

Nawal El Saadawi:

Better to Pay and be Free than to Pay and be Oppressed

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No Arab Woman inspires as much emotion as Nawal El-Saadawi. No woman in the Middle East has been the subject of more polemic. Certainly, no Arab woman's pen has violated as many sacred enclosures as that of Nawal El-Saadawi.
Fadwa Malti-Douglas¹

In 1998, the Humanities Division of the Lebanese American University presented on its Gulbankian Theater a major play production "The Women's Prison" based upon Nawal El Saadawi's autobiographical work *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*, presented and directed by Lena Abyad. It deals with El Saadawi's experience in prison in 1981 after the Camp David Agreement when the Egyptian government launched a large-scale arrest campaign, cracking down on political activists, which included many intellectuals who were accused of crimes against the government. El Saadawi was apprehended on September 6, 1981 where she underwent a series of interrogations and was released two months later after the assassination of President Sadat.

El Saadawi was invited to the opening of the play, and that's where I first met her with her husband Dr. Sharif Hattatta. Her thick white hair and shiny black eyes together with a candid simplicity made me feel in the presence of genuine transparency and purity. I felt that I needed no masks, preten-

sions or appearances to communicate with her. There she was lofty, sublime, charismatic, a rare being in a world of hypocrisy and appearances. She spoke her mind on women's rights without fear of intimidation or criticism, and her ardor and enthusiasm were unbounded. At the same time, I was struck by the great respect her husband, Dr. Sheriff Hetata, had for her. He was content to sit with the audience without any desire to be in the limelight. I admit I had not come across such a man who truly respects his wife and does not stifle her creative powers. This is a man who, like his wife, has devoted his life to the cause of freedom. He spent 13 years in prison and nearly two years in exile after escaping from prison. Furthermore, he is himself a writer who has published a vast number of articles and works of fiction. Indeed two of his novels were translated into English: *The Eye with an Iron Lid* (1974) and *The Net* (1974), while his memoirs entitled *Open Windows* came out in three volumes (1993, 1995, 1997).

Sometimes described as the Simone de Bouvoir of the Arab world, El Saadawi is known for her controversial views and fierce campaigns demanding equal rights for women in a male-dominated society. She has devoted her life to the cause of freedom and equality in the Arab world and has published 36 books, including her

memoirs. An ardent supporter of women's rights, El Saadawi wrote several books and novels focusing on the oppression of Arab women by ancient traditions and their treatment as sex objects in the Arab Islamic world. From the very beginning, her writings were considered controversial and dangerous for the society and were banned in Egypt and other Arab countries. Her book *Women and Sex* (1972) which dealt with the highly controversial subject of sexuality, politics and religion created a big controversy resulting in El Saadawi losing her job as Executive General Director in the Ministry of Health. Notwithstanding, El Saadawi managed eventually to re-publish her book in Lebanon, which was distributed on a large scale in the Arab world. Over the years, El Saadawi has received countless death threats and eventually required continuous police protection. Her courageous and uncompromising views make her, as Fadwa Malti-Douglas puts it, "the most visible woman in the Arab World," particularly that her writings "threaten many of the existing discourses on women in the Middle East."² She has spoken out in support of political and sexual rights for women, has fought against female genital mutilation and has worked against poverty, fundamentalism, and inequality of all kinds. After her release from prison in 1982, she founded the Arab Women's Solidarity Association (AWSA), a

3000 member group recognized by the United Nations, and dedicated to "lifting the veil from the minds" of Arab women. AWSA was the largest organization of women in the Arab world until its dissolution by the government in Egypt in 1991 following the group's criticism of the Gulf War.

