

Special Features

NAWAL AL-SAADAWI: RENOWNED EGYPTIAN FEMINIST

By Myriam Sfeir, Assistant Editor

It is Arab women alone who can formulate the theory, the ideas and the modes of struggle needed to liberate themselves from all oppression. It is their efforts alone that can create a new Arab woman, alive with her own originality, capable of choosing what is most genuine and valuable in her cultural tradition, as well as assimilating the progress of science and modern thought. Conscious Arab women who no longer live under the illusion that freedom will come as a gift from the Heavens, or be bestowed upon them by the chivalry of men, but understand that the road to freedom is long and arduous, and that the price to pay is heavy. Such women alone are those that will lead others to total emancipation. Such Arab women will not hesitate because they know that, if the price to pay for freedom is heavy, the price of slavery is even heavier. (Nawal Al-Saadawi)

I met Dr. Nawal Al-Saadawi and her husband Dr. Sherif Hetata on their last visit to Beirut. I never expected my interview to be so informal and unconventional. It was more like a group discussion² in which we exchanged ideas, and debated many themes such as femininity, masculinity, sexuality, virginity, circumcision, love, marriage, freedom, etc. The article is a summary of what we talked about.

According to Dr. Al-Saadawi femininity is neither inherent nor innate, it is something we acquire within society. In her view, women are trained to be wholly preoccupied with their appearance and clothing at the expense of their mind and intellect. She questions why men are not obsessed with their appearance and wonders why women accept to be used as sexual objects: "Because Arab girls are reared for the role of marriage, the supreme function of women in society, they are constantly reminded that their appearance should adhere to the prescribed standard demanded by men. Education, work, and a career are considered secondary matters which should in no way divert her from her primary function as a wife whose job is to cook, serve her husband, and look after her children."

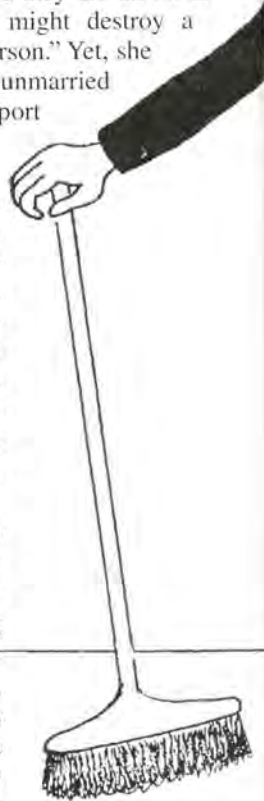
Al-Saadawi believes that the institution of marriage oppresses women who are "sold by" their parents for a *mahr* (dowry). They become the property of their husbands who buy them with a *mukadem* (in advance payment) and can later sell them with a *muakhar* (deferred payment). According to her, 90% of marriages are defective and hollow. In marriage women's personalities are crushed and their voices muted. Women are often too scared to express their opinions because they are terrified of divorce. According to Al-Saadawi husbands will never respect their wives if the latter do not value

themselves and fight for their rights. She affirms that self-respect and dignity have nothing to do with one's educational background or profession. She recounts that many battered women (doctors, writes, etc.) accept their fate and stay with their husbands, even though they are economically independent, because they are too scared of divorce. In contrast, her mother who was economically dependent on her father for her upkeep threatened to leave him when he once shouted at her and told him, "Don't ever do that again. I would rather go hungry and work as a maid than be treated disrespectfully."

Al-Saadawi insists that saying "no" is important: "I refused to accept any discrimination based on my sex and wholeheartedly strove and insisted on defending my rights." Al-Saadawi holds that she learned that from her mother: "I endured a lot in my two previous marriages. My two ex husbands were colleagues of mine. Prior to our marriage they accepted the fact that I was a doctor. Yet after we were married, they asked me to choose between them and my profession. I chose my profession. My relationship with Sherif is special because we are neither engrossed nor enthralled with each other. We both have space to pursue and accomplish our goals."

According to Al-Saadawi, many women compromise and marry any man who proposes because they are afraid of loneliness. She affirms that "loneliness might destroy a woman, but it might give birth to a new person." Yet, she asserts that when a woman opts to remain unmarried in our society she also needs a lot of support from her parents."

