

Dr. Nawal el-Saadawy at Beirut University College

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Translated by Randa Abul-Husn

She is famous for her radical ideas and statements, and her name is directly associated with the Feminist movement in the Arab world. Dr. Nawal el-Saadawy needs no introduction. When she came to Beirut University College on Wednesday January 22, 1992, the auditorium was a full house and students were standing in the aisles. Needless to say, her speech aroused controversy infuriating some while asserting the points of others.

Dr. Saadawy spoke of women's rights, the women's movement in the Arab World and the place of women and their cause in the so-called new world order.

What is the relationship between the liberation of women and the new world order? What is the connection between women's liberation with medicine, arts, literature, politics, economics, religion, health, psychology, sex and medicine? Dr. Saadawy began her lecture by raising these questions to explain the relevance and importance of the women's liberation movement in the Arab World, who seems to perceive it (the movement) as irrelevant to the main structure of society. The Women's cause forms the core of society. She said: It is the cause of those who have been oppressed for centuries by the class-patriarchal system. We live in a society where authority is vertical, always coming from above. Hence Dr. Saadawy spoke of three forms of absolute authority: Religious, Political and Patriarchal. An authority which calls itself religious, regardless of whether it speaks in the name of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism or any other. It uses religion, faith, and God to create an absolute authority over the

poor, the oppressed, women and children. Then there is political authority in the government which uses political control, power and autonomy over women and men. The patriarchal authority of the father over the women, young children, and minors in the family is another powerful hindrance for women. These three forms of authority are linked, historical and responsible for slavery, later transformed into the lordship system, then into the socialist system and they (authorities) continue to prevail in various forms of modern authority systems. These authorities thrive on division and colonialism discriminating on the basis of sex, color, creed, class, language, and others. These three fundamental forms of authority are indivisible, inseparable and vertical coming from above.

Dr. Saadawy went on to illustrate her point. The purpose of my trip to Lebanon was to participate in a panel discussion entitled "Civil Society in the Arab world and its Role in Achieving Democracy". Sadly, none of the women in the panel were asked to present a paper. Furthermore, this morning I was discussing the conference with one of my male colleagues and I asked why he did not discuss the issue of women in his paper which dealt with power systems and laws of obedience in the Arab world? Why didn't he include the condition of women in the issue of obedience? His reply was that he did not perceive any problem for women, and felt that the problems of women are the same as those of men. It is rather ironic that the educated ones who have profound knowledge and understanding of the structures of

the Arab society, its political forces, political struggles, regimes, foreign and other forms of interferences, development and planning, do not acknowledge the rights of women. This kind of awareness is suppressed in the name of obedience and traditional sex-roles. In the name of obedience of the female sex, the minds of children are socialized and women's potentials and rights are denied. Consequently, women in the Arab world have not reached nor acquired political power which would allow them to assert their rights and have effective participation in society. Women are still weak and divided even when they form public associations. I was imprisoned by President Sadat at one point and when I came out of prison, I felt that women must have political power. I admire their strong involvement in humanitarian organizations, but what women really need to get their rights is political authority. The women's cause is a political cause par excellence. There is a need for a political movement with a multi-disciplinary approach i.e. involvement in national and international politics, economics, medicine, psychology, sex, and other social arenas, and the connection between them. Dr. Saadawy points out the importance of in depth knowledge of one's history and society in order to act constructively. She said: We cannot understand the women's movement and its many achievements in the Arab World unless we thoroughly reread our history. And we cannot understand the cause unless we reread the religions, understand national and international politics, women's psychology,



discrimination and other social forces.

Eversince, the women's struggle in the Arab world began, it has been oppressed. For if women are to revolt the regimes will fall, because women are the core of society and the oppressed and enslaved population. It is said that the Arab women's movement is a western creation. That is not true. The movement in the Arab world is historical. Arab women are historical in that sense. My mother went to jail because she protested against British occupation. My grandmother, a peasant and illiterate woman, protested in the streets too. That is Feminism! The movement today is a continuation of its historical existence. We are not a creation of the West as the Leftist Arab ideology claims. Hence, the Leftists discredit us by claiming that women's rights will be **AUTOMATICALLY** secured once society is reformed. They criticize us when we raise the issue of sex and advise us to concentrate

on class struggles and economic problems. On the other hand, The Arab Right Wing accuse us of being communists because we link between economic injustice and sexual discrimination. Why? This linkage is a historical fact and the two forms of injustice cannot be separated. In short, all the Arab regimes are against the women's movement because our claims threaten them, for we speak against the class system, patriarchy, internal and external colonialism and other injustices. Therefore, we are historical in that we have always revolted against the systems. We do not revolt against class and patriarchy separately. We know that class struggles do exist and are healthy and that it is a natural trend for the poor to revolt against the rich when there is socio-economic injustice. Likewise, it is normal for women to revolt when they are secluded and oppressed by religious authority, patriarchy, political and other social forms of authority. It is our right to be angry.

What the women's movement needs is proper balanced education of the younger generation. Women need to be creative in society, because creativity mobilizes change. Our Arab society holds the ancient as sacred, hence, a father secludes his daughter and other female kin by virtue of protection, care and honor; and the minds of children are controlled and conditioned according to these values. Therefore, we need a revolt which begins at the children's level. We are in need of democracy. Democracy is not created by the political regime, it is created by the people. President Sadat of Egypt had me imprisoned for this statement, he told me that there was democracy and I believed him, so I went to jail. Furthermore, the Arab Women Solidarity Association in Egypt was shut down last July and my books and publications have been banned because we spoke out against the Gulf war. Why did they shut you down? You were not involved in any political

party? I am asked. We were discriminated against because we opposed the Gulf war. We were against war.

Women in the Arab world must unite. Unless we can reach Arab unity we cannot achieve anything. The Arab world has become the most dangerous area. It used to be the Soviet Union and now that its threat is removed, the Arab world became the new arena. Those who hold nuclear weapons are the ruling and colonial forces in the world. So how can we confront this American war machine and colonial power. Justice does not come from conscience and humanitarian intentions, it comes through power.

Dr. Saadawy concluded her lecture by touching on the political changes taking place in Algeria. She expressed her surprise that the first item on the agenda of the new regime was to force women to wear the veil and a covering robe in public, rather than address the acute problems of unemployment and other grievances in the country. She then criticized the fundamentalists' insistence on veiling women. If the veil's purpose is to protect women from the glances of men, then how are women guilty of indescency? Therefore, the men are the ones who should cover their eyes and wear the veil. She noted that these are human interpretations and laws in the name of religion. One of the spectators protested against the last statement saying that the Koran and Islam are

not against women's rights but support and call upon women to work, get an education and participate in societal development. Dr. Saadawy agreed stating that the interpretation not the Islamic religion are questionable. She clarified that these practices do not represent faith and honor. Faith to Nawal Saadawy is in the soul not in the appearance.

Dr. Saadawy's lecture stimulated loud applause of support and significant discontent from those who opposed her hard-line feminism. Extremist or not, Dr. Saadawy is a mobilizer. Her writings, her actions, her protest and her ideas stimulate women and men to think about women's rights more intently and for more than just a fleeting moment •