

Searching

by Nawal El Saadawy (*)

Reviewed by Dr. Evelyne Accad

The well-known Egyptian novelist, physician, psychiatrist, Nawal El Saadawy, whose achievements were made in spite of the discrimination she encountered within her society, has always amazed us with her courage and her relentless struggle against the harmful stereotypes of women in the Arab world. Once more, with this poignant "search," she raises important questions and problems plaguing Arab society and most other societies around the globe. It is no wonder that this first publication in English of her novel *Searching*, originally written in Arabic, has already won critical acclaim from the judges for 1991's Feminist Book Fortnight.

On a first level, *Searching* tells the story of Fouada (meaning heart in Arabic) who is searching for her missing lover, Farid, when he fails to come to their weekly appointment in a restaurant overlooking the Nile. Fouada keeps trying to call his home, but as the telephone rings unanswered, she tries to come to grips with his disappearance and with her loss.

On another level, the search is a pretext for a much deeper yearning into the significance of life. Fouada realizes that she is stuck in a dead-end ministry job and feels that there must be more meaningful avenues which would improve the world. But where and how? Like *A Woman at Point Zero*, another one of El Saadawy's novels available

in English, *Searching* tells the painful journey of a woman into her inner self and into the limitations which society places upon women who want to rise above the pettiness and the walls surrounding their lives. In both novels, El Saadawy indicts society and shows the need for change and reform. Despite their similarities, the female characters in each novel have different class backgrounds, and the restrictions placed on their lives are different. Firdaws, in *A Woman at Point Zero* reaches a dead end in all aspects of her life, while Fouada, relatively free compared to Firdaws, goes on dreaming even when her dreams appear unreachable.

It is not by coincidence that El-Saadawy gives Fouada a job in a ministry, like herself before being dismissed for publishing a controversial book about women and sex, translated as *The Hidden Face of Eve*, Beacon Press, 1981). Furthermore, Fouada, like El-Saadawy, lives in Cairo where she is confronted with pollution and an overpopulated city plagued by hunger and other major catastrophies of today's world. Fouada wants to be a scientist and opens a chemistry lab, hoping to make "a chemical discovery to eliminate hunger, a new gas for millions to breathe instead of food." (p.93) Fouada refuses a banal existence, "She would not simply live and die, and the world remains the same." (p.103) So she goes on searching for that "unique idea" which does not seem to emerge because of the "thick walls" which

surround it. The similarities between Fouada and the author reveal El Saadawy's plight with the problems that haunt her and that she confronts every day.

Fouada's search becomes more desperate when her lover Farid appears to have vanished and as her dreams seem unattainable. Finally, she discovers that Farid has been imprisoned leaving her these words of hope which end the novel: "Do not grieve, Fouada, do not weep. The words are in the wind beyond the walls, alive and entering hearts with the very air. A day will surely come when the walls will fall and voices once again be freed to speak." (p.114)

El Saadawy knows how to bring out the real issues, the ones that need to be addressed and dealt with if our world is to survive. In this novel, she does it with renewed imagination, creative ideas, descriptions and images that are very effective and show a maturity in style and thought *

(*) Nawal El Saadawy, *Searching*. Translated by Shirley Eber. London and New Jersey, Zed Books. 1991. 114 pages.