Sexuality, according to Al-Saadawi, is a very important issue. "Sex is politics, and these are inseparable." Given that it is a taboo subject, a lot of ignorance surrounds it. She explains that the moral values prevalent in our society ought to be applied to all its members irrespective of sex, color, or social class. So she asserts that if virginity is required of women it should also be enforced on men. She questions the significance of circumcision affirming that "women's private organs are extracted in order to transform them into tools for serving the patriarchal order. Women are denied the right to pleasure and their bodies are prevented from functioning normally." She asserts that because women's issues are world political issues, women should comprehend world politics and Arab politics and try to link them together to be able to understand why they are circumcized. Trying to understand why



women are oppressed socially, economically, politically, and sexually will enable them to understand their present situation and try and change it."

Because virginity is a prerequisite for all women, those who engage in underground pre-marital relations later undergo operations to repair their hymens (hymenorrhaphy). In resorting to deceitful measures, women are under the illusion that they are protecting themselves. "Women who lie carry a heavy burden for they live their lives deceiving their husbands everynight. This causes distress and totally destroys their personalities." Al-Saadawi holds that society will never change unless women publically admit having had pre-marital sexual relations. "According to her, women should reject men who do not appreciate the truth and indirectly coerce them into lying. Going underground is not the solution.

Al-Saadawi questions the significance of a marriage contract and claims: "We have transformed marriage from an honorable act to one whose legitimacy stems from a piece of paper." What makes a relationship

honorable? What gives legitimacy to a relationship? Is it the marriage contract or the relationship itself?

Al-Saadawi strongly condemns the contradictions, double standards, and fake morality which feature in all aspects of our lives. She criticizes the prevalent standards used by society to judge virtue, morality, honor, freedom, etc. According to her, contradiction is corruption and if religion, society, and the laws indirectly advocate these discrepancies they ought to be altered. "My grandmother, who was not religious in the traditional sense of the word, was strongly criticised and attacked by her fellow villagers because she refused to wear the veil. For me, my illiterate grandmother related to God and comprehended religion, although she has never read the Koran, better than anyone. The veil does not render one pious and virtuous. A woman can, at the same time, be veiled and flirt with men and seduce them."

Al-Saadawi favours civil marriage and recounts that in Egypt all laws are civil except those related to marriage. She questions why this is the case and claims that once women, who constitute half of society, unite and organize themselves socially and politically they will be able to bring about major transformations and enforce a civil law.

Al-Saadawi holds that women are armed with ignorance instead of knowledge. They ought to educate themselves and search for answers related to all the problems afflicting them. She warns that rereading the history of women is not an easy endeavor given that it will, most probably, not conform with the prevalent discourse which is hierarchical, patriarchal and based on class. According to her the patriarchal nature of the Arab society coupled with its hierarchical and class system have succeeded in excluding women from active participation in all fields. "Women were deprived of using their intellect and were transformed into mutilated bodies whose sole aim is to cater to men's needs." The social institutions and laws regulating Arab women's lives in marriage and divorce must be changed if we are to move on, affirms Al-Saadawi. "Freedom for women will never be achieved unless they unite into an organized political force powerful enough and conscious enough and dynamic enough to truly represent half of society."

True beauty is that of a woman who is herself, who does not forge another personality in order to please her husband lest he divorce [s] her or abandon [s] her for another woman, who does not put on an appearance which is not really hers in order to catch a husband, and who refuses to distort her behavior, her desires and her conception of happiness to satisfy the norms of society in the hope that people will not fight her, or accuse her of being abnormal. Beauty comes, above all, from the mind, from the health of the body and the completeness of the self. It does not draw its existence from the size of the buttocks, or the deposits of fat beneath curves, or the layers of cosmetics, that cover an underlying anxiety and a lack of self-confidence. (Nawal Al-Saadawi)



Picture credit: Daiffa, Women's Algeria (drawings)

DR. SHERIF HETATA ON HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH NAWAL AL-SAADAWI

Even though I was a leftist who believed in equality and in the elimination of all forms of discrimination based on color, religion, and class, I failed to recognize the discrimination and oppression women are subjected to from day to day. Nawal lifted the veil that was blocking my vision and for the first time in my life, I could see clearly. I realized that I had spent my life calling for equality, advocating freedom, and chanting slogans of democracy and, at the same time, practicing discrimination in my public and private life without even being aware of it.

