

## Writing Feminism and Spirituality against Camus: Ibtihal Salem's *Şundūq Şaghīr fī-l-qalb*.

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### Introduction

Recent scholarship on Egyptian women's writing suggests the need for more nuanced understandings of Egyptian feminism, including the ways in which feminism and gender identities are inscribed in literary texts (Abdo 2017; Elsadda 2012; Niu 2017). Valerie Anishchenkova (2017) has argued that the 1990s generation of Egyptian women writers have developed a new, non-ideological feminism that eschews oft-used dichotomies of "Islamic" versus "secular." I argue in this paper that this hybrid form of literary feminism has an important precursor in the later work of Ibtihal Salem, specifically in her short novel *Şundūq Şaghīr fī-l-qalb* (*A Small Box in the Heart*) (2004). In this semi-autobiographical novel, Salem expresses a feminism that subverts essentialist oppositions between the "Islamic" and "secular" in a character whose nuanced subjectivity draws upon and critiques a multiplicity of cultural and religious influences. Salem employs an intertextual approach and invokes a wide range of Egyptian and western artistic forms to explore a young woman's developing personal, spiritual, and professional self in the tumultuous years of late 20<sup>th</sup> century Egypt. Salem expresses this complex feminism through her characterization of the alienated Maryam, and by evoking and then revising Camus's enduring representation of alienation. While Camus's *The Stranger* (1942; 1989) takes his protagonist deeper into apathy, Salem's novel intricately characterizes Maryam as locating strength and motivation in her recollection of a life lived in a cultural context, rich in both secular and religious texts and traditions.<sup>1</sup> The retrospective narrative that conveys Maryam's memory is shot through with references to, and incorporation of, prior texts and practices. Evocatively represented in this novel, Maryam's memory - the "small box in her heart" - becomes a space for questioning old and new gender norms, recuperating time honoured - if often unrecognized - forms of female authority, and exploring a spirituality that accommodates female needs and desires.

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In a recent article Valerie Anishchenkova (2017) reminds us that Egyptian feminism should be understood as a multifaceted and complex body of thought that cannot be represented in terms of the simple binary of “Islamic” and “secular.” She cites an extensive scholarship on Arab and Egyptian feminisms that support this position (Ahmed 1992, 2011; Al-Ali 2000; Badran 1995; 2009; Elsadda 2012) and suggests that this nuanced perspective should also be applied to the rich representational discourses on gender issues and female identity found in literature and other creative arts. After `Abd al-Rahman Abu `Uf (2012), Hafez (2010) and Mehrez (2001), Anishchenkova highlights the unique perspectives and contributions of the 1990s writers - both male and female - including their representation of a new generation of liberated women who are actively challenging middle-class gender ideologies and restrictions. She also points to their self-questioning, fragmented narratives that effectively describe and critique a contradictory and deteriorating social reality. Anishchenkova and Mehrez argue that the 1990s generation, in fact, ushered in a new feminist writing in Egypt that focused on the expression of personal experience, and also emphasized the complexity and diversity of the female experience of this generation. Anishchenkova further argues that this new feminist writing is characterized by specific narrative features, such as polyphony, hybridity, and intertextuality (93), and that the work of Miral al-Tahawy, in *al-Bādhinjāna al-zarqā*, 1998 (*Blue Aubergine*, 2002), exemplifies this new literary feminism. Importantly, Anishchenkova argues that al-Tahawy presents a new feminist identity in her protagonist as she intricately weaves secular and Islamic elements into the narrative, and thus “presents the new feminist identity as a hybrid of modernity and tradition. Intertextuality works to modernize Islamic discourses while grounding the subject’s emancipation in tradition” (97).

Diya Abdo also locates a powerful female subjectivity in her analysis of another of al-Tahawy’s works, *al-Khibā*’ (1996) (*The Tent* 1998). She argues that the imaginative world of the protagonist Fatima - whom some scholars have described primarily in terms of her passivity and insanity- is actually a place of empowerment. According to Abdo, encoded in Fatima’s imaginative world are ancient stories of resistant female experience which attest to a history of positive attitudes towards the female within the Islamic and Bedouin traditions. This includes “the encoded (hi)story of the pre-Islamic Egyptian woman Hagar, highly respected by Muslims as a symbol of dedicated motherhood and women’s strength and courage” (278). Of course, as Egyptian authors have long drawn upon their rich cultural heritage to explore contemporary issues, it should be no surprise that Egyptian feminists also invoke multiple layers of history to create feminist narratives.

