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Translation: *Isis: A Play in Two Acts* by Nawal El-Saadawi

Nina Youkhanna

Translator's Note

“By repeating the past, I’m molding and transforming it, an impossible act.”

– Kathy Acker, *Don Quixote*, p. 49

If simulacrum is a cure for Anglo-American women writers’ patriarchal hangovers—as Jennifer Komorowski’s enlightening essay on Kathy Acker argues—then how would their Arab counterparts fare with such radical experimentation? This pressing question began a long search that finally led me to Nawal El-Saadawi’s play, *Isis*, which will be the fulcrum of comparison in my response to Komorowski’s article. Nawal El-Saadawi is a renowned and controversial Egyptian author and feminist who has written non-fiction, novels, and short stories that examine women’s place in Muslim society and critique patriarchal oppression in all its forms. El-Saadawi’s *Isis* (1986) is not only a re-evaluation of the mythical eponymous Egyptian goddess but also a re-writing of another play titled *Isis* (first published in 1955) by her male compatriot and fellow writer Tawfiq al-Hakim (1898-1987). In the introduction to her play, El-Saadawi argues that the goddess Isis has not be given her due as a woman who represented justice and truth but has been, instead, portrayed

as the ideal faithful wife whose only mission was to resurrect her murdered husband, Osiris. She also critiques al-Hakim for naming his play *Isis* yet silencing his eponymous heroine when male characters engage in important philosophical discussions. El-Saadawi’s play, thus, serves as a simulacrum—as defined by Komorowski—in two ways. First, El-Saadawi, though claiming that she is merely rendering to us the “original” historical version of *Isis*, produces instead a “false pretender” (Komorowski 50) imbued with an unmistakable feminist message directed at the author’s oppressive, patriarchal society. Second, El-Saadawi subverts the privileged position of her fellow male writer by inverting his interpretation of the myth of *Isis* and creating “an image without resemblance” (Deleuze 357). Through this twofold simulacrum, El-Saadawi, like Acker, opens a fissure—a line of flight—through which becoming-woman becomes possible.

The play is, admittedly, imperfect in its chaotic structure and oversaturation of themes, which include critiques of monotheistic religions, political regimes, tyranny, corruption, and female circumcision. The story begins with the sun god Ra proclaiming his autocratic rule in heaven and on earth after defeating the goddess Nut. Ra is essentially modeled after Arab dictators who de-

mand absolute submissiveness of their subjects and punish any resistance with fire and fury. Set, who is Isis and Osiris's brother, sides with Ra and requests the kingdom of earth as his prize. He must first get rid of his brother Osiris, the current king and husband of Isis, which he does easily and ruthlessly while also hoping to win Isis's heart. Isis, dejected and distraught after her husband's murder, resurrects Osiris and produces a son (Horus) with him only to see him killed again by Set, who cuts his body into pieces and scatters them all over Egypt. The play ends with Set being accused of murder in a public court. Horus exacts revenge by cutting off Set's testicles. Isis, because she is a merciful goddess, decides that that is punishment enough and lets Set live.

The two excerpts I have translated below speak, mainly, to the simulacral nature of the play. The first section—from Act 1, Scene 3—is a conversation between Isis and Maat (the personification of order, truth, and justice) in which they discuss how to respond to Ra's despotic regime. Maat advocates acceptance and defeat, but Isis, refusing to believe Osiris' death, views action as the only possible solution. The most fascinating part of this discussion is the goddesses' argument about the writer's place in society. Maat, an author, claims that her job is either to record what she sees or to engage in creative writing that is unconnected to reality. Politics is not her forte or her concern. Isis vehemently rejects this position, maintaining that every written word is a stance and that silence only serves to condone injustice. Maat is indicative of many Arab women writers

who, feeling that feminism is an extreme Western idea, simply content themselves with "neutrality." Isis, on the other hand, subverts patriarchal limitations placed on women by maintaining the power of feminist writing and art. Remarkably, Maat, the goddess of order, embodies the calmness of cold reason while Isis speaks with a forceful rage that provides her character with more dimension. It is imperative to note the identical discussion topic (the artist's place in society) as it appears in Tawfiq al-Hakim's play, where the interlocutors are Tut and Mastat, two male characters. El-Saadawi's play, in this instance, becomes an image that does not resemble the copy because she displaces the discussion from its masculine context to station it between two women. Defamiliarizing the words "artist" and "writer" exposes the masculine monopoly placed on creativity and cultural influence.