Over the past few months, she has suffered increasing persecution which she refers to as "paying the price of freedom." The latest controversy started with the independent weekly newspaper *Al-Midan* which came out on March 6, 2001 with a large headline on its front page that read: "From Nawal Al-Saadawi: Pilgrimage is the remnant of idolatry." Based on this interview, she has been charged with transgressing against Islam and exhibiting scorn to it. On her part, El Saadawi has denied "scorning" Islam and has made it clear that her views have been manipulated and quoted out of context for commercial and political ends. In the newspaper interview, El Saadawi reiterates her opinions regarding the rights of women and her opposition to women wearing the veil, which implies that women are only bodies, subject to exploitation and inequality in economic and inheritance rights. In other words, she sees that such practices as wearing the veil are "not necessarily an indication of morality in the woman who wears it."³ She insists that all of these practices are in contradiction with the true spirit of Islam and the correct interpretation of the Quoranic text and accuses religious dignitaries of being obsessed with sexual matters rather than the essence of religion, which she claims to be justice, love, and equality. She also suggests that religion as it is practiced in Egypt has inherited some customs and rituals from periods of Egyptian history preceding Islam. As a result, a whole campaign of harassment and false accusation

was raised against her. Many readers wrote to the *Al-Midan* newspaper demanding that "Saadawi's head ... be chopped off with a sword"⁴ as a punishment for her views. Furthermore, she was accused by the Mufti of Egypt of having "overstepped the bounds of Islam." Accordingly, two cases were raised against her. One case was sent to the prosecutor asking him to try her on the charge of having transgressed against Islam. Nevertheless, the case of slandering Islam was dismissed by the general prosecutor's office, but the family affairs tribunal decided to hear the petition, which aims to divorce El Saadawi from her husband. A case of *Hisba* (a rarely applied Islamic concept that allows any Muslim to charge another with apostasy) was raised against her accusing her of breaching the codes of Islam and demanding that she be separated from her husband (since Muslims cannot marry apostates) after 37 years of marriage.

This is the second time an Egyptian intellectual is under trial for apostasy aiming to separate her from her husband. The first case concerned Professor Naser Abu Zaid who lives now in exile in the Netherlands. Nevertheless, such accusations have not stopped El Saadawi from voicing her criticism of *Hisba* which in her view is "punishing the innocent and is in direct contradiction with the most basic of human rights which hold the individual alone responsible for his actions and do not permit any form of collective punishment." She cannot comprehend how a "husband and his wife are arbitrarily separated from one another because a third party that has nothing to do with their private lives sees that this separation should be enforced because he has differed with one of them on a matter related to freedom of opinion."⁵ She asserts that such acts are in contradiction to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of

Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) which has been ratified by Egypt, and ensures respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms in accordance with national laws and international human rights standards. Nevertheless, despite fierce persecution El Saadawi and her husband have stated publicly that whatever the outcome of the trial, they will not accept either divorce or exile. Her husband was quoted as saying "I don't want to be separated from my wife. I am now 78, and I don't know what to do without her."⁶

El Saadawi, who is praised in the West for writing against women's oppression and female circumcision to which she herself was subjected has generally been viewed in Egypt and the Arab world as someone who has gained fame "by confirming to Westerners their own prejudices about Arab and Islamic culture."⁷ As Malti Douglas puts it, in the eyes of many people in the Arab world she has become "a tool of Western imperialism" despite her "consistent opposition to Western Imperialism."⁸ There have been few reports in the Egyptian Press on her case, and her views have been generally overshadowed in her home country. She herself asserts that despite the recognition she has had abroad "in Egypt I hardly had a chance to express my views in the local media."⁹ In her article entitled "A War Against Intellectuals," Mona Megalli attributes this complacency and cold indifference by the general public in Egypt to the "success of society's more conservative factions in seizing the moral high ground, as well as alienation, a reaction against globalization and economic pressures."¹⁰

El Saadawi's case is another example of persecutions and smearing campaigns that have, over the past decade or so, targeted Egyptian and Arab intellectuals. Since Arab