Ibtihal Salem's *Small Box in the Heart* may be considered a precursor to this new age of feminism, partly because of its hybrid, intertextual style, which is characterized by a complex weave of secular and religious elements and references, including Egyptian and Arab song, poetry, and orthodox and non-orthodox spiritual expressions and practices. More importantly, it presents the protagonist Maryam as a 'modern,' liberated woman who can be defined neither in terms of western secular, nor Islamic feminism. She lives by what many in the West would consider western feminist ideals of independence, privileging professional fulfillment over marriage, and rejecting social and religious norms in order to pursue love and intellectual freedom. At the same time, she is profoundly grounded in the traditional spirituality of the old quarter in Cairo, whose inhabitants practice Islamic, Christian and Jewish traditions, and non-orthodox forms of spirituality. Her existential questioning moves her forward, but not to a place of atheism as is the case with Meursault, to whom she is textually linked. She remains committed to an Islam that does not restrict female behavior, or empower men. Throughout the shifting narrative, Maryam's focus returns to the old quarter, to the spiritual and communal practices of women as they negotiate a multi-religious landscape, and to the rich orthodox and non-orthodox spirituality of her grandmother. But Maryam is also grounded in secular elements of Egyptian and Arab culture. The retrospective narrative reminds us of moments when Maryam and her friends engage with Arab tales and poetry and other aspects of popular culture as they process multiple personal, social, and political experiences. This grounded way of being becomes an anchor for Maryam and offers both a spiritual and feminist response to the experience of alienation.

Salem's writing has long been recognized by critics for her effective use of experimental techniques to forefront women's perspectives and everyday experience. Edwar al-Kharrat has examined her use of cross-genre writing to develop compressed prose that nevertheless encompasses rich detail about women's emotional lives and allows for exploration of female desire. He has praised her innovation in developing poetic prose that expresses meaning through striking, fleeting imagery, and that inverts conventional associations and assumptions (1994). Scholars have also noted Salem's ability to explore the intimate details of women's lives while at the same time linking the challenges women face with larger socio-economic issues including the growth of a globalized consumer economy that contributes to local poverty and social alienation (Booth 2002, Saliba 2003).

In what follows, I provide a brief personal history of Ibtihal Salem, the writing context within which she worked, some of her ideas about the role of the woman writer, and a synopsis of *Small Box*. Next, I explore the way in which Salem

evokes Camus's enduring representation of alienation in *Stranger* and her continual, subtle shifting of Meursault's masculinist perspective to craft a narrative dominated by female voices. Salem generates an artistically compelling representation of profound moments of political and personal alienation. However, the insistent intrusion of folk and popular culture elements from Maryam's memory - along with her recollection of the strong female spirituality of the old quarter - creates a mythic tone that firmly installs memory as a source of strength and optimism. My discussion draws upon textual analysis and interviews with Salem that I conducted over the period from 1992 until just before her death in the summer of 2015.

### **The Author and Writing Context**

Ibtihal Salem was born in Cairo in 1949 and spent most of her life in that city, although she lived for ten years in Egypt's Mediterranean coast city, Port Said, and worked for a short period in Iraq. Salem was raised in el-Zāhir, a district on Cairo's northeast side, which at the time was a highly integrated area populated by Coptic Christians, Armenians, Greeks, Jews and Muslims. The daughter of a university professor, Salem attended a secondary lycée where she was exposed to French, British and American literature. She recalls reading Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Bernard Shaw, Ernest Hemingway, and Arthur Miller among others.<sup>2</sup> After a conflict with her parents over her educational and career aspirations, Salem left home at the age of sixteen, and worked her way through university. She wrote for the student newspaper at 'Ain Shams University and graduated with a degree in psychology in 1973. Given her academic study of psychology, perhaps it is no surprise that that a significant number of her works deeply explores psychological states, including personal and cultural loss, and recuperation from that loss. Salem's fiction, including *Small Box*, has played an important role in Cairo's literary field since she began publishing in the 1970s. Her work, like that of other successful writers of her generation, is characterized by what Ferial Ghazoul calls "magical dualism" (1994, 13); that is, it successfully fuses important social or political issues with artistically innovative literary techniques.

Salem belongs to the cohort of Egyptian women writers who began publishing in the 1970s. This generation includes Salwa Bakr, Radwa Ashour, and Neamat el-Bihiri, and although it is not within the scope of this paper to treat their work, it is important to note that they have broadened literary and non-literary discussion of women's lives and experience, and have paved the way for a younger generation of women writers to explore uncharted areas of women's lives. This includes Miral al-Tahawy, who as noted above, has made inroads into

the exploration of women's imaginative worlds, personal desires, and emotional lives in such works as *The Tent*, *Blue Aubergine*, and *Brūklīn Hāyts* (2010, *Brooklyn Heights* 2011).