The second excerpt translated below—from Act 1, Scene 4—reveals El-Saadawi's play as a "false pretender" that challenges pre-existing representations of women in history. In this scene, Set and Isis come face to face and enact an archetypal battle of the sexes. Set, the misogynistic masculine villain who embodies evil and injustice, acts as a mouthpiece for the trope of ideal womanhood (beauty, stupidity, obedience, docility, and faithfulness) and reiterates patriarchal clichés (why women should stay at home, and why they must be controlled by men). El-Saadawi does not shy away from those ignorant and revolting opinions; instead, she faces them sardonically (much like Acker in *Don Quixote*) and

opens, through them, a space for a woman's voice to emerge in Isis's reply. Isis challenges Set's bigotry by summoning and exemplifying the ideals of virtue, honour, and justice, which are typically considered masculine interests. She breaks the boundaries of feminine representation, usually limited to wife and mother, and becomes a revolutionary philosopher and human activist. Much like Acker in Komorowski's analysis, El-Saadawi creates a woman who defies the feminine image created in male texts by speaking as a "new type of human, not just a new type of woman" (Komorowski 55).

To answer my initial question, then, El-Saadawi's work suggests that it is possible for Arab woman to use the simulacral as a subversive cure by which they can challenge the hegemony of "original" male texts and create new lines of expression for an empowered feminine voice. It is important to note, however, that El-Saadawi is one of the most radical feminist writers in the Arab world, and few others have dared to challenge the highly esteemed male canonical texts or their patriarchal values.

Isis: A Play in Two Acts

Act 1, Scene 4 (El-Saadawi 43-47)

Isis's house.

The darkness of the long and silent night.

Still, the voice of the mother echoes like the faint wind calling, "Isis ... Isis ..."

The light, little by little, exposes Isis's face while she sits in front of her house wearing mourning clothes. Sad, silent, proud, she gazes at the horizon. Near her sits Maat, sad and silent also.

Isis moves her head as if listening to the [mother's] call.

Isis: I hear a voice calling me, a voice that resembles Osiris's voice. Yes, it's his voice ... his voice still rings in my ears and calls to me. Osiris is not dead, Osiris lives ...

Maat: (*weakly and dejectedly*) It's the sound of the wind, the sound of air blowing from afar. Osiris is dead, Isis. Osiris is dead. Set killed him. We must admit this reality.

Isis: What reality, Maat, goddess of truth and justice, what reality? Don't you hear his voice?! Don't you hear? Listen ...

The mother's call echoes softly like a quiet wind. Isis hears it but Maat does not.

Maat: I don't hear anything. It's the sound of the wind. Osiris is dead, Isis. The god of beneficence is dead, and Nut the goddess of heaven is dead, and Maat the goddess of justice is dead. Nothing is left except this Maat, a woman ... merely a woman. I'm not longer a goddess. I no longer own even my freedom, and my heart is broken ...

Isis: (*in pain*) I don't like hearing this dejected and weak voice. You are still the goddess of justice, Maat. And my mother Nut is still the goddess of heaven, and Osiris is still the god of beneficence and kindness. And I, Isis, am still the goddess Isis. There is no power in the heavens or on earth that can defeat us as long as we do not want to be defeated. Humans, Maat, can only be defeated from within, let alone the gods!

Maat: (*dejectedly*) Woman is no longer even [considered] human. The god Ra has ordered her to subordination and submissiveness. There is nothing left for us except peeling onions and breeding children

like rabbits and cats.

Isis: (*angrily*) I do not like to hear this dejected and weak voice. Dejection is death and they want death for us.

Maat: I do not see any hope in the horizon.

Isis: As long as we live, we create hope. We are still alive, and as long as we live, hope lives.

Maat: Us alone? You and me? Even my colleagues and my fellow women writers have abandoned us. Set has seduced them with money and [high] positions, and there only a rare and few scrupulous ones left. And even those are silent and fear Set's tyranny, and do nothing except blow on reed pipes.¹ We must concede to reality and not live in delusion. And you, Isis, goddess of reason, you cannot remain living in delusion like this. Osiris is dead. This is a fact. Set killed him. This is a fact. Set has triumphed over us, triumphed with weapons and daggers and violence. Triumphed with injustice, bribery and pillage. Triumphed with every despicable method, but he still triumphed and we must admit defeat and give up.

Isis: Admitting defeat is something, and giving up is something else. My mother, Nut, was defeated, but she did not give up. My mother died while resisting. And we too, we must resist until the last breath.