Nawal valued the principles and beliefs that were entrenched within her to the extent that I knew I had to change if we wanted to build a life together. When Nawal and I first got married we had a lot of conflicts and arguments because in spite of my willingness to change, such change could not possibly come overnight. Yet, gradually I managed to rid myself of the deeply rooted stereotypical concepts which I acquired over the years. We succeeded in overcoming our differences because we both wanted our relationship to grow and mature. I changed because I loved Nawal and because I wanted our relationship to be egalitarian. We are engaged in constant dialogue, we talk about things, we support each other, and depend on each other.

Nawal and I shared everything: I helped her with the house work and we reared our children together. My friends used to look down upon me. To them I was a tool in

the hands of my wife, and in their view this deprived me of masculinity. They were shocked by the fact that I cooked, cleaned, changed diapers, etc. At first I was affected by their reactions; I was shy and ashamed of helping Nawal in the housework. Yet, with time I changed, and my friend's outlooks changed too. Nowadays when my friends visit me and I'm busy in the kitchen, I invite them to come and sit with me. They have come to realize that our relationship is special and unique. Nawal and I paid a heavy price in defense of our beliefs for everything worth fighting for exacts a high price. Our inner strength and power sprang from the very special relationship we shared.

Men and women ought to unite and join forces. Our society would acquire immense power if there is equal treatment between its members, when couples work hand in hand towards a common goal, harmony, serenity, and power prevail.

ENDNOTES:

1. El Saadawi, Nawal, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*. London: Zed Books, 1980, p.xvi. (Translated and edited by Dr. Sherif Hetata).
2. Owing to time limitations I had no choice but to talk to Dr. Al-Saadawi and Dr. Hetata in the presence of other journalists.
3. El Saadawi, Nawal, *op.cit.*, p. 88.

Nawal al-Sayyid al-Saadawi was born in the village of Kafr Tahla, Egypt, on the 27th of October, 1931, near the Nile. She studied psychiatry at the Faculty of Medicine in Cairo, and received her doctorate from Cairo University in 1955. Between 1955 and 1965, she practiced as a medical doctor and psychiatrist in the University Hospital and in the Ministry of Health. Her practice in cities as well as in the countryside allowed her to deepen her understanding of matters related to Egyptian society, particularly women's condition. After receiving a degree in Public Health from Columbia University in New York in 1966, she returned to Egypt and became the Acting Director General and later the Director General of the Health Education Department in the Ministry of Health. At the time she also founded the Association for Health Education, in addition to serving as the director of a popular magazine dealing with medical information. She published al-Mar'ah wa al-Jins (Women and Sex), where she dealt openly and courageously with the controversial issue of sex, religion, and politics in 1972. In it she uncompromisingly denounced women's economic and sexual oppression. It caused so much controversy that Nawal was dismissed from her job, the magazine she ran was shut down, and her books were censored. Later, the book was reprinted in Lebanon and became widely read throughout the Arab world. Al-Saadawi is the author of six books on women in the Arab world, seven novels, six collections of short stories, two plays, and one memoir, all in Arabic, many of which have been translated into several languages, including English, French, German, Persian, Portuguese, Italian, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, and Dutch. Some of these works have been adapted for the theater in various countries. The best-known titles are: The Hidden Face of Eve, Woman at Point Zero, Two Women in One, God Dies by the Nile, Death of an Ex-Minister, She Has No Place in Paradise, and Memoirs from the Women's Prison. Her work has been crowned by two awards: the Literary Award of the Supreme Council for Arts and Social Sciences, Cairo, Egypt (1974), and the Literary Award of the Franco-Arab Friendship Association, Paris, France (1982). (Evelyn Accad, "Rebellion, Maturity and the Social Context: Arab Women's Special Contribution to Literature." Judith E. Tucker (ed.) Arab Women: Old Boundaries New Frontiers Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University 1993.)