governments have persistently taken it upon themselves to curb freedom of speech, it is becoming increasingly difficult to think or express one's opinion in our part of the world. For instance, the fierce campaign launched against Haydar Hadar's novel *A Banquet for Seaweed* has raised issues that have plagued Arab cultural and political life for over two decades. The novel was deemed insulting to Islam and the Syrian writer has been severely attacked. Over the past decade, writers and intellectuals have been imprisoned, injured or killed for their opinions. In 1992, the columnist Faraq Fouda was killed by extremists, and in 1989 Nobel Prize-Winning novelist Naguib Mahfouz was knifed in an attack by Islamists. The case of the 62-year-old sociology professor Saaddine Ibrahim founder of the Ibn Khaldoun Center for Social Developmental Studies which has for more than a quarter-century been a tireless advocate of democratic values in Egypt is, as Carla Power puts it, a "showpiece for human rights violations."¹¹ Ibrahim was sentenced to seven years for allegedly defaming Egypt and receiving illegal funds from the European Union. This case reveals the difficulties writers and intellectuals are facing in their indefatigable efforts to promote democratic and egalitarian values in Arab countries. The attack against freedom of speech in the Arab world and the attempt by governments to silence any free opinion reveals that the forces of oppression are slowly taking over. The charges raised against the Kuwaiti woman writer Laïla Al-Othman whose works were viewed as attempts to breach the moral and religious codes, is a telling example of the situation. As Social Anthropologist Hania Sholkamy maintains, "any time there is critical thinking, any dissent from...the official dogma that interprets whatever our ailments are ... [it] is a crime in itself and

[the concerned country's] reputation is harmed."¹² In February 2000, a large number of Egyptian intellectuals called on other Arab intellectuals to boycott the Cairo International Book fair (held in February, 2001), accusing the government of oppressive measures against intellectuals. In the Bookfair, three novels were confiscated: *Before and After* by Tawfiq Abdel Rahman, *The Children of the Romantic Error* by Yasser Shaaban and *Forbidden Dreams* by Mahmud Hamed. Furthermore, the Egyptian government confiscated books that belong to the Arab Heritage such as the works by Abu Nawwas and others. Indeed some of EL Saadawi's own books were banned. Other measures aimed at intellectuals, writers and artists include accusations of blasphemy, lawsuits condemning their literary and artistic works, and attempts to use them as scapegoats and drive them out of their countries through "cultural and ideological terrorism."¹³ As the Jordanian writer Ibrahim Nesrallah (who was accused of heresy) sees it, such acts can be viewed as a "new strategy" aimed at "distorting the views of truly nationalistic writers, accusing them of heresy and alienating them from the Arab individual."¹⁴

Despite the general atmosphere of antagonism towards freedom and free thought, El Saadawi remains one of those who insist on upholding principles and promoting the cause of freedom. Despite persecution and fear for her life, she remains undaunted by these threats and has made it clear that "such cases don't scare me or worry me. I've acquired psychological immunity with time." For her it is "better to pay and be free than to pay and be oppressed."¹⁵ Accordingly, El Saadawi insists that the struggle for human rights must be fought without hesitation. Despite intimidation and harassment, she has vowed that she won't leave her

country for she has a responsibility for the silent majority that supports her. Despite the fact that an Egyptian court has dismissed the case against her and all charges have been dropped, the fight continues. Indeed those of us who believe in democracy and human rights will pursue our solidarity efforts with all intellectuals like El Saadawi and will continue to fight against all attempts to stifle free opinions by opposing these new acquisition tribunals against intellectuals or individuals who believe in freedom and equality.

End Notes

1. *Men, Women, and God (s): Nawal El Saadawi and Arab Feminist Poetics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).
2. *Ibid.*, 14.
3. Statement by Nawal El-Saadawi (May 18, 2001).
4. Quoted in Khaled Dawoud, "Off With Her Head", *Al-Ahram Weekly Online* (April 12- 18, 2001).
5. Statement by Nawal El-Saadawi
6. Quoted in Khaled Dawoud, *Al-Ahram Weekly Online* (June 14-20, 2001).
7. Mona Megalli, "A War Against Intellectuals," *Middle East Times* (August 3, 2001).
8. 14.
9. Quoted in Dawoud, *Al-Ahram Weekly Online* (June 14 -20, 2001).
10. *Middle East Times* (August 3, 2001).
11. *Newsweek International* (June 4, 2001).
12. Quoted in Megalli, *Middle East Times*.
13. Statement by El-Saadawi.
14. www. Al-jazeera net/art and culture (June 1, 2001).
15. Quoted in an interview with Katrina Payne (July 27, 2001).