Maat: And would Set let us resist? He follows us everywhere and terrorizes anyone who communicates with us. We no longer see anyone. No one visits us. No one comes near us, not even Tut and Mastat. We haven't seen either since Osiris died. Everyone is afraid, and everyone is silent.

Isis: And you, Maat, are you silent? Are you afraid?!

Maat: I'm not afraid. But I possess only pen and words,² and I have no concerns with what Set is doing or with politics. I will write on matters of philosophy or write poems and stories...

Isis: But you are the goddess of truth and justice. Don't you have faith in truth and justice?

Maat: Faith is in my heart, and faith means love. I love justice, and that is enough for me.

1 Figuratively, this phrase suggests "a futile action" or "something done in vain."

2 Literally, "I'm the owner of pen and intellect."

Isis: Love that does not lead to action is nothing but a hollow feeling. And the writer, man or woman, who does not seek justice is nothing but a siren blowing air into a reed pipe.

Maat: I am a neutral writer, and I am content with recording only.

Isis: A word, when you write it down, is no longer neutral. Because a word is a stance. You think that you are neutral because you do not stand with Set or against him. But your “neutral” position, ultimately, sides with Set. You know that he is oppressing and killing, and [yet] you stay silent. And this silence of yours helps him to continue this oppression and murder. You are not neutral, as you imagine. You are aligned with Set. Aligned with him in a negative and weak manner. Your position is alignment and not neutrality.

Maat: (*angrily*) No! I am not with Set.

Isis: But you are not against him either.

Maat: I am against him in my heart. Every night I pray and supplicate the gods of beneficence to dethrone [his] tyranny.

Isis: This is the position of the weak who are incapable of action.

Maat: I am weak and incapable, and you too are weak and incapable. But you live in delusion and fantasy, and you think that you are strong and able to create miracles. You think you can resurrect Osiris after his death. Tear away this delusion and live in reality. Osiris is dead. Yes, dead!

Isis: No! He is not dead. Osiris is the god of beneficence, and gods do not die, and goodness cannot be gone from this world. Osiris, the god of kindness, lives in my heart and in the heart of every kind human. Osiris is the Nile. His blessings extend to the people and the earth. Osiris lives in every green, fruitful tree, in every dew drop, in every mind, in every child’s smile, in every song. Osiris is love, beauty, virtue, and tranquility.

Isis falls silent. Maat seems in pain. She wipes away her tears in silence.

Maat: (*drying her tears*) Osiris ... was kindness and tranquility. Ever since he left, my heart has not known peace.

Isis is silent and sad.

Maat: Set will not be satisfied with what has happened, Isis. He will not cease [this] evil. He will not calm down until he possesses you too. And the only way ahead now is to flee and hide away from him.

Isis: I will not flee. I will confront him with the accusation of murder. I will confront him face to face. (*She retreats.*) But I hate his face. I don't like seeing him. I will only see him when goodness is dispelled from my being. I never loved him. He never excited in me anything but feelings of hatred and aversion—the opposite of Osiris. Osiris used to excite in me the most beautiful things: love, justice, mercy, beauty, and virtue. But Set excites the ugliest things in me: anger, evil, hatred. He strips me of all my virtues and reflects on me all his vices. The evil features of his face reflect on my face. His anger and hatred pass on to me as if by contagion. I see him only when evil has possessed my body and my mind. I do not like to see him. He makes me hate myself and hate my angry face in the mirror. And hate my body that trembles with the desire for revenge that, like a cold shudder, crawls ... like death it crawls ... I hate him like death. I wish I could close my fingers around his neck, press on it, and press and press until he breathes his last breath. He turns me from Isis the merciful goddess to Isis the murderer.

Act 1, Scene 6 (El-Saadawi 80-82, 83-85)

Isis has been stripped of her house, property, and clothes. She wears a loose robe like the one worn by poor peasants. Set shows up wearing his armour, his swords, and gigantic shoes made of metal.

Isis: I remember since childhood that my mother, Nut, used to say that the virtue that characterizes the just ruler is more preferable to her than the bull he sacrifices. The god Ra has announced that he is the absolute ruler in the heavens after Nut, and it cannot be, dear brother, that a regime is overturned without [all] its values and morals being overturned with it—one of which is virtue.

Set: There was no virtue in your mother Nut's reign. Woman lived with freedom and let her hair down.³ Children traced their lineage through their mothers, and they inherited her, and the father was almost unknown. Even the greatest god, Ra, the sun god, knew only his mother!