In a 2007 interview, Salem spoke explicitly about the role women writers may play in the Egyptian society. She emphasized the diversity of contemporary women's experiences, socio-economic backgrounds, religious orientations, and the difficulty of generalizing about women's situation in Egypt today, other than to say that most Egyptians have suffered for decades from the pressures of a failing economy. For Salem, literature may help people to better understand the diverse circumstances and emotional experiences of women. She said that writing *Small Box* was in part an attempt to help people to understand the alienation that many Arab women feel, especially those that are trying to craft lives or careers outside social norms. She said:

Alienation is an important theme in the novel. I lived in Baghdad and experienced alienation there, and I have also experienced alienation living here in Egypt. There are people in this country who do not appreciate the role of the woman writer, and who just see me as different in a shameful sort of way. This makes me feel alienated. So I tried in this novel to talk about alienation, both inside the country and outside.<sup>3</sup>

Salem argued that the role of intellectuals is limited in Egypt due to the decline of the middle class, problems in the educational system, and literacy issues. However, she clearly modeled the role of the public intellectual, publishing her work through government organizations that keep book prices low, doing interviews on TV and radio, and circulating her books herself. She said:

I want to be effective and have an influence on society through my writing ... I try to interact with the people; it is part of my personality to be with the people. I interact with the coffee shop proprietor, the shoe repair man, the juice seller ... All these people in my life know that I am a writer and sometimes I give them my books and they read them ... I also write children's books. I go to people's homes and bring my books to their children.<sup>4</sup>

As a member of an influential and pioneering generation of women writers, Salem has published three collections of short stories and seven novels, which have received serious critical attention and praise in both the Arab world and in the West from critics, writers, and literary scholars, such as Edwar al-Kharrat (1994), Medhat 'abd el-Dāyim (2002), and Marilyn Booth (2002). Critics such

as ʿAyyad ʿAbd al-Halīm (2005), and Madīḥah Abū Zayd (2007) positively reviewed *Small Box* in Arabic literary journals and on the literary pages of major Egyptian newspapers. Mahmoud Khadrā Yāsīn (2008) made specific note of Salem’s use of symbolism, cinematic montage, and shifting time frames to paint an intimate emotional portrait of a woman struggling with depression and loss of a sense of self in the harsh economic and political environment of the 1970s.

### **Writing Alienation/Figuring Hope: A Small Box in the Heart**

In *Small Box*, Salem blends the language of time, song and myth to represent a woman’s memories of her life and her self-analysis. During the process of this introspection, Maryam begins to recognize her deep sense of alienation both while she is residing in her natal country and while she is living in the 1980s wartime Iraq, where she moves in search of work. Salem develops this theme through the estranged second person point of view of Maryam, a girl from an old and diverse popular quarter of Cairo. The narrative voice that begins the novel is that of the mature Maryam, who relates her life story to herself in the form of an internal monologue. While sometimes jarring, this unusual second person point of view effectively suggests Maryam’s alienated frame of mind. Maryam’s remembering voice guides the reader through the tripartite structure of the novel, introducing changes in scene and locale, and drawing attention to the shifting temporalities of the narrative. The older Maryam’s narrative voice often takes on a reassuring tone as she relates how Maryam relied upon memories of a happy childhood in order to maintain a feeling of connection and motivation. In this feminist move, Salem posits an older woman as a source of wisdom and psychological strength.

Part One, “*al-ḥayy al-qadīm*” (the old quarter), begins with Maryam entering her Turkish grandmother’s old flat, where she now lives. Her grandmother’s home is the primary site of Maryam’s reveries, and it provides her with both comfort and a haunting sense of loss. Salem’s representation of the grandmother’s home, which houses family artifacts, such as her grandmother’s Najafi style wedding dress and her grandfather’s tasseled tarboush, is a gesture to the richness of Egyptian culture and the diverse geographical and cultural traditions that have influenced it. This signals a theme woven throughout the text, that of the complexity and wealth of the Egyptian and Arab culture and spirituality. Maryam’s awareness of this heritage - and women’s role in harboring it - becomes a source of pleasure and strength.

Maryam’s memories of her grandmother describe the identity of a woman from a past era, and they also develop Maryam’s personal history and personality. Recollections of warm, supportive interactions with her

grandmother, the old woman's folk tales, and religious invocations emerge throughout the narrative, especially when Maryam is feeling lonely and alienated. Through these memories we learn about Maryam's childhood and experiences that were common to many young women of her generation. She is given opportunities for education and personal mobility that were much less common in her mother's and grandmother's times. Although we hear little directly about her college days, we know that Maryam - like many Egyptian youth then and now - participates in political demonstrations, and consequently has traumatic dealings with the State Security forces. She graduates from University in the early 1970s, but the harsh economic situation ushered in by Sadat's "Open Door" policy forces her and her beloved Sa'īd to join the ranks of Egyptians seeking work outside the country. Maryam leaves for Iraq in search of work, and Sa'īd goes to America to pursue graduate studies. The breach in her relationship with Sa'īd becomes one of many fractured relationships that characterize Maryam's life. A number of Maryam's experiences parallel those of Salem, who grew up in an integrated district, attended college in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and worked in Iraq during the early 1980s. Salem also spoke about having been followed and harassed by security personnel because of her writing that drew attention to the economic and political failures of the Mubarak regime.<sup>5</sup>

