Nawal El Saadawi

Submitted by Sierra Hussey



Nawal el-Saadawi has been creative her entire life. As a young girl, she imagined becoming a singer or a dancer. Her dreams of becoming an artist were opposed by her parents, and she put all her energy into writing as she became a doctor. How fortunate the world is. Because of the state of Egyptian politics at the time, el-Saadawi’s writing was controversial, and as it gained influence, she was dismissed from her work as a doctor. This allowed her, she says, to focus even more on her creative work. Over the course of her life, she has written in almost every genre, and has been published in at least 13 different languages. She continues to win awards both for her powerful writing and activism for women’s rights, which she calls human rights. Nawal el-Saadawi is a creative advocate for equality: her passion has led her to work against oppressive religious beliefs, especially those that degrade women.

El-Saadawi was born in a small Egyptian village called Kafr Tahal in 1931 to an upper-middle class family. She describes her home as having lots of space to walk and think creatively beside the Nile River and the beautiful green trees. Her parents were advocates of education. While many girls in Egypt did not finish their education, el-Saadawi was encouraged by her parents to pursue higher education. In an interview, el-Saadawi talks about her childhood. Chuckling to herself, she says, “in school I was very naughty.” She was a curious child, intelligent, and excited to please others as long as it did not involve sacrificing her beliefs.

Though 90 percent of Egypt is Islamic, Nawal el-Saadawi’s family was not religious. Her father’s mother was an inspiration to el-Saadawi -- this grandmother would say, “God is justice, and we know him by our mind.” And in this vein, her father taught her to read the Quran but think with her mind. From a young age, el-Saadawi was taught to think creatively and critically. She was taught not to accept something at face value, and to search for truth not based on a patriarchal belief system, but to think with her mind. Although el-Saadawi’s family was relatively progressive, still she was subjected to female genital mutilation, which impacted her beliefs. Female genital mutilation, also called female circumcision, was a practice that was accepted by almost everyone at that time, and was specifically associated with Islam in her region. Almost every young girl in the village was circumcised, it was something that was not questioned. FGM was such a regular practice that her parents had el-Saadawi go through it simply because they did not question it. This experience led el-Saadawi to realize from a young age that Female Genital Mutilation was the product of a patriarchal system and that it needed to change.

Women in Egypt during el-Saadawi’s youth were oppressed due to its complicated and multifaceted patriarchal history. El-Saadawi noticed this patriarchy in practice when her grandmother, whom she admired for her independence and spirit, told her that “a boy is worth 15 girls at least.” Nawal el-Saadawi remembers working hard in school and receiving top marks, while her brother who was a year younger and did not receive good grades was preferred. In an interview, el-Saadawi explains how Egypt’s patriarchal system arose with the rise of slavery in ancient times. She points out that “if we go back to ancient civilizations in Africa we find that men and women were more equal.” El-Saadawi points out that there is a direct correlation between gender and class oppression. With the division between masters and slaves in Ancient Egypt came a dominating power. Statues of female goddesses before the rise of slavery were more equal in size to the male god statues. The goddess Isis was the goddess of justice. El-Saadawi declares that “with the evolution of slavery she became the goddess of the body and was owned by her husband.”

Fast forward into more recent history, Nawal el-Saadawi was born into an increasingly nationalistic and patriarchal Egypt. After Egypt had been colonized in 1882, the Egyptian leader Abbas II came into power in 1892 and opposed British colonialism in Egypt. In the late 1910s and early 1920s, while England’s attention was directed towards WWI and its aftermath, the Egyptians wanted to declare their independence, and they were allowed to establish a constitutional monarchy in 1923. When Sultan Fuad was named king, national extremism entered mainstream politics under the *Wafd* party*.* The year after Sultan Fuad became king, the national extremists murdered British officials, including the British commander of the Egyptian Army. This started Egypt down a path of increased patriarchy and oppression. In 1928, just four years before el-Saadawi’s birth, the heightened nationalistic mentality gave birth to the formation of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Muslim Brotherhood, the first of the Islamic fundamentalist groups, believed that the government should establish the Quran as governmental law.

Although the Egypt around her was dominated by rising nationalism and oppressive patriarchs, Nawal el-Saadawi was fortunate to grow up supported by her father’s love for education and her mother’s free spirit. El-Saadawi says that her mother would have been an early feminist had she not chosen to perform her duties as a mother and a wife. When el-Saadawi would have disagreements with the elders and would stand up to them, she remembers her mother’s eyes shining “with pride.” From a young age, el-Saadawi declared that she would never get married. Nevertheless, she married three times. She met her first husband while training to become a doctor. She married Ahmed Helmi in 1955, the same year she finished school and qualified to be a doctor. This marriage was destined to be cut short because of events taking place around the Suez Canal in Egypt.

