sentence she had received. She does not publish the prison memoir later in her life because of her "desire to let the curtain fall on the past" with its "defeat" (129). In both instances, the absence has been a means of survival. Presenting such absence in *Personal Papers* echoes with a multitude of interpretations of the prison trauma, while simultaneously crafting a multi-vocal narrative space for self-reconciliation and healing.

### **Conclusion**

Latifa al-Zayyat's *Awraq Shakhshiyya* [*Personal Papers*] is an 'outlaw' life narrative that defies the laws of autobiography proper, and trespasses conventional generic boundaries. In her life story, al-Zayyat carves a hybridized framework in which normative practices of self-inscription are disrupted. The multi-layered experimental fusions and liberatory narrative interventions transpire as a situated response to the author-narrator's experiential realities of political activism and her subsequent imprisonment. The digressive episodic narration coupled with the multiple beginnings and non-ends liberate the life story from the imposed linearity, and fractures the narrative temporality into multiple disjunctive pasts. These pasts remain unstructured, with no urge to impose a sequential procession of events, or build a developmental life course of self-becoming. Instead, the multiple oscillating pasts become productive of a multiplicity of past 'selves;' each is historicized in its own memory episode, attempting to articulate a chapter of the story, and ensuring the subversion of any sovereign monologic selfhood. The conventional autodiegetic articulation of individuated authorship is shattered into co-operating narrative voices that engender the pluralized 'I' of a self-narrating subject struggling to suture back the scattered components of her fragmented subjectivity, and to *re-member* the ruptured course of her history.

Instead of embarking from self-knowledge, the self-narrating subject in *Personal Papers* embarks from self-search, sifting through the array of accumulated selves, pasts, and voices, in search for a unifying thread. This thread is reassembled through the self-identification with the collectivity and its struggles. The author-narrator reclaims the collective memories and traumas of the intersubjective past as her personal triumphs and defeats. She, consequently, authorizes subjectivity

reconstruction through a collective authorial position that overthrows the conventional inward-turning position of the unified subject who seeks an authentic identity through individual uniqueness. The shared past urges the self-narration, and inflicts intrusive remembering and forgetting on the self-referential life narrative. In addition, during subjectivity reconstruction, the author-narrator asserts agency in weaving the polyphony of her divided narrative voices. Instead of arriving to a realized meaningful destiny with a sense of achievement in her present, she proceeds in an unresolved search until she locates the defeat in her past. Self-becoming is irresolvable as no wholeness nor completion is realized, with the non-end ushering a re-start to revise the life lived and narrated. What is attained at the end of *Personal Papers* is a liberating sense of accepting past defeats, with courage and heroic yearning for a renewed beginning. Self-acceptance allows the dispersed pasts and estranged selves to be reconciled following a series of self-confrontations mediated inside prison. Latifa al-Zayyat's memories of her politically motivated incarceration destabilize the familiarity of the autobiographical narrative space, ushering the reconstruction of a subjectivity troubled in and by its own unfinished becoming.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> All the translations from the Arabic language into the English Language are done by the author.

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