Part Two of the novel, *al-rahīl* (Emigration), explores Maryam's experiences while working in Baghdad. There she becomes part of a community of Arabs in exile, and develops relationships with others who have had to leave their own countries to escape poverty or political persecution. Maryam becomes particularly close to 'Azīz, a Christian Palestinian and member of an underground democratic Palestinian political organization, who has lived the tragic life of a political refugee ever since his family fled Palestine in 1948. The primary scene of Part Two takes place in 'Azīz's flat, also known as "the airport" because it is the gathering place for people of many different nationalities and ethnicities. Here, Maryam's older self as narrator provides a sweeping view of the individual experience of alienation and desperation across the post-colonial Arab world. In addition to 'Azīz, who has not seen his family in decades, Maryam meets students and artists from Tunisia, Egypt and Syria, along with another Palestinian, who has found his purpose and sense of justice fighting in South Lebanon.

The third and final part of the novel, *al-ḥanīn* (Longing), is marked by the same shifting narrative that characterizes the text throughout. The second person voice continues to structure the narrative here, with memory montage rapidly leading the reader back and forth between present and past, Maryam's childhood, and present awareness of being in her grandmother's house, between dream and

reality. Images of watching Charlie Chaplin at the cinema with Sa'îd merge with scenes in which conservative relatives residing in Iraq try to marry Maryam off without real concern for her happiness. This shifting, sometimes disjointed, narrative effectively works to invite the reader into Maryam's complicated and frustrated process of coping with her losses and recovering a sense of hope. At the same time, the second person voice of the older Maryam also reminds her of former relationships with diverse individuals in the old quarter, and these memories renew her dispirited heart.

**Elaborating Feminism against Camus: the Power of the Maternal Artifact**

*A Small Box in the Heart* evokes and revises Camus's *Stranger* in order to explore Maryam's growing social and political alienation. *The Stranger* is a rich hypotext given Salem's desire to explore the state of alienation experienced in one's own country as opposed to that experienced abroad. Both Maryam and Meursault live the difficult realities of a colonial or post-colonial context. Meursault is a member of the Algerian pied-noir, a member of the working class, and an individual alienated from both the ruling class that identified with the French, and the indigenous Arab population (See McCarthy 1988, 41) Maryam is an Egyptian from the heart of her native city, a first generation university graduate, and a woman who must struggle with the inflation and unemployment of the Sadat and Mubarak economic eras. Although she identifies strongly with her country and her city, she is distressed by the rapid building and development that has left the old parts of Cairo unrecognizable to her, and also by the new religious conservatism that is changing the social face of her city.

A number of textual features in *Small Box* establish an intertextual link with *Stranger*. Both novels begin with narrators with names beginning with M, remembering a deceased maternal figure. Both Meursault and Maryam have essentially unfulfilling office jobs, both express a depressed, alienated state as they remember events in their lives and detailed interactions with others. For both characters—although to different degrees—memory is posited as a means of survival in a hopeless present in which periods of distraught wakefulness, or sleep, are fraught with frightening thoughts and mental images. (Camus 1989, 4, 9-11, 20, 51, 113; Salem 2004, 15, 21, 39, 51-52) Finally, Salem makes several specific textual allusions to Camus's novel.

While both Maryam and Meursault experience quotidian reality in alienated terms, Salem expands her treatment of the experience to consider gender and reworks the masculinist perspective of *Stranger*. In Camus's text, Meursault drives the action and is dismissive of female figures in his life, including his mother—whom he rarely visited and barely grieves—and his girlfriend Marie,

to whom he is also indifferent. His dismissive attitude toward women is exemplified in the aid he provides his friend Raymond to avoid prosecution for beating a woman (Camus 1989, 37, 48). Conversely, in *Small Box* it is Maryam and other women who consistently drive the action forward. Salem's text also has a distinctly feminine linguistic texture. As the older Maryam addresses her younger self, the second person singular feminine verb and possessive pronoun dominates the text: "māluki wa-l-ghinā' yā Maryam? Māluki lā tabūhīna tajūbīna al-durūb tafīrīna min zamaniki al-ḍayyiq..." (What's going on with you and this singing of yours, Maryam? Why don't you let on? You wander the alleys trying to flee your own oppressive days) (Salem 2004, 9).