In 1956, one year after Nawal el-Saadawi married, the new President Gamal Abdel Nasser signed an arms deal with Czechoslovakia, resulting in the United States and Britain losing trust in Egypt. Angered by the lost trust and finance from the US and Britain, Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal Company and declared their tolls would finance a needed dam. Soon thereafter, Israel invaded the Egyptian Suez Canal, and seeing an opportunity, Britain and France assisted. This invasion in 1956 nearly wiped out all of the Egyptian bases and the Egyptian air force. The international community disapproved of this attack, and the United Nations Emergency Forces sent soldiers to man the Egyptian-Israeli border following the cease-fire. While Egypt faced extreme hurt in the aftermath of the invasion, they received widespread support from the Arab world, as the invasion was seen as neocolonialist aggression. This neocolonialist aggression spurred nationalism and an increased pressure from Islamic fundamentalists to turn to Islam in government. Nawal el-Saadawi reflects on this period of her life. She remembers wanting to fight, however at that time women were not allowed to be in the war. Her husband however was allowed. Though he was one of the few soldiers who survived, he came back broken. Once a supporter of el-Saadawi and equality for all, her husband suffered from Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and was unable to sleep. He would repeatedly say and write, “God, country, love… all three illusions.” Unable to cope, el-Saadawi’s first husband turned to alcohol and drugs, and their relationship ended in divorce.

In the aftermath of the Suez Canal invasion, President Nasser formed a short-lived alliance with Syria. By 1961**,** Egypt and Syria had grown dissident of each other as their policies were just too different. Within a couple of years, Israel attacked the Egyptian border with more frequency. At that time, Egypt still had international support from the previous invasion, so Syria and the other Arab states scorned Egypt for relying too heavily on UN support for protection. Because of this, Nasser demanded the UN leave their border to appease the Syrian government in 1967. Soon after the withdrawal, Nasser established a higher Egyptian presence on the border and declared that Israel would not have access to the Red Sea. As a result, Israel attacked again, killing about 10,000 Egyptian soldiers and pushing the Israeli military into the Suez Canal. Again, the UN imposed a cease-fire until fighting escalated in 1970-1971.In 1970, Nasser unexpectedly died and Anwar Sadat succeeded him. Sadat was first thought to be incompetent, however he soon ousted his rivals. This proved to affect Nawal el-Saadawi later in her writing career. While he promised to keep his successor’s policies, Sadat changed Egypt in many ways. Though the Muslim Brotherhood was still illegal, Sadat released those who had been imprisoned and encouraged a relationship between traditional Muslims and the Egyptian state. Sadat also introduced *sharia* law into the constitution and lifted some of the restrictions facing Muslim fundamentalist organizations.

During this period of political unrest, Nawal el-Saadawi grew increasingly curious and dissident. She began her work as a doctor at the beginning of Egyptian independence, and shifted during the same time Anwar Sadat rose to power. Her time working as a doctor from 1955-1971 was very influential on her writing. Many of the patients she worked with became the inspiration for her books. Working as a doctor also impacted her view of the world. As a doctor, she says “we don’t study why people get sick, we only study how to treat them.” El-Saadawi’s curious and compassionate mind led her to want to study why her patients came to her, and why they were predominantly lower class citizens. She sought to educate people, especially those who did not have access to top health care, on how to be healthy but she was shut down by the government, told that her job was only to treat patients, nothing more; and yet she knew in her heart that this was very wrong.

Much of el-Saadawi’s literature reflects this lesson she learned. Nawal el-Saadawi advocates for education which, in her words, enables an “unveiling of the mind.” El-Saadawi critiques some types of education, believing as she does that education must help people think critically, make connections, and understand the interrelatedness of everything. In recent interviews, she says, “we must be educated to help each other.” Throughout her life, this compassion, empathy, and deep love for others resonates through all of her work. While she was able to help others as a doctor, she realized that she wanted to do more to advocate for equality in order to enable every single person to live a happy life. In 1971, while she was still a practicing doctor, her work *Women and Sex* was published. Due to its controversial nature*,* el-Saadawi was dismissed from her position as director of Education in Egypt’s Ministry of Health and as editor of *Health* magazine in 1972. She had written graphically about the injustices Female Genital Circumcision brings to communities. In a systematic bureaucracy, these controversial ideas led to her moving on. El-Saadawi jokes that she was actually quite happy to be fired by the government, as it allowed her to do what she really wanted to do.

Between 1972 and 1980, el-Saadawi moved into roles that enabled her to write and advocate for women’s rights, leading to her eventual imprisonment. After being fired as a government doctor, she worked for Ain Shams University Faculty of Medicine, researching women and neurosis, and then as the United Nations Advisor for the Women’s Programme in Africa and Middle East. Her work researching women and neurosis also gave her inspiration for multiple books, such as her 1975 book, *Women at Point Zero.* The story follows a woman who chooses prostitution as a means of freedom from the social pressures of being a wife, and then murders the pimp trying to control her. El-Saadawi writes strong, creative, and extremely thought provoking stories. She does not shy away from difficult topics, but rather runs towards them, embracing them with her powerful mind, shining a light on these difficult topics in a way that provides deep conversation and growth.