3 Literally, “she walked with her hair loose,” meaning she could do whatever she wanted.

Isis: And what about the law of virtue in the reign of the great king Set?!

Set: That an honourable woman should be killed if she is caught in the night with another man! Fidelity and loyalty to the husband is [her] honour and virtue, and a woman has only one husband.

Isis: (*sarcastically*) And what's [left] for man? The virtue of fertilizing all earthly women?!

Set: If a woman knows a man other than her husband, the father will not be able to know his children. And if the father doubts his children, then how can he bequeath his property and throne to them?

Isis: So, only those with property and thrones are in need of the law of virtue?

Set: Of course! How can someone who is not my son inherit my throne? The sons of slaves do not inherit anything, so it is not necessary for the father to know his sons, and women slaves are incapable of virtue. However, women with an ancestry of kings and gods like you, Isis, can adorn themselves with virtue.

Isis: (*sarcastically*) Like being adorned with precious gems and bangles of gold and ruby?

Set: Yes! How much more beautiful do precious gems look on the breast of an honourable woman who is loyal to her husband?

Isis: And how much more beautiful does a man's breast look if he adorned himself with justice, virtue, and honour.

Set: Yes, of course!

Isis: So, then, does a man's honour differ from a woman's honour? Does virtue differ from one person to another?

Set: Yes. No ... no ... no, of course not. Honour is honour and virtue is virtue, but if a man is unfaithful to his wife, that does not affect the inheritance because he [still] knows his children. But if a woman is unfaithful to her husband, then it is a crime.

Isis: Virtue, if it does not have one measure for all people, would not be virtue but a slavish and binary law—it gives freedom to the masters and imposes shackles on the slaves.

Set: The world is divided into masters and slaves. This is nature. Equality is contrary to nature. Look at your fingers! (*He holds Isis's hand and opens her fingers.*) Look, your fingers are not all equal [in length]!

[...]

[Set passionately professes his love to Isis, who spurns him and reaffirms her devotion to Osiris.]

[...]

Set: The laws of the god Ra are the best laws, and his holy book contains all the virtues and ideals. Have you read it?

Isis: Of course I have read it. He only talks about his holiness and his greatness and his supernatural strength and his burning anger and his intense revenge on anyone who casts doubt on his existence or does not obey him. I did not read a single word on justice among people. Instead, he divides people into masters and slaves. As for women, they have no place for him, neither in heaven nor on earth!

Set: We have not known in all our history a law that ennoble woman like the great god Ra's laws. What did woman take from authority and from the throne? What did our mother Nut, goddess of heaven, do? Her mind was busy all night and day with philosophy, religion, politics, and power struggles. We did not see her. I was denied a mother's love as a child. And my father was denied a wife's care. What did my mother gain in her life except exhaustion and misery and battles and wars? A woman was not created for such a cruel and difficult life. A woman is gentle and her body is weak. Men's bodies are stronger.

Isis: If the one with the strongest body must rule, then why are we not ruled by mules? No doubt, a mule's body is stronger than yours, Set.

Set: A woman was not created to rule. A woman was created to be a loving mother and a delicate and docile wife—to wait for her husband with an affectionate smile, a bright face, and a soft and per-

fumed body. Yes, this is the ideal wife. Nothing occupies her mind and her heart except her husband. How I wish you could be this kind of wife for me, Isis, and give birth to a child who will inherit my throne. I wish I could put the crown of woman[hood] on your head. I would make you the crowned queen in my house, and I would enclose you in my arms every night. How much I want you Isis. I want you to be my wife and my lover. You are a beautiful woman with a gentle heart. You were not created for heavenly struggles and earthly wars. You were not created to wear these coarse clothes. You were created to wear silk and sleep in bed and leave the battles to me. I love it when you are this docile and obedient woman. (*He caresses her head and her hair and tries to embrace her, but she moves away from him.*)

Isis: Obedient?! Do you know what it means for me to obey you? It means that I should nullify my reason and my thoughts. I should become a body without a mind and [let] you become my mind and my head. You do not want me as I am and do not love me as I am—a complete human, mind and body. [Instead,] you want a pliant and weak woman, a lifeless body that is devoid of everything except adornments and perfume and jewellery. A stupid wife who waits for your return in order to fill your stomach with food and satiate your appetite for rape and lets you be a despotic and intolerant god. In front of you, she feigns stupidity and the inability to debate with you so as to satiate your sense of grandiosity and your dominance and divinity complexes. This is the wife and lover that you want, and she is definitely not me. She is not Isis, the goddess of reason and wisdom.

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