While Salem's text forefronts a feminine voice and reference to the maternal, Camus's text famously begins with "Maman died today" (Camus 1989, 3), signaling a profound disconnection from the maternal figure. Meursault goes on to relay memories of his mother in a highly detached tone, his thoughts distracted by people, sights and sounds around him and by his own physical sensations of drowsiness and discomfort in the heat and glaring sun. As he contemplates her funeral, Meursault reflects that his mother "had never in her life given a thought to religion" and he refuses to look into his mother's casket (6). In contrast, *Small Box* begins with an elaboration of rich maternal relations and female spirituality. Further diverging from Camus's text, the first pages of *Small Box* describe Maryam peering into her grandmother's old chest, which carries warm memories of the grandmother, a focal figure in Maryam's life (Salem 2004, 11). While Meursault refuses to look into the coffin that holds his mother, Maryam delves eagerly into her grandmother's chest, and this investigation begins the retrospective narrative that weaves together Maryam's memories of her childhood neighborhood with present action. This narrative includes Maryam's reflections on her own existence as a single working woman, her relationships and personal, social and sexual development, and her self-questioning as to why her life has been plagued by professional difficulties and loss of love and friendships. Finding her grandmother's wedding dress reminds her of the stories that her grandmother used to tell of her first love:

You considered him the handsomest boy in the village. His mother always used to fear that he would be struck by the evil eye. But you, Grandmother, used to worry about the other girls and the evening walks along the bank of the canal, since an evil jinni had taken up residence in the canal waters.  
(12)

Of course, tales of jinn evoke the tales of the *Thousand and One Nights*, but Salem's characterizations of the rich story world of her grandmother also refers obliquely to Suhayr al-Qalamawi's 1935 work *'Ahadith jaddati (My Grandmother's Stories)* which describes the positive relationship between grandmother and granddaughter based on the former's stories, and upon their intimate conversations. Maryam's grandmother's tales offer an opening to consider her own desire. Maryam listens to her grandmother's tales of first love at the novel's start, and this gives her a language with which to think about her own first experiences with love and eroticism.

You stretched your little body out on the cold floor under the bed. Sa'īd undid the suspenders of his shorts and stretched out his hand to lift the hem of your school smock as elation stole into your aroused body... He came nearer and touched you and you embraced him as he embraced you. Bathed in sweat, you kissed. Suddenly, you heard footsteps and you both held your breath... Quickly, you crawled out from under the bed and scampered away like frightened mice. Simmering with both newborn ecstasy and terror, you tore up the stairs. (Salem 2004, 80)

The frolicsome tone with which this scene is described recalls Cixous's notion of productive playfulness of writing; writing that helps the female self to recover from the alienating effects of patriarchal thought, and to define and validate female desire.<sup>6</sup> Like Cixous, Salem expresses the struggle and negative emotions that may obtain in this process, and she describes the children's conflicting and simultaneous emotions of "*nashwa walīda*" (newborn ecstasy) and "*khawf ghāmid*" (terror). The children scamper away like frightened mice "*ka fa'rayn madh'ūrayn*", and yet Maryam holds close this first experience of sexual pleasure.

### ***Layers of Spirituality and Memory***

There is also clearly a spiritual element to Maryam's memory of her grandmother's stories. Although it harkens from a different historical and cultural milieu, Maryam does not disdain her grandmother's non-orthodox religious belief, or her stories of jinn and other magical creatures. Rather, she remembers this part of her grandmother's religious and emotional life as interwoven with orthodox Muslim beliefs, and as part of a multi-confessional community in which women shared aspects of each other's religious practices and celebrations. Unlike Meursault who has an areligious and apathetic stance toward life, Maryam maintains a religious belief that seems to be rooted in the

complex spirituality practiced by Muslim, Christian, and Jewish women of the old quarter; Umm Safīr, the Copt; the Armenian Umm Mīnā who spoke broken Arabic; Umm Sa‘īd, mother of her childhood sweetheart, Sa‘īd; and Umm Rachel, the Jewish seamstress. Salem develops a personal language for her diverse characters here, incorporating degrees of colloquial, or non-fluent, language to represent each woman and her individual cultural and ethnic background. In personal interviews with the author, Salem described this rich ethnic and cultural diversity as a valuable aspect of the Egyptian society that has all but disappeared due to post-colonial emigration and the emergence of religious fundamentalism that fuels ethnic and sectarian hostilities.<sup>7</sup> Salem does not wax romantic about the old neighborhoods in her novel as she also represents conflicts and tension within the community. However, in a feminist move, Salem depicts the quarter’s women as strong and resilient, able to solve both interpersonal disputes and to negotiate a multi-cultural and sectarian landscape. One scene describes Maryam’s mother leading the mediation between Umm Mīnā and Umm Sa‘īd after the former has flirted with the latter’s husband, and the way that the community of women ultimately resolve the dispute together. Salem’s representation of the scene again includes women’s religious utterances, which serve to evoke the linguistic milieu of the old quarter:

your mother knocked on Umm Sa‘īd’s door, and when Umm Safīr opened it, Umm Sa‘īd could be seen sitting in the middle of the parlor. Your mother entered, with Umm Mīnā behind her and you, slim-bodied Maryam, also passed through the gathering mass of bodies into the parlor. Silence reigned.

