

Men, Women and God(s):

*Nawal El Saadawi and
Arab Feminist Poetics*

by Fedwa Malti-Douglas

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273 pages.

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Malti-Douglas's in-depth analysis of the work, life and criticism inspired by a leading Arab feminist, often called "the Simone de Beauvoir of the Arab world," is must reading for anyone wishing to learn more about an Arab pioneer of the women's movement, who is also an accomplished novelist, playwright, physician, and a beautiful human being. Malti-Douglas's new study greatly contributes to our understanding of the complex work of this stimulating and controversial woman writer.

Malti-Douglas addresses El-Saadawi's polemical nature. Why does she elicit so much love and hatred? Why does so much misunderstanding surround her work? Is it due to fear, ignorance, or something else? Malti-Douglas notes that El-Saadawi's critics have often read her work only in bits and pieces, choosing to be picky about certain details while ignoring the totality. Consequently, these critics are unable to appreciate her literary and intellectual complexity. Malti-Douglas also notices how very little has been written on this seminal literary figure, in spite of the fact that El-Saadawi has given us some of the most explosive feminist narratives of the second half of this century, boldly addressing sexual violence, female genital mutilation, stereotypes which harm women in

the Arab world, theological questions, and other politically charged themes.

Malti-Douglas focuses on El-Saadawi's pivotal concern with patriarchy in the social, religious, and political spheres as they are related to gender issues, tracing the links between these scholarly concerns and her political activism. This aspect of El-Saadawi's work has received attention in the past, but what makes Malti-Douglas' analysis unique is her interpretation of these interactions as well as her sensitive and successful depiction and revelation of El-Saadawi's linguistic games, literary allusions, and erudite religio-legal intertextual references. I had already admired this facet of El-Saadawi's writing in her preface to her most recently translated novel, *The Innocence of the Devil*, but I would have found this dimension rather hermetic were it not for Malti-Douglas excellent presentation and interpretation of a text I had failed to see as based on close readings of the Islamic tradition. This book, *Men, Women and God(s)*, goes many steps further in showing us the connections between El-Saadawi's work and her Arabo-Islamic heritage. It is an eye-opener.

Malti-Douglas raises important questions which have universal ramifications. She discusses the debate between art and political engagement, observing that, contrary to what many critics have claimed, El-Saadawi handles both successfully. The question of medicine and its impact on society and the body is analyzed through *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*. The physician and the prostitute, a pairing divided by class but united by gender, constitute the theme of *Woman at Point Zero*, El-Saadawi's most widely read and carefully studied novel. In another novel, *The Circling Song*, the problematic pair of brother and sister is united by class but divided by gender.

Among the most interesting chapters of the book is Malti-Douglas's analysis of *The Fall of*

the Imam, or the "rewriting of patriarchy." She demonstrates how El-Saadawi challenges all three monotheistic patriarchal traditions and superbly plays intertextual games with the literary and religious heritage. Her analysis of the references to all three Abrahamic religions is well rendered and forceful. The chapter entitled "Between Heaven and Hell," which examines *The Innocence of the Devil*, is a continuation and expansion of her preface to that book, already mentioned above. Here, Malti-Douglas argues that, even more than *The Fall of the Imam*, the religious text dominates, restructuring the political and social spheres. El-Saadawi's ability to tackle religion with great skill was facilitated, according to Malti-Douglas, by the Islamist movement's implantation of its cultural agenda in the region, which El-Saadawi responds to with her own feminist interpretation. She shows how El-Saadawi's deep and wide readings of the Qur'an, the Hadith, as well as secondary religious sources have helped her achieve what she sees as "El-Saadawi's *tour de force* novelistic foray into theology" (p. 119).

But El-Saadawi does not only contest patriarchal traditions found in monotheism. As Malti-Douglas shows us in "Of Goddesses and Men," this contestation is also found in her play *Isis*, whose roots, like Egypt's, are planted in polytheism or paganism. Here patriarchy, religion, sexuality and violence redefine our perception of this ancient Egyptian goddess. Even though we think *Isis* might re-institute a matriarchal order, it is patriarchy that triumphs in the end, with murders and mutilations continuing. Unlike Andrée Chedid's similar theme in such works as *Nefertiti, ou le rêve d'Akhnaton*, where the relationship of this famous historical couple gives us an example of a love able to triumph over politics, El-Saadawi does not give us such a message, nor does Malti-Douglas underline it.

Memoirs from the Women's Prison is analyzed as El-Saadawi's rite of passage at the age of fifty. Her incarceration under Sadat generated quite a literary legacy: memoirs and a play. Malti-Douglas shows us how those memoirs extend beyond the prison and are embedded in multiple layers of events, how killers and prostitutes are

made to travel in the same literary universe as political activists and veiled Muslim women, how religion and secular politics inhabit the same textual world. Finally, in her analysis of *My Travels around the World*, Malti-Douglas illustrates that El-Saadawi's text constitutes an act of transgression.

Loaded with an incredible amount of references and complementary readings, and evidencing in-depth knowledge of the various feminist, religious and political debates, Malti-Douglas's work on this important literary and political figure is an impressive scholarly work which rehabilitates El-Saadawi and gives her the honor and sensitive understanding which have long been her due.

Al-Raida welcomes reviews of books on any and all topics related to women in the contemporary Arab World.

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