While the appreciation, criticism, and censorship of el-Saadawi’s work increased during the 1970s, Egypt faced more political unrest. In 1977, after years of civil and military unrest between Israel and Egypt, President Sadat campaigned for peace between the two countries and pressed negotiations. To the dismay of the other Arab nations, a peace treaty was signed between Israel and Egypt in 1979. Sadat faced economic and political problems as his power waned and opponents threatened his regime. At that point, Sadat faced dissidence from the far right Arab supporters, those unhappy with the peace treaty, and the far left, such as El-Saadawi who were against all forms of religious practice in the government. In August 1981**,** with the threat of his crumbling power, Sadat imprisoned over 1,500 people from both the left and right side of politics. El-Saadawi was imprisoned in September. In October, Sadat was assassinated by *al-Jihad* rebel soldiers, an Islamic fundamentalist group, and released later that November because of Sadat’s death. Her time in prison taught her a lot. She was not scared into silence; prison merely fueled more of her fire for life. In prison, she was not given toilet paper because the government was rightly afraid that she would find a way to write. They were correct, as she did find a way to access toilet paper and makeup tools from prostitutes in order to write down her stories. She wrote short stories, novels, fiction, and nonfiction. All of her writing contained a message of the need for justice for those who are oppressed.

Despite the constant uphill battle, Nawal el-Saadawi has never ceased advocating for others. After her imprisonment, she immediately began writing again, and in 1982, founded the Arab Women Solidarity Association, which was outlawed ten years later in 1992 when all their funds were seized in the Western zone of Cairo because those in power at the time did not like el-Saadawi’s message against Female Genital Mutilation. In 1993, she was forced to flee Egypt for the United States, where she went to North Carolina and was not allowed to return to Egypt until 1996. Including her time in exile, el-Saadawi has taught and lived in “the West” for over 13 years. She has spoken out against using the terms “West,” “East,” and “Middle East,” because those terms originated based off of their relation to England, as if England were the centre of the world.

El-Saadawi communicates her dissidence with western countries very clearly in an interview when she is asked whether she sees the world as “masters and slaves… the masters - the United States and their ally Britain, and the slaves - the developing world and the middle east.” She explains that while the world is still living in an oppressive postmodern slave and patriarchal society, the reality is more complex than giving a blanket statement. She explains that there are multiple types of oppression, and that oppression is found everywhere and to different degrees. El-Saadawi then points out that it is not the people of any country who are to blame, rather it is “the small minority of multinationals of men and women who own “80 percent of the wealth of the world where the majority of the people in Africa, in Asia, in Latin America, in the Arab world are certainly starving.”

El-Saadawi explains how these few people are the ones who have all the power in an interview reflecting on her time in the United States.

There was no clash between myself and them, between myself and the American people. With my students, I lived in harmony. The clash is between the people who own the money and the military power - the colonizers and exploiters - and the poor and women. That is the clash, a clash of economic interests. There is no clash of civilizations. This is a very false theory to hide the economic reason for oppression.

From her experience, she saw a distinct difference between the common civilian and those that would look to exploit others. El-Saadawi does not blame the people of the United States, she blames those who have power and choose to use it for personal gain.

Nawal el-Saadawi continues to write and advocate for equality of all kinds to this day. In 2004, she ran in the Egyptian election, however was barred from the government from gaining any traction. Also in 2004, she won the North-South Prize from the council of Europe, an established prestigious award that recognizes commitment to human rights. In the last 15 years, she has continued to win awards that recognize her advocacy of others, including many College and University awards and other national and global awards. Even at the ripe age of 80 years old, in 2011, el-Saadawi played an active role protesting in the revolution at Tahrir Square, Cairo to force President Hosni Mubarak to resign. This is consistent with one of el-Saadawi’s many themes in writing. She believes much of the problems in society are due to the hypocrisy and deception that occurs in government. She is even-handed when it comes to condemning governments, especially those with a religious foundation. El-Saadawi points out that most governments say they want peace, wellness, and world equity, and yet their actions in no way represent those statements.

Activism against religious fundamentalism is one of the core components of her beliefs. El-Saadawi does not believe that there are any true secular nations in the world. Countries such as the United States claim that there is a separation between church and state, and yet the Christian ideologies are very present within the government. El-Saadawi considers herself a Muslim, although does not base her beliefs off of any religious texts. From her study of history, politics, and religion, she believes that religious sacred texts such as the Bible and Quran are patriarchal texts used to oppress others. Just as her grandmother taught her to think with her mind, she encourages others to think critically and creatively, and to keep their religious beliefs separate from government ideologies. This is a large reason el-Saadawi is vehemently against Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). El-Saadawi says that FGM originated from the idea that women were sexual in nature, and their sexuality had to be controlled so they could not tempt men. This idea means that FGM was a tool for control, and is therefore unethical and must be abandoned. El-Saadawi’s medical background is another large reason so much of her writing fights against FGM, as she witness first hand the danger and harm it carried.

Nawal el-Saadawi views humankind as inherently good, and that it is society that damages people. She advocates that men and women, rich and poor, work together to establish equality among every living person. El-Saadawi argues that the number one way to do this is to educate people about the truth, to learn to make connections, think critically and creatively about world issues, and to fix the education system so that the future is not perpetuated by negative world thinking.

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