Your mother interrupted it, “For God’s sake, settle down, Umm Sa‘īd, it’s OK!”

Umm Sa‘īd muttered, “You’re right, may God protect me from the devil’s temptation (*allahuma khzī-k yā shitān*).” (Salem 2004, 28)

The dispute is finally settled when the Christian Umm Safīr suggests that the women go to Church together to light a candle to the Virgin Mary. Though Maryam’s family is Muslim, her mother quickly supports this idea and the women agree to go, invoking God to help them put aside their differences.

When Maryam returns to the old quarter, she finds it transformed, full of apartment buildings and shops; the community’s solidarity and diversity gone. She wonders, “Where was the clamor of the children in the courtyard, or the sound of Umm Rachel’s sewing machine or the unintelligible shouts of Umm Mīnā with that foreign accent of hers? (23).” Here Salem clearly valorizes a phenomenon that she reports having seen as a child – Muslim and Christian

women living in close community, going to each other's religious institutions, and participating in each other's religious observances. Salem represents shared religious practice as a source of bonding for the women, and the trip to the Church as both a spiritual and a social outing. Of course, she is also pointing to a shared Muslim and Christian belief in Mary as mother of Jesus. Muslims revere Mary as an ideal woman whose model behavior might be emulated by Muslim women. Her story is told in the *Qur'an* in a chapter named after her (Sura 19), and she is praised in other verses as well (for example 66:12). Indeed, Maryam's very name, the Arabic for "Mary," is significant here as Maryam is the product of a quarter in which Muslims and Christians have lived and shared their religious traditions. Notably, Salem represents the Muslim women as practicing what Leila Ahmed (2011, 235) describes as a more privately pious, pre-Islamist style of religiosity as opposed to the more visible and activist Islamism that developed in Egypt in the 1970s, and which Salem negatively represents in Maryam's childhood friend Kawthar. Salem subtly alludes to Kawthar's transformation in several places throughout the text, as she begins to cover her luxurious chestnut-colored hair first with a scarf, and later with an all-encompassing robe and *niqab*, and whose once playful personality has become staid and cool. Salem also represents Kawthar as adopting the pious language of the ultra-religious, laden with formality and invocations to God and the Prophet (Salem 2004, 57, 160-62).

### **Mining the Arab tradition**

While Salem characterizes Maryam's strength in terms of the spirituality of the old quarter, she also situates it in secular terms as well. Indeed, Salem figures Maryam's attachment to the old quarter in complex ways: it is both a site of traditional social and family structures, and a place of freedom for Maryam, where she can experience diverse individual and various elements of Arab and Egyptian folklore and oral tradition. The narrator as Maryam's older self recalls Friday visits to the park with Sa'īd where the children find an alternative world of creativity and popular theater. In particular, Maryam and Sa'īd are drawn to the vendor with a portable hand-crank driven film projector, *ṣundūq al-dunya* ('the box of the world'), which shows cartoons representing characters from the Arab oral narrative tradition.

Your heads were pressed together, you and Sa'īd, under the black cover of the 'box of the world', gazing at the pictures and listening carefully to the stories until the box went completely dark and the crank stopped turning.

Then you ran off to another spot in the festival grounds, each of you hiding a little box of memories deep within your little soul. (19)

The pictures that Maryam and Sa‘id observe are of folk heroes such as Abū Zayd al-Hilālī and Zanāti Khalīfa, from the epic poem *Sīrat Bani Hilāl* about the Bedouin tribe that originated in the Arabian peninsula, and in the tenth century moved westward and conquered a large territory in North Africa. The scene includes a track from the “box of the world: ‘Come out of your houses, I am Abū Zayd al-Hilālī, hero of heroes, prince of princes ... I have conquered our enemies, and freed the oppressed” (18). Another track refers to the *Thousand and One Nights*, recounting the story of the brave young Arab prince who rescues Sitt al-ḥusn - lady of goodness and beauty- from the effects of evil Umm al-Dawāhī’s apple. The vendor’s moving picture box becomes a central metaphor for memory, and particularly the memory of the creative and dynamic period of childhood experience and sense of connectedness to one’s history and culture. While Salem’s narrative is often melancholic, memory - ‘the small box in the heart’- becomes both a source of stability and a space for questioning aspects of reality. The prominence of elements of the Arab oral narrative tradition in the ‘box of the world’ signals Salem’s attempt to recuperate and validate folk and literary heritage as part of what secures the persona.

