

# NAWAL SAADAWI

A physician and fiction writer who has dedicated herself to the task of struggling against harmful stereotypes concerning women in the Arab world.

Nawal Saadawi is an Egyptian physician who expresses through her activities and her writings certain ideas which are generally approved by the enlightened class of women in the Arab world but which remain latent in their subconscious because of fear, inadequate experience, or lack of competence for writing.

In her works she not only speaks to the cultured elite but she also addresses ordinary men and women. For this reason she sometimes resorts to novels which arouse their interest and make her ideas more accessible to them. Out of nine books that she has published four are novels, while the rest contain historical biological and psychological studies of woman's past and present, her problems and her needs. A large part of her research is drawn from her clinic where she comes in contact with thousands of women who come to her for treatment.

The main topic she treats is women's emancipation. Though the subject is the same all through her books, the reader can find in each of them some new ideas inspired by her new experiences and extensive readings.

"Woman and Sex" is the title of one of her books which has been published three times since 1971. It contains frank and honest information about the nature and characteristics of sex in women, indicates the false concepts which have been circulated regarding this topic, and discusses the commercial aspect under which it appears in marriage contracts and in family laws which assert man's control and subjugation of woman and of the family.

The adversaries of woman's liberation exaggerate the difference between male and female in sexual structure and emotions. In fact, the differences between them are very small though they may not appear to be so. In each sex the hormones of both male and female exist but in different proportions. No man is 100% male and no woman is 100% female.

Various myths have been woven about sexuality. One of them is Freud's theory about the "penis envy" in which he attributes a girl's bitter attitude toward the other sex to the fact that she envies the boy's possession of an organ which she does not have. Early in life a girl is told that her virginity, as symbolized by the hymen, is "her most precious possession". Dr. Saadawi informs us that due to the existence of various types of hymen, one of them being elastic and uninjured by defloration, makes this membrane an unreliable evidence of chastity. She condemns the stereotyped admonitions imposed on a young girl, creating in her a state of morbid anxiety regarding sex and chastity, making her the guardian of the "family honor", while a male member of the family may be a thief, a killer or an adulterer without thereby damaging his "family honor". A girl who has been so repressed and frightened on account of her sex develops certain complexes which hamper her normal growth and make her a prey to romantic fantasies or to abnormal sexual behaviour.

Another myth related to women's biology, says Dr.

Saadawi, is the theory which says that a woman is less intelligent than a man because her brain weighs less than his. This theory has been refuted by the fact that the weight of a woman's brain in proportion to her body weight is more than that of a man's brain in proportion to his body weight.

After expounding the historical factors which led to the inferior position of woman, the author emphasizes the economic ones and concludes that a change in the politico - economic system is necessary for the promotion of woman, provided that laws and regulations be put into practice.

Saadawi notes that people's attitudes toward sexual taboos are not uniform. Some of them tend to be lenient and to forbid violence while others are exceedingly severe and savage. In primitive tribes of Africa and Arabia the circumcision of young girls is still practiced as a means of ensuring their virginity and inhibiting their sexual impulses. Marriage is generally based on materialistic interests; it is a kind of transaction or legalized prostitution. Family laws give the husband complete ownership of the wife and unrestricted power to divorce. Illegitimate children are considered as social outcasts, enjoying none of the rights of legitimate children.

Another myth that needs elimination is the traditional idea which considers love as a relation between master and slave. True love implies no ownership and no selfish interest. It is not a purely physical relation, it is not this morbid condition described by our inflamed songs, full of longing and lamentation. It is not madness, nor excessive sentimentalism, nor self-sacrifice and immolation as the romantics pretend. True love consists of mutual understanding, respect and recognition of the other person's equality, freedom and independence. "It is the highest process by which a person's physical, moral and intellectual powers are induced to perform their highest function."

Nawal Saadawi's books, as we have tried to show, derive their value not only from her daring to say what others refrain from saying but also from their reliance on both personal experience and documentation.

Her readings induce her at times to commit mistakes which other researchers have committed when they thought that a change in the political system is necessary for woman's liberation. Political regimes, whether socialist or capitalistic, have been created by men leaders and are subject to manipulation and change which upholds their own interests. In an article written by Simone de Beauvoir and quoted by WIN vol. 4, no. 2, Spring 1978, p. 82, the famous author states that socialism has not succeeded in ensuring woman's freedom. Women's condition in socialist countries is no better than in other countries. Saadawi's attitude towards sex adopts that of some Western researchers who overemphasize in it the pleasure element and claim for women an equal sharing in this pleasure. She equally gives a poetic or idealistic description of love which is a subject of controversy. It is true that real love should be free from coercion, exploitation, enslavement, affected sentimentality and other traits that destroy a person's liberty. But the feelings of longing and frustration expressed by most love poems and stories seem to show that ideal love is very rare, often of short duration, bound to vanish or to be replaced by friendship. Love, when sincere and mutual, may be a help to self-realization but it is never a substitute for it.