As the narrative follows Maryam’s growth and maturity Salem continues to weave religious and secular elements into the description of her formative experiences. Salem’s feminist characterization of Maryam as drawing on the traditional strength of women in the old quarter is also bolstered by a careful response to other aspects of the Camusian depiction of alienation, and she clearly figures Maryam’s moments of depression and despair in Camusian terms. As in *Stranger*, depressed mental states are characterized by periods of insomnia and sleep, depressive drowsiness, memories and present action. In both novels, waking moments are fraught with terrifying thoughts and mental images. For example, once Meursault has been sentenced to death by beheading for murder, we are given access to his disturbed imaginings in his prison cell:

For a long time I believed - and I don’t know why - that to get to the guillotine you had to climb stairs onto a scaffold ... In reality, the machine was set up right on the ground, as simple as you please ... That bothered me too. Mounting the scaffold, going right up into the sky, was something the imagination could hold on to. (Camus 1989, 111-2)

Maryam also thinks of frightful death by guillotine in moments of desolation, as she reflects on Sa‘īd.

Your friend loaded his passion for life onto his back and left for distant lands. Do you think he will return?... Ahhh, Maryam, will that be the end of you? That you'll fall down once and not have the strength to stand up again? (Salem 2004, 51)

It is at this point that Maryam falls into a distraught sleep, and dreams of death:

There you are ascending the stairs ... hands tied ... a guillotine appears to you at a distance. Ugly metallic faces turn around it, screeching like crows:

Let's splatter her with dirt!

Let's fling filth at her!

Let's smash her and scatter the fragments of her corpse! (51-2)

While Meursault tries in some sense to glorify his death by guillotine, imagining a sort of grand exit by means of stairs ascending above the heads of spectators, Maryam sees the stairs as a final labor that she will endure before death. However, unlike Meursault, Maryam finds comfort after her nightmare both in her faith and in the memory of her grandmother. Her older self narrates:

You woke up from your distraught sleep, Maryam, and felt your neck. Thanking God that it was still there, you turned on the light in the room; everything was in its place, Grandmother's chest, the brass bed, the kilim and the old wardrobe. You uttered an invocation seeking refuge in God from the accursed Satan and you tried, once again to sleep. (52)

Although Salem does not portray Maryam as particularly pious or devout, her references to Maryam's faith allow her to develop a protagonist that diverges from Camus's figure of alienation. In his cell, Meursault struggles to find some hope that he may win an appeal of his case. However, soon he is also overcome by a creeping certitude that this will not happen, that he will die and be forgotten. He has no belief in God to comfort him in these moments and refuses several attempts that the chaplain makes to visit him (Camus 1989, 115). When the chaplain finally comes unannounced, Meursault expresses his atheism, and his absolute disinterest in even thinking about the matter of God and belief. In the final pages of the novel, Meursault reflects upon the absurdity of life and the relatively empty and meaningless nature of his interpersonal relationships. He becomes preoccupied by the moments surrounding death, the prospect of

climbing steps up to the guillotine, and the realization that he should hope for its efficient operation. Meursault's level of alienation from his society leads him to think:

For everything to be consummated, for me to feel less alone, I had only to wish that there be a large crowd of spectators the day of my execution and that they greet me with cries of hate. (123)

Meursault is condemned for a murder that he has committed, but he is also judged for his general inability to engage meaningfully and sensitively with others, including his mother, neighbors and acquaintances. Meursault's hope for screaming voices at his execution signals his rejection of society and interpersonal relationships. In contrast, Maryam is terrified as she imagines the guillotine: "Ugly metallic faces turn around it, screeching like crows" (51). Her fear of these screaming voices signals an intact commitment to people, society, and faith, despite her depression and alienation.

Some of Maryam's strongest interpersonal connections are developed while she is in Iraq working as a newspaper editor. The spiritual openness cultivated by her youth in the old quarter allows her to fall in love with the Christian Palestinian 'Azīz, an activist and refugee, in Iraq. Maryam and 'Aziz connect over their exilic circumstances when 'Azīz presents his own situation of alienation. Here Salem makes direct reference to Camus. 'Azīz says:

I myself am in a constant state of absence; absence from my family and homeland, absence even from myself, traveling from country to country like a lost bird ... There's no need to worry - everything, from absence to exile - is hard at first, but habituation, as Camus says, sometimes has its own strength and power. (95)

In *Stranger*, Meursault also makes reference to the idea of habituation. When he is first trying to adjust to the privations of prison life, he remembers, "it was one of Maman's ideas, and she often repeated it, that after a while you could get used to anything" (Camus 1989, 77). For Meursault, this attitude is another aspect of his apathy, but in the context of the conversation between 'Azīz and Maryam, it is stated as a quiet attitude of fortitude.

In Iraq, Maryam learns about 'Azīz's difficult situation, but also comes to terms with the fact that many Arab youth are in similar straights. During an evening party in 'Azīz's flat, 'Ali, Māzin, Hamdān, Ibrahīm, and Marwān -men from South Lebanon, Tunisia, Jordan, Egypt and Syria- share their backgrounds and discuss aspirations, most of which have been thwarted by political and

economic circumstances in their homelands. Maryam's remembering voice reminds of the comfort and familiarity she felt with this diverse group, which seems to become a sort of parallel for her former community in the old quarter in Cairo. Much of this scene consists of 'Aziz's narration of his own and his friend Māzin's childhoods in the Jordanian refugee camps after their families were forced to leave Palestine in 1948. Woven throughout are references to or quotations from Arabic poetry and song that deal with longing, loss, and uncertainty. 'Ali, an ode player, sings the first stanza of Mahmoud Darwish's iconic poem "My Mother," which he wrote while imprisoned in an Israeli jail, and which expresses the prisoner's desire to cling to life if only for the memory of and compassion for one's mother. The group applauds his performance but the mood of the *sahra* quickly becomes melancholic as Marwān consumes too much wine, all the while reciting lines from Omar Khayyām and Abū Nuwās. Using direct quotations, Salem refers to the heritage of the wine song and poetry that extols the pleasures of wine, friends, and the present moment. Marwān continues to bring the mood of the evening down when he requests 'Ali to perform Darwish's "Angry Brow" (104).

Ibrahim is angered by the request of this sad poem, and Marwān is hauled off to a bedroom to sleep off his drunkenness. But significantly, the group is able to recover from this incident and they resume their discussion. 'Aziz narrates the tale of his own and Māzin's lives as refugees, their relationship with the PLO, work with the Fedayeen in the 1956 war, and later, their life in exile in Cairo and Tunis. Theirs is a tale of multiple losses and displacements, and one to which the others can relate, each in a different way. Salem clearly figures the *sahra* as a site in which individual tales of loss and longing unfold. Yet at the same time it is a context within which the youth speak constructively about education, consciousness raising, political reform, peaceful social change versus armed resistance, and censorship. Poetry and song that are part of a larger shared Arab literary and musical tradition allow them to experience a sense of solidarity and aesthetic pleasure even as they express their sadness and frustration.

The second person narration that guides us through Maryam's experiences and memory is maintained throughout the final part of the novel in which Maryam remembers her sad final encounter with 'Aziz before he leaves for South Lebanon. Back in Cairo, Maryam has a cold encounter with a widowed Kawthar who is working for her uncle, who, as Maryam thinks, "was known by the title 'Master', although you, Maryam, were aware of no master other than almighty God" (159). Maryam wonders why this ultra-pious man treats his niece as nothing more than a laborer and leaves her to live in an attic room with her infant. She also wonders about Kawthar's new pious manner and dress: "Is this the

same Kawthar that I used to know? Or some other woman behind that face veil? You struck out on the street leading to the river, longing for the friendships of your past” (160).

### **Conclusion**

In *Small Box*, Salem crafts a feminist text by means of an experimental narrative approach and a complex intertextuality. She employs an unusual second person feminine point of view that gives the novel a distinctive feminine texture. Salem develops a complex intertextuality to express a feminism that resists categorization as “Islamic” or “secular” in a character whose complex subjectivity draws upon and critiques a range of western and Arab cultural and religious influences. Salem reworks Camus’s classic representation of alienation by mining the Arab oral and literary traditions, and newer, popular forms of creativity to examine a young woman’s developing personal, spiritual and professional self. Salem ultimately rejects Camusian atheism and apathy, but she does so by creating a protagonist who finds her strength and motivation in her recollection of a life lived in a cultural context that teems with both secular and religious texts and traditions. While Camus represents a man defeated by his life experiences, interpersonal relationships and apathy, Salem figures a strong female character able to draw strength from multiple aspects of her past and her cultural heritage. She paints a portrait of a woman who survives despite social, economic, and personal struggles. Maryam’s memory - the ‘small box in her heart’ - becomes a space for questioning old and new gender norms, valorizing female histories and roles, and describing a spirituality that accommodates women’s desire for personal, professional and intellectual fulfillment.

### **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> I rely on Matthew Ward’s 1989 translation of *The Stranger*. All translations of *Small Box* are my own. I include transliteration of the Arabic where it is important to describe the feminine texture of language, or where it adds to discussion of feminist word choice, imagery, or use of colloquial and religious language.

<sup>2</sup> Ibtihal Salem, Interview with author, Cairo, 10 May 1992.

<sup>3</sup> Interview by author, Cairo, 17 March 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Interview by author, Cairo, 17 March 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Ibtihal Salem, Interviews by author, Cairo, 10 May 1992; 17 March 2007; 18 July 2015.

<sup>6</sup> I refer here to essays in *The Hélène Cixous Reader* (1994); “First Names of No One” (27-33) and “Angst” (71-79) and Cixous’s essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1983).

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<sup>7</sup> Ibtihal Salem, Interview with author, Cairo, 10 May 1992.

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